Assessing Impact: Grey Literature and Development

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Abstract: Non-governmental organizations have long been important non-state actors in the process of sustainable development. Their publications often fall under the rubric of "grey" literature - that which is not published through standard channels. This paper explores the types of information produced by these civil society organizations, the dissemination of this information, and the change in the use of this information in the scholarly research that is being done to support sustainable development.

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1. Introduction

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are occasionally looked at as a source of information for the scholar and practitioner in the field of sustainable development. The "grey" literature that they produce is not filtered through the traditional publishing process and therefore remains, in the majority of cases, un-cataloged, unorganized and unused by many who would find the information contained in this literature extremely helpful. The breadth of this literature is immense, including local data, problem articulation, and case studies, as well as, at the international level, articulation of the problems that plague many in our society today. Until the locally produced information is more widely disseminated and preserved, scholars will be missing some of the most important aspects of the data contained in these documents. The access to and use of the World Wide Web on the part of the NGO is an encouraging sign, but has this really had any effect on the types and amounts of this information that appears in the scholarly literature? The improved use and access for this type of information would clearly lend it a higher status and caché in the problem-solving that interdisciplinary studies is engaged in sorting out.

The raison d'etre for the NGO is, at the most universal level, considered to be the general improvement of society. There are various definitions for these organizations that situate them as central to the concept of civil society. Key aspects include:

- They are not government-funded as a whole, although they may frequently seek and obtain government funds and attempt to change government policies.
- They have defined objectives and goals related to the development of civil society, and as a byproduct, human rights.
- They advocate for change, usually to solve problems that have been identified at a grass-roots level.

NGOs sit in a conceptual area between the sovereign state and the individuals who are subject to that state. It is not surprising therefore that the literature produced by these organizations sits between that formally published and individuals who might find it to be of use. However, the NGO is not a powerless entity and is used by many, including the United Nations, to provide relatively unbiased and reliable information in a variety of areas.

Why is this important to us as library professionals? Aside from the obvious importance of sustainable development for the peace and prosperity of 7 billion individuals trying to live together, the capture and dissemination of information developed by NGOs has impact on the future of library and information science as a whole. We know our profession and scholarly communication are changing almost as rapidly as the technological tools we employ. Our information tools have passed from the printed word to the computer to the mobile device in a space of only twenty years, while in the West the basic printing press remained unchanged for two centuries. The development of digital libraries and open archives will soon have a great deal of impact on even our most traditional scholars and their academic departments. The grey literature developed by the numerous NGOs working in the field of development and elsewhere is an important addition to the body of knowledge we shepherd.

We will briefly look at the types of NGOs, the impact of technology on the ability of the NGO to make information available to a broad audience, and the uptake of NGO publications in the scholarly literature.

2. Types of NGOs

The importance of interaction with NGOs in the area of policy making has been recognized for many decades now. Some of the earliest NGOs in the modern world were trade-based, followed quickly by those that focused on education as an imperative identified by various religious groups. At many levels, the NGO is deeply embedded in the notion of globalization, and, it might be argued, in the spread of western ideas regarding human rights. At the signing of the Charter of the United Nations, the Specialized Agencies of that international body were recognized, as was the importance of the NGO, when 41 of these organizations were given consultative status. Today the Department of Public Information of the U.N. recognizes 3,400 organizations. Many of them receive consultative status to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) with general, roster, or special status, according to their size and the breadth of issues they are involved with that correspond to those of interest to ECOSOC and its subsidiaries. (United Nations, 2012) Beyond the organizations associated with the U.N., some 65,000 are listed in the *Yearbook of International Organizations* and nearly 500,000 not-for-profit organizations are found in the database, *Associations Unlimited*. (Yearbook of International Organizations, 2011) (Associations Unlimited, 2011) The *Directory of Development Organizations* is in its 11th edition and contains information on 70,000 organizations. This tool is particularly helpful in dividing NGOs into various categories including international organizations, government institutions private sector support organizations, finance institutions, training and research centers, civil society organizations, development consulting firms, information providers, and grant-makers. We are particularly interested in the civil society organizations working on local topics. The directory is divided by country with specific designations for the type of development organization as well as mail address, email address, and website where each exists for a listing. (DevDir, 2012)[1]

Civil society organizations come with several differing structures and relationships. The local NGO is a grass roots development, arising either from recognition by a population that assistance in improving the society they live in is needed, or arising from individuals looking at a specific society and assessing what needs to happen to improve the quality of life for the members of the community. Often, these grassroots organizations band together in the interest of a common theme to form larger organizations that can coordinate and promote the grassroots concerns at a level that has more impact through additional resource allocation or interaction with governmental or international stakeholders. Frequently, when these organizations band together, we encounter international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). Organizations that rely primarily on government funding but are administratively separate from the state are referred to as QUANGOs, and international governmental organizations that work cross-border on various problems and issues are simply IGOs. Some examples of each include:

- NGOs grassroots – Mith Samlanh "Friends" (Cambodia) ; Longford Women's Link (Ireland)
- NGOs coordinating – Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (Cambodia); Doras Luimni (Ireland)
- INGOs – CARE International; International Committee of the Red Cross
- QUANGOs – Farm Animal Welfare Committee (United Kingdom); National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (United States)
- IGOs – United Nations; Organization of African Unity or African Union

Two very specific types of NGOs are often mentioned, and then excluded from consideration. These are strictly religious organizations with purposes other than general education, and, at the other end of the spectrum, criminal networks.

The type of information that these organizations produce has always been quite varied in nature. Research done by the author in 2008 in Cambodia showed that the primary emphasis in publications for the local NGOs there was primarily on materials to support the interests of the population served. This included brochures, pamphlets, newsletters and broadsides, and, in a growing number of cases, videos, other audio-visual resources, and social media. Materials produced for other stakeholders such as funding agencies and government offices included field

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[11] This directory presents its own problems since it is updated on a regular basis, but no archive is provided. Due to previous research in this area, the author was in the possession of Edition 2007 for Ireland and 2008 for Cambodia.

reports, financial reports, and occasional public relations materials. Technology has had a great impact on these organizations and for good reason.

3. Impact of Information Technologies

The increased access to communication technologies has risen in many areas of the world, although the digital divide still exists. To provide an idea of the contrast between countries in use of the Internet we can compare a developing country, Cambodia, to a much more developed nation, Ireland. The World Development Index indicates that between 2000 and 2010 the number of Internet users in Cambodia increased from .3 per one hundred to 1.3 per hundred. In Ireland over the same span of time, Internet users increased from 41.6 per one hundred to 69.8 per one hundred. World Bank (2012) Even in countries with very low access to the Internet, it is small wonder that webpages supporting local NGOs have been embraced by these organizations as a way of promoting themselves and the issues with which they are concerned. It is a fairly efficient way of reaching out to funders and other stakeholders. The number of NGOs with web pages increased both for Ireland and Cambodia between 2007 and 2010. The chart below indicates the percent of listings in the DevDir Directories that do not have websites for the respective countries.
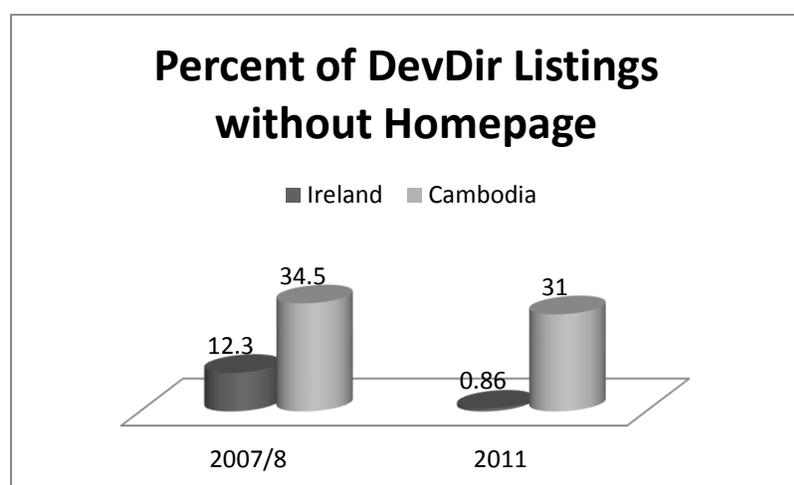

Figure 1. Change in Website listings.

It should also be noted that the list of civil society organizations for Ireland in this resource increased from 65 to 116 in the intervening three years, perhaps as the economy slowed. The number of Cambodian civil society organizations increased from 277 to 314 over approximately the same time period. (Directory of Development Organizations, 2008, 2011)

3. Citation Analysis for NGO Publications

Since the target of investigation for this paper is the impact of grey literature on scholarly publishing related to capacity building, the journal *Development and Change* was chosen for bibliographic analysis. This journal has an impact factor of 1.359 in the most recent Journal Citation Report from Web of Science placing it in 14th place for impact. (ISI, 2010) The journal publishes a wide variety of peer reviewed articles related to international development in many countries. To get a range of articles, we chose to look at the first issue of this title for 2000, 2005, and 2010. The first issue of the 2000 volume of *Development and Change* dealt specifically with the global effects of the deforestation and the environmental impact this had on developing countries. This was a rather extensive issue with thirteen articles that included 934 references. Issue 1 from 2005 included only seven articles with 196 references with a range of works on several topics. The 2010 issue included eight articles with 390 references for a variety of topics. The references provided by the publisher included several that were merely notes and these were eliminated from our consideration reducing the set that was reviewed from 1,590 citations to 1,493 citations.

The verifiable citations were downloaded from the publisher's site and moved into an Excel worksheet. The citations were reviewed for format of the material and assigned a code for book, journal, news (including newspapers and newsletters), conference proceedings, government documents, dissertations and theses, United Nations publications (including those of the Specialized Agencies of the United Nations), publications by NGOs, grey literature, and other unverified materials such as mimeos.
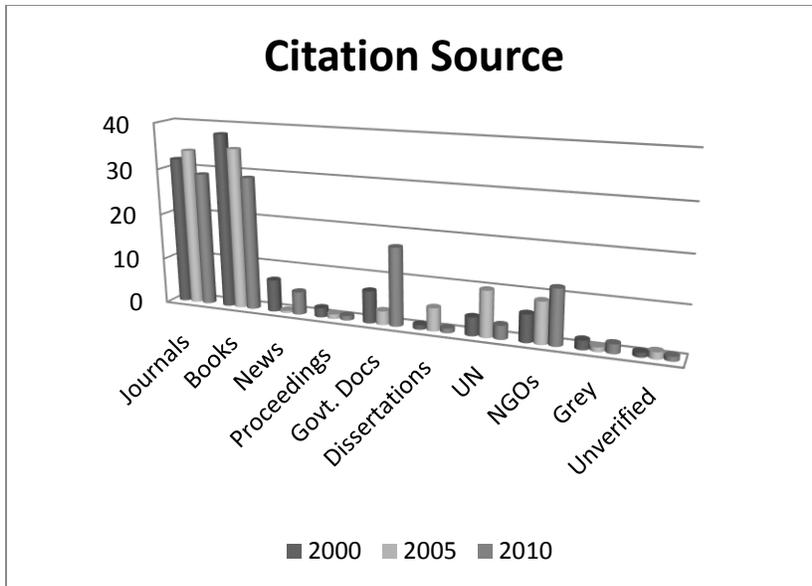

Figure 2. Sources of Citations in *Development and Change*, 2000,2005,2010

Several trends can be seen in Figure 2 above. Although the use of journal citations seems to fluctuate, the use of books as sources for the issues in question shows a definite downward trend. The use of government documents has taken a definite upward trend and citations to NGO materials have been steadily climbing. Some of the changes in other material types may be a reflection of the subjects being dealt with in the articles found in the respective issues, but if we look at the ten year span the differences are fairly well articulated.

4. Disappearing Data

One of the most basic reasons for authors to cite their sources is to allow other scholars to trace back the source of information on articles of interest. This is directly related to copyright philosophies that form the basis of fair use in the United States and elsewhere. The original intent of copyright law relates not to ownership, but to dissemination of information that will support and enrich technology, and therefore social and economic growth.

As we know, items disappear from the Internet at a rather high rate. This was particularly apparent in the attempt to trace back to the original information found in the 2000 and 2010 issues of *Development and Change*. Of course, there were few citations to websites or webpages in the 2000 edition, with only one article out of the thirteen reviewed that included hyperlinks. This particular work included thirteen citations to web pages. Of those listed, only two still link to the information that was cited. Citations to websites in the 2010 issue were much more common. It was, in fact, rather surprising that two articles in this issue did not cite information on the Web at all. The references listed in the five remaining articles included 28 citations to webpages, and of those sixteen could no longer immediately take the user to the original material cited. The most common reason for the bad links was "page not found" but several included missing servers. It was noted that one of the working citations linked to a blog, and one of the bad citations linked to a Google Group that could not be found in the 2010 issue. The most reliable citations to websites by type were to government websites and newspapers although these were not entirely consistent either.

The disappearance of many of these sites could be related to the publisher's unsustainability as an organization in many cases. In addition, several of the articles highlighted many of the antagonisms between the organizations and

the government, which ultimately has control over access to the Internet. Finally, pages might simply have been moved to another server without an appropriate or long term "redirect" being built.

5. Conclusions

The use of information produced by NGOs appears to be growing at a consistent rate in the scholarly literature on the issues of development. However, the disappearance of these materials is not uncommon, even in the burgeoning area of digital repositories. There are several projects throughout the world that are attempting to capture this material and make it permanently available to users, but, though valuable, they do not represent a well-coordinated global effort.

In the United States there is a current emphasis on data curation. This effort has been ongoing in the area of federally funded grants in the science disciplines, and emphasis on the process is beginning to take hold in the social sciences as well. This is promising, but not the full answer to the problems of access to a wide variety of information produced by NGOs. Perhaps it is time for the publishers of development literature to step up and work with authors to ensure that the works used and cited by scholars is captured in perpetuity. In addition to the citations to works, the works themselves should be deposited at the time the article is published, thus enabling future scholars the opportunity to fully understand the research of others. This might also be helpful for the scholars of the future to understand what has already been done in their respective areas to enrich the literature in a way that is non-duplicative.

The bibliographic research that needs to be done in this area is immense. In the near future, more titles and more issues of the development disciplines will be reviewed to ascertain whether this trend is continuing. In the meantime, it appears that the use of NGO literature is a trend that will increase as long as the Internet is available to push information out beyond the grassroots organization.

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