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## BOOK REVIEW

**Undermining Development: The Absence of Power among Local NGOs in Africa. Sarah Michael. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004. 206 pp.**

Sarah Michael's book, *Undermining Development: the Absence of Power among Local NGOs in Africa*, is a powerful in-depth analytical study of NGOs and their power structures. The Book details the importance of power in local NGOs to significantly contribute to sustainable development. Based on observations of Asian and Latin American NGOs, Michael provides a theoretical framework of elements of powerful NGOs and how they operate to sustain and advance development. The book then provides in great length a discussion of African NGOs and how their lack of power undermines development in Africa and explains how power affects NGO sustainability. It shows how a powerful African NGO can look like and identifies policies available to improve power in local NGOs and advises different elements involved with NGOs, including the NGOs themselves, how to refocus their strategies.

This book is based on a qualitative research done on case studies of Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Senegal. The fieldwork of this analysis was undertaken during 1999-2000. Overall, sixty or more local NGOs were interviewed. Across each case study country, over one hundred interviews were conducted with local NGO directors, government officials, relevant donor agencies, key international NGOs, academics, media and other relevant bodies. In addition, the author conducts an in-depth study of one Bangladeshi organization to provide a comparison.

The main focus of the book is why local African NGOs lack power and how development of their power can contribute significantly to development on the African continent. Power is defined as "The ability of a local NGO to set its own priorities, defines its own agenda, and exerts its influence on the international development community, even in the face of opposition from government, donors, international NGOs and other development actors"(p.19). Elements of NGO power are identified by the author as NGO development space, financial independence from donors, solid links to international development community and engagement in political activity in their respective fields.

Based on case studies, the author argues that African NGOs lack consistency and strength in these four elements of power. A very important illustration of this book is the identification of elements that prevented local NGOs from gaining power in Africa. Pushing past traditional understanding of weaknesses of local NGOs of organizational and programmatic shortcomings, the author takes us through historical passages of the NGO development. She then demonstrates the barriers posed by host international NGOs, local governments and donor agencies to power attainment. Lack of support and competition posed by international NGOs for development space and donor funding, intentional and unintentional government policies carried out by local governments to prevent NGO empowerment, shifting donor policies and the competition faced by local NGOs to receive funding are crucial barriers faced.

This book illustrates that NGO power is crucial to development because NGOs, due to their special status in the development field, can act as catalyst mobilizing and bringing together various groups in the field of development. The author specifies three unique methods by the NGO sector can uniquely contribute to development. First, due to its local base, local NGOs have a level of local familiarity and expertise that international NGOs do not have. Second, once again due to their "local" status, they can get involved in local political issues regarding development without seeming like outsiders intruding. And finally, due to their status local NGOs are the best group organizations to mobilize local communities to development than any other groups or organization. The author exemplifies through the book that when local NGOs are unable to play their roles due to lack of power, others take their place resulting in drastic consequences for Africa. This book further draws a strong linkage between NGO power and NGO sustainability.

The content of the book is presented in eight chapters. The first chapter is an introduction to NGO activity in sub-Saharan Africa and to their power structures. Chapter two provides a conceptual

framework of power based on experiences of several powerful local NGOs in Asia and Latin America. Chapter three through five consist of case studies of Zimbabwe, Tanzania and Senegal respectively. The sixth chapter observes why power matters to local NGOs and how absence has undermined development in Africa. Chapter seven provides a link between NGO power and sustainability. Finally, chapter eight outlines a range of strategies available to improve NGO power in Africa.

This book provides a very deep conceptual framework of NGOs and power. It is empirically grounded and illustrates very explicitly the complicated historical and existing relationships between local NGOs, international NGOs, their respective governments and donor agencies in Africa. My only concerns are about the broad generalizations made based on three case studies to African, Asia and Latin America. It is true that Michael has studied a few powerful local Asian and Latin American NGOs in-depth, however, to draw the conclusion that these continents are far ahead in NGO power is a stretch, for while these continents may have a few very powerful NGOs, the majority of them suffer from similar lack of power as African NGOs. The book also would have benefited if it had mentioned the bureaucratic barriers to development when local NGOs become too expansive and powerful. Once again, while the author provides a masterful theoretical framework of NGO power, her advice for attaining power is nothing new or too practical. The government issues discussed by the author are very complicated and do not get solved immediately for governments to provide full support to local NGOs. The donor's contributions are based on larger global priority needs and changes and INGOs operate under their own priorities.

Overall, this is a very conceptual, visionary and highly insightful book. I would highly recommend this book be read by policy makers, donors, NGOs, researchers and academics and local NGO members themselves or anybody else who is interested in working with local NGOs, not only in Africa but any other part of the developing world.

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