The Four-C’s of Third Sector– Government Relations
Cooperation, Confrontation, Complementarity, and Co-optation

Adil Najam

All over the world, we see trends of increasing interaction between the third sector and governments. Is this the “start of a beautiful friendship” or are they already “too close for comfort”? This article argues that the nature of these complex relationships is poorly understood and often simplified. It proposes a four-C framework based on institutional interests and preferences for policy ends and means—cooperation in the case of similar ends and similar means, confrontation in the case of dissimilar ends and dissimilar means, complementarity in the case of similar ends but dissimilar means, and co-optation in the case of dissimilar ends but similar means.

THE KING. Venerable Nagasena, will you converse with me?
NAGASENA. If your Majesty will speak with me as wise men converse, I will; but if your Majesty speaks with me as kings converse, I will not.
THE KING. How then converse the wise, venerable Nagasena?
NAGASENA. The wise do not get angry when they are driven into a corner; kings do.

—MILLINDAPANHA (SECOND-CENTURY COLLOQUY)

Note: At various points during their development, the ideas contained in this paper have been presented at a number of international research meetings and have benefited from the vigorous review and comments of a large number of colleagues studying the third sector in different parts of the world. It is difficult to acknowledge all of these people, but the author is particularly grateful to Julie Fisher, Peter Dobkin Hall, Margaret Harris, David Lewis, Syed Ayub Qutub, and Dennis Young for valuable insights that have significantly influenced the evolution of this article.
This article seeks to understand the nature of relationships between governmental organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Although the term nongovernmental organization is often used in reference to entities working in or with developing countries, it is used here as a synonym for that broad spectrum of organizations that is variously referred to as the nonprofit, voluntary, independent, charitable, people's, philanthropic, associational, or third sector. This analysis is not confined to developing countries; the claims made in this article apply equally to industrialized societies. The choice of the term nongovernmental is partially a matter of convenience—it seems to be the intuitively obvious term for considering this sector’s relations with the government sector. This choice also reflects the rising international stock of this particular alias of the sector.

This article is motivated by and responds to two broad findings of the larger literature on the subject. The first finding highlights a striking trend toward increased interaction between nongovernmental and governmental entities all over the world (Smith and Lipsky, 1993; Salamon and Anheier, 1996; Kumar, 1997; Fisher, 1998; Najam, 1999; Smillie and Helmich, 1999). The second finding identifies a lack of conceptual understanding of these relations and the need to refine our understanding in this area (Salamon, 1987; Smillie and Helmich, 1993; Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Coston, 1998; Fisher, 1995; Waddell, 1998; Young, 1999). This article posits a conceptual framework for understanding NGO–government relationships. The framework offered is global, and therefore simple. It argues that the nature of these interactions is best explained through the complex lens of the strategic institutional interests of both governments and NGOs, rather than determined solely by isolated factors such as the nature of government (democratic or authoritarian), the state of development (advanced industrialized or agrarian), economic ideology (liberal market economy or controlled economy), and so on.

The Rise and Rise of NGOs

The 1990s was quite a decade for the term nongovernmental organization. The acronym NGO has been elevated from a code word used by a sizeable but dispersed coterie of development practitioners, aid agency staff, and academics to a term of which politicians and media people around the world have become increasingly fond.

Scholars of the subject are basking in the glory of the sector as much as practitioners. Princen, Finger, and Manno (1995, p. 54), for example, inform us that “by supplementing, replacing, bypassing, and sometimes even substituting for traditional politics, NGOs are increasingly picking up where governmental action stops—or has yet to begin.” Salamon (1994, p. 109) chimes in with the proclamation that “a striking upsurge is underway around the globe in organized voluntary activity and the creation of private, nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations. . . . Indeed, we are in the midst of a
global ‘associational revolution’ that may prove to be as significant to
the latter twentieth century as the rise of the nation-state was to the
latter nineteenth.” Rosenau (1995, p. 23) goes even further, predict-
ing that “NGOs may serve as the basis for, or actually become,
nascent forms of transnational governance.” For the most part, even
those who tend not to be as enthusiastic as these authors do agree
that although “claims about NGOs’ eclipsing the role of the state
are exaggerated, . . . significant change is nonetheless taking
place regarding their weight in world politics” (Gordenker and Weiss,

NGOs are not a new phenomenon. Arguably, nongovernmental
institutions probably predate governments in both form and func-
tion (Hodgkinson, 1989). What is new, however, is the rapid and sus-
tained growth in their numbers across the globe (Fisher, 1993;
Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Uvin, 1996), their increasing prominence
in an ever-growing number of areas (Drabek, 1987; Clark, 1991;
Fisher, 1992; Livernash, 1992), and their concurrent “discovery” by
scholars and international institutions (Brodhead, 1987; Cernea,
1988; Charlton and May, 1995). For the most part, the outburst of
interest has been expressed in flattering tones—we seem to be in
what may be described as a “honeymoon period.”

Like any other honeymoon, however, this one cannot last forever.
Rumblings are now being heard about whether the act can live up to
the advertisement (Rieff, 1999). In questioning the implied infallibil-
ity of NGOs in international development, Erasmus (1992) ponders
whether they are “saints or sinners,” and Hirschfield (1993) wonders,
“NGOs have ‘arrived,’ but where?” Probing questions are being asked
about NGO accountability and performance (Edwards and Hulme,
1996; Najam, 1996c). In fairness, most such concerns are not criticism
of the intrinsic nature of NGOs as much as they are concerns about
whether idealism may not have gotten the better of pragmatism, and
whether reality may not have been overextended by rhetoric. Clark
(1991, pp. 52–53) provides a useful analysis of why so many people
tend to be so unquestioningly enamored by the NGO phenomenon:
“The bias is overwhelmingly pro-NGOs. After all it is governments that
we, the public, love to hate; non-government organizations can’t be
suspect. It is large bureaucracies we mistrust; small, voluntary organi-
izations are our friends. It is the profit-motive that we find vulgar; altru-
ism is noble.” Moreover, he adds that much of what is written on the
subject is written by those who “have an implicit faith in the ‘NGO
approach’ which they don’t want rocked. After all, one doesn’t scruti-
nize magic too closely, otherwise it loses its charm.”

A Definitional Note
Despite all the attention that is lavished on it, the sector—by what-
ever name you refer to it—remains much less than well understood.
In particular, its definitional impoverishment stems from the fact that
by insisting on using different terms to describe it, scholars and
NGOs are policy entrepreneurs; the normative values they represent and the social visions they seek to actualize are their contribution to the “primeval policy soup”

practitioners alike tend to focus on different aspects of its essence—often at the cost of ignoring other aspects (Hodgkinson, 1989; Salamon, 1992; Najam, 1996b). In all fairness, trying to define the sector is at best a confounding exercise (Douglas, 1987; Brown and Korten, 1991; Clark, 1991). Given the tendency toward definitional confusion, it is important to state explicitly how this article views the broad institutional boundaries. The operational definition of the NGO sector adopted in this article includes the broad spectrum of voluntary associations that are entirely or largely independent of government and that are not primarily motivated by commercial concerns. These organizations are principally motivated by the desire to articulate and actualize a particular social vision and they operate in the realm of civil society through the shared normative values of their patrons, members, and clients.

Building on my earlier work (Najam, 1996b), this article considers NGOs to constitute a distinct institutional sector with particular motivations and structural preferences. The institutional landscape is understood as constituting three distinct sets of organizations—those of the prince, the merchant, and the citizen. The first of these—the state sector—is primarily concerned with the preservation of social order. It accomplishes this goal through its legitimate authority and coercive sanction from society, it represents the interests of the majority (or dominant groups), and it operates in the realm of the political system. The second set of organizations—the market sector—is concerned with the production of goods and services. It carries out this purpose through mechanisms of negotiated economic exchange and profit maximization, it represents individual self-interest, and it operates in the realm of the market system. The third set—the voluntary associational sector—is most concerned with the articulation and actualization of particular social visions. It achieves this goal through the shared normative values of its patrons, members, and clients; it represents the interests of those who consider their interests marginalized; and it operates in the realm of civil society. This conception is designed to be expansive; it makes no distinction between organizations by size, geographic locale, financial base, or substantive interest; and it includes industrialized as well as developing country groups. No moral claim is implied; the Ku Klux Klan would be accepted as no less of an NGO by definition than, say, the American Civil Liberties Union. Indeed, just as the “rouge state” is very much a reality, so is the “scoundrel citizen.”

A second term that demands definitional disclosure is policy. This article’s conception of policy emanates from three related streams in the policy literature. First, in his seminal book, *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies* (1984), Kingdon suggests that policy alternatives emerge through a selection process that could be compared to biological natural selection, and in what the book calls the “primeval policy soup,” different ideas collide with each other and through such interaction end up themselves being changed into
something new. In essence, the process of debate on policy alternatives itself changes the alternatives under discussion. Second, Stone (1988, p. 14) asserts that “public policy is about communities trying to achieve something as communities. This is true even though there is almost always conflict within a community over what its goals should be and who its members are.” Finally, Majone (1989) introduces the notion that the policy process is not one of simply presenting objective evidence but of dialectical argumentation and persuasion.

At a minimum, then, policy is seen as a social device to accelerate, decelerate, circumvent, or create particular changes. The narrow view of policy as a set of legally binding edicts handed down by some competent authority is rejected. Instead, the policy enterprise is conceptualized as a dynamic dialectic dialogue (Majone, 1989) between the sometimes competing and sometimes converging notions of the public interest held by the various elements in the community (Stone, 1988). It is in the interaction between these various notions in the policy stream, or rather the “primeval policy soup,” that policy is shaped, reshaped, and reshaped again in a constantly evolving process (Kingdon, 1984). Within such a conception of the process, NGOs are best identified as being policy entrepreneurs (Najam, 1996a). The normative values they represent and the social visions they seek to actualize are their contribution to the primeval policy soup.

**NGO–Government Flirtations**

As they make their way through the policy stream, the goals, interests, priorities, resources, and other policy paraphernalia of the NGOs and of governments collide—sometimes in harmony, sometimes in discord. It is a postulate of this article that the nature and conditions of this interaction shape the NGO–government relationships that emerge. As their very nomenclatures scream out, one can neither ignore nor camouflage the necessary tension that must exist between governmental and nongovernmental organizations as they float through the same policy stream. Even when they work in unison and demonstrate the friendliest of relations, the tension remains palpable; when they do not, it becomes inescapable. This tension—sometimes latent, sometimes patent; sometimes constructive, sometimes destructive—is always present, and is in many ways a defining feature of all NGO–government relations. Arguably, if it were to somehow disappear, it would mean only that at least one of the two has ceased to be what it essentially is.

This tension is the subject of this article. The need to conceptualize it has become urgent because—partly due to the increase in the sheer number of NGOs and partly because of governments’ newfound desire to engage them—governments and NGOs are colliding in the policy stream far more often than before—sometimes by intent, sometimes by default.
Nongovernmental organizations have an abiding interest in public policy. According to McCormick (1993, p. 142), “the fundamental objective of an NGO is to influence public policy from outside the formal structure of elected government.” Hall (1987, p. 3) defines nonprofit organizations firmly as policy entrepreneurs, as “a body of individuals who associate for any of three purposes: (1) to perform public tasks that have been delegated to them by the state; (2) to perform public tasks for which there is a demand that neither the state nor for-profit organizations are willing to fulfill; or (3) to influence the direction of policy in the state, the for-profit sector or other nonprofit organizations.”

Indeed, NGOs can be defined as para-policy organizations on the basis of their principal normative characteristics: the bringing together in associations of actors with shared normative values, and the actualizing of particular social visions (Najam, 1996b). NGOs as para-policy organizations are not dissimilar to notions of nonprofits as semipublic institutions or third-party government, as used by Salamon (1987, 1994). Similarly, the work of Smith and Lipsky (1993, pp. vii–viii) on the rise of public service contracting in the United States strengthens this view of NGOs as policy entrepreneurs: “We believe that the experiences and behaviors of the people who work in nonprofit organizations and other parts of the service system, taken together add up to—in a sense, become—the nation’s social policy” (emphasis in original).

It is not without irony that government is central to the activities of the group of organizations that defines itself as nongovernmental. This, however, should not be a surprise. The non in nongovernmental is as much a statement about what these organizations are not like in form, structure, vision, and values as it is a statement about what they are most like in terms of the issues and activities that motivate them. As James (1989, p. 290) points out, “the semantics perhaps arise from the NGO’s functional similarity to, and therefore need to differentiate itself from, the government.” That they are not governmental is seen by most NGOs to be a badge of honor; this, however, does not imply that they are not interested in the government—far from it. Much of NGO action and aspiration—in developing as well as industrialized countries—can be boiled down to NGOs doing, or wanting the government to do, things that the government either refuses to do, does not do enough of, is incapable of doing, or is unable to do.

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One of the most important insights from the recent literature on NGO-government relations is the global trend toward greater—and largely more cooperative—interaction between the two sectors. Salamon (1994, p. 120), for example, points out that contrary to popular opinion, this relationship “has been characterized more by
cooperation than conflict.” More important, he suggests that we will see even more NGO–government interaction in the twenty-first century. Evidence from around the world supports this observation. Writing about the United Kingdom, Taylor (1998, p. 1) points out that “the changing shape of ‘governance,’ especially at local level, is drawing many [third sector] organizations into the policy process as partners.” Smith and Lipsky (1993) highlight the striking growth in the use of nonprofits as public service contractors in the United States today. Young (1998) presents evidence of similar trends in the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, and Japan. And Smillie and Helmich (1999) argue that the trend is common across the entire Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

The evidence from the developing countries suggests that this trend is not unique to industrialized societies (Fisher, 1998; Edwards and Hulme, 1996). In writing about Peru, Diaz-Albertini (1993, p. 332) reports that “the relations between the government and [NGOs] . . . are becoming frequent and intricate, making the differentiation between the actors more difficult.” Kumar (1997) comes to similar conclusions about NGOs in India, while in studying Ghana, Opoku-Mensah (1997, p. 19) finds that “contrary to the rhetoric of conflict, relations between the [citizen] sector and the state in Ghana have generally been collaborative.” He goes on to extrapolate his discussion to Africa in general and argues that accommodation between citizen organizations and governments is on the rise throughout the continent. In reporting from Asia, Korten (1991) points toward a similarly sophisticated approach to coexistence. Finally, building on the evidence from Latin America, Annis (1987, p. 132) highlights a similar trend and points out that, “at the same time that [third sector] organizations are trying to wrest services and concessions from the state, the state is generally trying to break itself into finer units of political and bureaucratic control. What happens in practice is a kind of interpenetration—a blending in which the so-called ‘governmental’ and ‘non-governmental’ meld together.”

This trend can be viewed as an expected corollary of increasing NGO presence in the policy domain. Indeed, it is viewed de facto recognition of NGOs having come of age and being taken seriously by other, especially governmental, actors in the policy stream. Although the trend is obvious, it is not monolithic. Indeed, some governments remain hostile to citizen participation and actively engage in restricting and repressing NGO activities (Bebbington and Farrington, 1993; Pearce, 1997). Also, the nature of cross-sector interaction is not uniform. The motivations, conditions, and terms of interaction differ widely. The point to be stressed relates to the ubiquity of NGO–government interaction, that such interaction can take many forms, and the nature of such interaction needs to be better understood. Although it is obviously an important concern, the question of how and whether increased interaction between NGOs and government erodes state sovereignty or NGO autonomy remains
beyond the mandate of this article (Bratton, 1990; Sanyal, 1994; Najam, 1996c; Rieff, 1999).

Toward Understanding NGO–Government Relations

Despite a now burgeoning literature on the subject, Salamon’s (1987) lament about the absence of a firm theoretical basis for government-nonprofit relations still rings true. Much of the literature still comprises case descriptions rather than means to analyze, organize, and explain the universe of cases. For the most part, scholars have shied away from theory-building explorations of the nuances of NGO–government relations. Where such excursions are taken, the dominant approach is to focus either on the “comparative advantage” of the third sector (Cernea, 1988; Weisbrod, 1988; Clark, 1991; Lindborg, 1992) or simply on fears of threat to NGO autonomy by the coercive abilities of the state (Tandon, 1989; Bratton, 1990; Commuri, 1995).

More recently, however, efforts have been made to organize this literature into categories and typologies. For example, Seibel (1992) organizes the scholarship on NGO–government relations as emerging from three major perspectives: analyses of resource flows, of interorganizational interaction styles, and of comparative advantage. Coston (1998) suggests an eight-point typology spectrum of relations that range from repression to rivalry to competition to contracting to third-party government to cooperation to complementarity to collaboration. Refreshingly, she does not lump the entire NGO or government sector in any given society into one homogenous blob and she recognizes that “governments are not monolithic: regimes of all types may incorporate agencies and actors that are more cooperative or repressive than the overall regime” (p. 363).

For the most part, scholars have tended to look at NGO–government relations only from the perspective of one of the two sides. Clark (1991, p. 75), for example, notes that NGOs have only three options: “They can oppose the state, complement it, or reform it—but they cannot ignore it.” Other researchers focus on the other side of the coin, that is, governmental attitudes toward NGOs. Commuri (1995) suggests a continuum of governmental attitudes ranging from supportive to facilitative to neutral to regulative to repressive. Fisher (1998) provides a more nuanced model that ranges from government repressing NGOs to ignoring them to co-opting them to taking advantage of them without trying to take control to being genuinely collaborative and indulging in an autonomous partnership.

Young (1999) is one of the few who looks at both sides of the relationship. His simple but elegant model characterizes the relations between the two sectors as supplementary, complementary, or adversarial. In acknowledging that the final shape of the relations is a
function of decisions made by government as well as NGOs, he takes a major step beyond most of the literature.

**NGO–Government Relations: A Conceptual Framework**

The framework proposed here for explaining different forms of relationships between NGOs and government is based on the empirical findings of the case literature from around the world, on earlier scholarly attempts to classify and organize the learning from this literature, and on the conceptual construction of the nongovernmental sector and the policy process elaborated earlier. This framework is different from many earlier attempts in that it tries to do more than just codify the case evidence—which although substantial is far from complete—into the most intuitively obvious categories. It is conceptual in that it derives directly from an explicit theoretical construction of nongovernmental organizations and of the policy process. It is distinct from the dominant strands of the literature in that it is based not on theories of comparative advantage, resource flows, or interorganizational interaction styles but on a theory of strategic institutional interests.

Stemming directly from this article's earlier discussion of definition is a view of governmental and nongovernmental organizations vying within the policy arena for the articulation and actualization of certain goals or interests. On any given issue, these goals will be either similar or not similar. Each organization will also have certain preferences for the strategies, or means, they wish to employ in pursuing these goals. These, too, will sometimes be similar, and at other times will not.

Essentially, the Four-C's Model boils down to a question of ends and means. Each institutional actor—governmental and nongovernmental—pursues certain ends (goals) and each has a preference for certain means (strategies). As these organizations float within the policy stream, they bump into each other in one of four possible combinations: (1) seeking similar ends with similar means, (2) seeking dissimilar ends with dissimilar means, (3) seeking similar ends but preferring dissimilar means, or (4) preferring similar means but for dissimilar ends. The model, depicted in Figure 1,

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**Figure 1. The Four-C's of NGO–Government Relations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preferred Strategies (Means)</th>
<th>Goals (Ends)</th>
<th>Similar</th>
<th>Dissimilar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Similar</td>
<td>Cooperation</td>
<td>Co-optation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Dissimilar</td>
<td>Complementarity</td>
<td>Confrontation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
posits that these four combinations—which correspond to cooperation, confrontation, complementarity, and co-optation, respectively—encompass the realm of possible NGO–government relationships.

Obviously, there is also a fifth possibility—nonengagement—in which the two organizations happen, or choose, not to bump into each other within the policy stream. It is very possible that, on any number of issues, governmental and nongovernmental actors simply do not engage with each other for substantive or strategic reasons. This implies, however, that on this particular issue there is no relationship; hence it is beyond the scope of the model.

**Cooperation**

A cooperative relationship is likely when, on a given issue, government agencies and nongovernmental organizations not only share similar policy goals but also prefer similar strategies for achieving them. Essentially, there is a convergence of preferred ends as well as means.

The literature tends to use a number of different words for what this model labels NGO–government cooperation—collaboration and coproduction are just two of them. At a minimum, these words entail acceptance of institutional pluralism (Coston, 1998), common goals (Sanyal, 1994), and shared norms, open communication, and some coordination of activities (Waddell, 1998). Sometimes, however, the words are used very differently. Coston (1998), for example, considers cooperation and collaboration to be different forms of NGO-government relations. She seems to require far greater (near perfect) power symmetry in collaborative arrangements. In fact, she argues that “true collaboration is rare” and “NGOs are seen as mere implementers of government’s will” (p. 375). Cooperation is a much milder notion in Coston's typology, which requires merely that there be a free flow of information, that NGOs follow the government's rules, and that government policy be neutral toward NGOs. Her distinction results from the importance she places on power symmetry and the assumed need to be somehow equally powerful and totally in agreement in order to be collaborative. Others, however, use a more relaxed definition. Waddell (1998, p. 7), for example, believes that “the popular meaning of collaboration emphasizes that although parties are working together, they have significant differences.” Moreover, the dictionary definition of the two words—collaboration as “to work jointly with others” and cooperation as “to act jointly with others”—suggests that the distinction may be somewhat contrived.

The Four-C's Model does not consider perfect power symmetry between NGOs and government a prerequisite for collaboration or cooperation. The issue of perfect power symmetry is less important to this model than the absence of perceived threat—on the part of either NGOs or government—from the means or ends being pursued by the other. It is assumed that irrespective of power symmetry where
both ends and means are in sync, cooperative behavior is likely because neither will consider its intentions or actions to be challenged.

According to this definition, there are myriad examples of active government–NGO cooperation, especially in the delivery of human services and relief. For example, Profamilia in Colombia and BENFAM in Brazil are both nongovernmental networks that literally run the national family planning programs in these countries; in both cases the goals and preferred strategies of the groups and the governments are in tandem—that is, they are checking rapid population growth with the provision of information about and tools for easy and safe contraception (Korten, 1991; Fisher, 1993). Hence, cooperation occurs. Another example is that of the World Conservation Union, which has a track record of cooperating with governments and has either helped draft or provided a secretariat for several international environmental treaties, including the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species and the World Heritage Convention (McCormick, 1993). The growth in NGOs acting as public service contractors for governments is one of the most significant trends in developing as well as industrialized countries (Livernash, 1992; Salamon, 1992). Here again the cooperative behavior would be unlikely if either the government agency or the NGO considered either the ends or the means being pursued by the other to be antithetical to its own.

A poignant example of cooperation between a consortium of national governments, led by Canada, and a small Vermont-based NGO, was the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). This campaign eventually earned a Nobel Peace Prize for the NGO and its founder Jody Williams. In fact, the convergence of the preferred ends and means of the multigovernment coalition and ICBL—thereby the resulting cooperation—was so close that it would even meet the test of Coston’s (1998) definition of collaboration (Price, 1998). Yet, the relationship between the same NGO and other governments (for example, the United States) was outright hostile because, in that case, the perceived goals were very different.

**Confrontation**

A confrontational relationship is likely when governmental agencies and nongovernmental organizations consider each other’s goals and strategies to be antithetical to their own—essentially, total divergence of preferred ends as well as means.

Confrontational, or adversarial, relations between NGOs and government are repeatedly discussed in the literature. In fact, some scholars consider this to be the natural order of things. While much recent work has argued against this general view (Smith and Lipsky, 1993; Salamon and Anheier, 1996; Opoku-Mensah, 1997), it nonetheless remains true that governments and NGOs often find themselves in explicitly or implicitly adversarial relationships
(Bebbington and Farrington, 1993; Pearce, 1997). Governments possess, and are often willing to use, their coercive powers for outright repression and harassment (Fisher, 1998). At the same time, confrontational relations are also to be expected in those many situations where NGOs emerge precisely as forces of reaction or resistance to particular governmental policies (Najam, 1996b), or to press for policy change that is otherwise not forthcoming (Young, 1998). The street violence between nongovernmental and governmental forces during the 1999 ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organization in Seattle was an example of both dynamics in action and demonstrated how the two dynamics can propel and feed upon each other.

The Four-C’s Model defines confrontation as encompassing not just acts of coercive control by government but also policy defiance and opposition by NGOs. One can easily imagine examples of either element being legitimate, because opposition is as much a defining feature of the nongovernmental sector as coercion is a defining feature of the state apparatus. The important determination is not which form of confrontation is just, but the proposition that wherever the preferred ends and means of the two are dissimilar, they are likely to feel threatened by the intentions and actions of the other, and therefore are more likely to sink into confrontational behavior.

Examples abound of confrontational relations between NGOs and government. For example, in commercial whaling, the proclaimed goal of the governments of Norway and Japan is the wise use of a scarce but valuable natural resource, and their preferred strategy is scientific whaling. The goal for an activist international environmental group such as Greenpeace is to eradicate the exploitation of endangered species, and the preferred policy option is a ban on all whaling activities. Both ends and means are in conflict. Not surprisingly, the result is dramatic (and sometimes violent) confrontation on the high seas between whaling vessels and Greenpeace activists. Note that the cause of this confrontation is intrinsic differences in interests rather than outright repression by the state or terrorism by the NGO (both of which can, and do, lead to confrontation). Although confrontation does often imply hostility—especially because volatile situations are all too easily constructed when states exert their coercive power and NGOs muster their popular street power (as in Seattle)—confrontation need not necessarily be hostile. On the issue of Antarctica, for example, Greenpeace is no less sympathetic to the position of many governments than it is to the whaling issue, and the resulting relationship is no less confrontational at the substantive level. However, the confrontation in the latter case is not hostile and it is articulated more on the negotiation table than on sailing vessels in the North Atlantic (Bramble and Porter, 1992).

At the same time, one can also cite examples of repression by governments—such as the Kenyan clampdown of NGOs in 1995 (Fisher, 1998) or the attempt by the Pakistan government to harass
particular NGOs in 1998. What is important in these and other, similar instances is that even as certain elements of the government were busy repressing certain elements of the NGO sector, other agencies of government were able to continue working productively with other (and sometimes the same) NGOs. The explanation lies, once again, in the institutional interests of particular government agencies and particular NGOs.

**Complementarity**

A complementary relationship is likely when governmental and non-governmental organizations share similar goals but prefer different strategies. Essentially, they have divergent strategies but convergent goals.

Both Coston (1998) and Young (1999) identify complementarity as one of their categories. Young (1998, p. 5) defines complementarity as “a partnership or contractual relationship in which government finances public services and nonprofits deliver them.” Coston (p. 371) quotes Gronbjerg’s (1987, p. 66) description of complementarity as similar to symbiosis, “coexisting to mutual advantage, sometimes to the point of mutual exploitation.” However, both definitions also restrict the concept to instances where the government pays and NGOs perform. In doing so, they implicitly define the relationship in terms of the theories of comparative advantage (Weisbrod, 1988; Clark, 1991) and resource flow (Kramer, 1981; Salamon, 1987). The Four-C’s Model defines complementarity differently. It rejects the simple one-way resource flow approach and instead also considers what Young (1998, 1999) calls supplementary relations within complementarity. In Young’s conceptualization, the difference between the two relationships is that the resources in supplementary relationships do not come from government while in complementary relationships they do. However, from the perspective of this interest-based means-ends model, ends are being complemented much more than means, because ends trump means; after all, the defining purpose for both NGOs and governments is not just the procurement of resources but also the provision of services. This model defines complementarity as a function of ends, that is, goals. It is postulated that where the goals of government and NGOs are similar, they are likely to gravitate toward an arrangement—in which they complement each other in the achievement of shared ends, even through dissimilar means.

This notion of complementarity is most common in the service provision arena where NGOs, in developing as well as industrialized countries, move in to fill a function that might otherwise be expected of government but that government is unable or
unwilling to perform (see Douglas, 1987; Weisbrod, 1988). For example, in Pakistan, the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme operating in the Northern mountains of the country and the Orangi Pilot Project working in the urban center of Karachi both share many goals of the government, such as enabling the poor to obtain clean water, decent housing, and earning opportunities. However, the preferred policy strategy for government agencies in the country is to achieve these goals through top-down engineering and managerial mechanisms. For these NGOs, however, the preferred strategy is to achieve the same goals through bottom-up participatory community development. The result is an ongoing complementary relationship between these NGOs and government agencies in which they tend to work separately but not antagonistically (Hussain, 1992).

**Co-optation**

A co-optive relationship is likely when governmental and non-governmental organizations share similar strategies but prefer different goals. Such situations, based on divergent goals but convergent strategies, are often transitory.

Co-optation is a strong theme in the literature that looks at developing countries (Tandon, 1989; Bratton, 1990; Commuri, 1995; Pearce, 1997; Fisher, 1998). A word that is also used with similar frequency in this literature is catalyzing. Being catalyst for change in society (including government) is presented as what NGOs do, and it is considered a universally positive attribute. However, co-optation is nearly always discussed as what governments try to do to NGOs, and it is a universally negative thing. Although there is much merit to these stereotypes, the line between co-optation and catalyzing is often fuzzy. Within the context of this article’s framework, both terms can be classified, using a power asymmetry, as attempts to change the preferences that others have about particular ends and means. NGO activists are no less desirous of converting government agencies to become more like them than government bureaucrats are of doing the same to NGOs. Arguably, there exists a positive face of co-optation—as a necessary feature in the tug-of-war of ideas in the policy marketplace. While the use of particular tactics may be questionable, influencing the views of other participants is an entirely legitimate goal. In fact, NGOs have been no less successful in their attempts to influence government agencies catalytically than the latter have been in co-opting NGOs. Third sector organizations have a long and illustrious track record of influencing (that is, co-opting) government policy to reflect their interests (Hall, 1992; Bramble and Porter, 1992; Sands, 1992).

The postulate of the Four-Cs Model regarding co-optation is simply that those relatively few although not insignificant situations in which governmental and nongovernmental organizations seem to
have similar preferences regarding means but dissimilar ends are likely to be unstable, and one or both parties will attempt to change the goals of the other. The relationship could linger into mutual manipulation, turn into outright confrontation, or convince one party that their ends are a subset of the other party. The situation is unstable, or contrived, because it is the ends that are in conflict. As each side tries to change the goal preference of the other side, the discomfort is likely to be directly proportional to the power asymmetry. It is the power asymmetry that will decide whether, and which, side gives in or gives up—the instability is resolved as the relationship moves to one of the other three boxes.

For obvious reasons, the literature provides very little in the way of a record of cases that might fall within this category. Yet there are some examples. Consider the government clampdown in Kenya, introduced earlier (Fisher, 1998). A number of groups being targeted were in fact undertaking activities (that is, means) very similar to those of government programs—such as primary education, health services provision, and so on. However, while the means were similar, the government’s perception of ends was very different in that a major aim of the government’s provision of such services was to solidify one-party rule. Elements within the regime saw the goal being pursued by some NGOs as enticing people toward plural democracy. This situation of similar means but dissimilar ends was inherently unstable—hence the clampdown. As a result, a number of groups simply gave up and disbanded; others gave in and turned into government-organized NGOs oriented toward the official party, while a few brave ones hung in despite the repressive environment and in doing so had to change their strategies and thus move to a relationship of perilous confrontation (D. L. Smith, personal communication, Nov. 1997).

A different example, from my own experience, is a situation in which the power asymmetry works in favor of the NGO. Although this is less common, it is happening increasingly—for example, with large environmental NGOs in Pakistan—as large chunks of international aid are being channeled directly to NGOs instead of to government departments. This creates a situation in which the financial clout shifts from government agencies to NGOs, who even in pursuing programs with the same strategies may be reaching for different goals. This can be a recipe for frustration, as efforts to catalyze change within government agencies are seen as interference and co-optation by officials used to a very different power asymmetry. Importantly, while co-optation is certainly a function of power, the source of power can be varied: financial, political, coercive, even epistemic. In a few instances, one or both sides are able to change their goals so as to arrive at a common position, and therefore meaningful cooperation. In many others, the attempt breaks down, and relationships turn sour and move to a confrontational plane.
Conclusion: Focus on Strategic Institutional Interests

It is important to stress that these are the likely rather than the necessary conditions for each behavior. In reviewing the archetypes, all standard caveats about any exercise at this level of generality must be kept in mind. Indeed, as Esman and Uphoff (1984, p. 58) point out, “Almost anything that one can say about [NGOs] is true—or false—in at least some instance, somewhere.”

In building on the emerging consensus that the most important roles of NGOs—especially but not solely in policy—are institutional and political rather than economic (Cernea, 1988; Brown and Korten, 1991; Salamon, 1994), this article suggests that the more robust approach to studying NGO–government interaction is to focus on the resulting relationship instead of looking only at the individual attitudes of the one party toward the other. Moreover, it argues that by understanding confrontational, co-optive, complementary, or cooperative NGO–government relations as a matter of strategic institutional choice and by explaining them in terms of varying and converging institutional interests, we are likely to arrive at a more relevant and robust understanding of such relationships. The key feature of this Four-C Model is that it is based on a theory of strategic institutional interests. Beyond that, three key points are also particularly important.

First, the model does not take sides in that it looks at the perspective of both NGOs and government in any given relationship rather than focusing unduly on the motivations of any one party. For example, implicit in many earlier conceptions is a strong assumption that it is the government that defines both the space for NGO action and the nature of its relations with NGOs, and that the dominant tendency of government (except in the most democratic polities) is to feel threatened by NGOs and try to co-opt them (Fisher, 1998; Biggs and Neame, 1996). For example, Annis (1987, pp. 132–133) argues that, “it may well be that wildflowers grow by themselves. But grassroots organizations do not. They are cultivated, in large measure, by just policies and competent government agencies that do their job.” The Four-C Model agrees that the attitude of government agencies toward the voluntary sector is extremely important, but it stresses that even where government is the dominant and dominating institutional player, the ultimate nature of this relationship is a strategic institutional decision made by both the government and the nongovernmental organizations in question. One party, often the NGO, may have fewer options to play with in reaching its decision, but its very choice to stay in the game is in itself a strategic decision. After all, when they choose to form a relationship—whatever it may be—both the government and the NGO are acting as consenting adults.

This point is closely related to a second important point. The Four-C's Model is based on the premise that the NGO sector is

The most important roles of NGOs are institutional and political rather than financial and economic.
certainly not monolithic, and neither is the government. On any given issue, different agencies and actors within the same government can nurture different types of relationships with a given NGO, and vice versa. This is why in the very same polity one is liable to find various types of NGO–government relations. If the nature of the political context were, in fact, a strong explanatory factor, then this variance in the nature of NGO–government relations would not have been as widespread. The same NGO may have a confrontational relationship with one state agency and a cooperative one with another. Similarly, different NGOs are likely to have different relationships with the same agency. This is not as a weakness of the model but a testimony to the heterogeneity of the two sectors with which we are dealing. Implicit in the construction of the model is the notion that NGO–government relations are best understood at the level of particular issues and organizations, instead of as generalizations at the level of societies, nations, or continents. Accepting the heterogeneity, resisting the temptation to paint the entire NGO sector or all parts of a government with one broad brush, and focusing on strategic institutional interests also helps explain what Fisher (1998) has called the “schizophrenic” nature of NGO–government relations.

Finally, there is the question of advocacy, which is a critical issue in studies of NGO–government interaction (Clark, 1991; Fisher, 1995; Ritchie, 1996). Without denying its importance, the Four-C Model refuses to accept advocacy as a relationship. Instead, it views it as a function. Moreover, it is a function that NGOs are likely to undertake under different forms of relations with government. In fact, an NGO could undertake the advocacy function within any of the four types of relationships identified in this article. The nature of the advocacy function would obviously change depending on whether it is undertaken within a cooperative relationship (in which case it is likely to be persuasive advocacy) or within a confrontational relationship (in which case it is more likely to be activist advocacy). The importance of advocacy notwithstanding, the key point is to distinguish clearly between advocacy as an NGO function—sometimes its defining function—and the four C’s identified in the model as relationships.

Ultimately, this Four-C Model of government-third sector relations stems from the premise that organizations—whether governmental or nongovernmental—are driven not just by the grand schema of sectors and politics, but by the reality and rationality of their institutional interests and priorities. Scholars of the subject will do well to focus on this reality and rationality as they seek to decipher the complex relations between governmental and nongovernmental organizations.

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