

Negotiating war and the liberal peace:
National NGOs, legitimacy and the politics of
peacebuilding in Sri Lanka 2006-7

Thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

by

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STATEMENT OF ORIGINAL WORK

I certify that this thesis is the result of my own research and that it contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published, written or produced by another person, except where due reference is made in the text. I give consent to copies of this thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) established and maintained their position as legitimate social and political actors in Sri Lanka. It focuses on organisations engaged in peacebuilding work between 2006 and 2007, a transitional period during which Sri Lanka's fragile ceasefire was unravelling and NGOs experienced a crisis of legitimacy.

The thesis addresses four central questions. First, how did national NGOs generate and maintain legitimacy? Second, why did a crisis of NGO legitimacy occur and how might such a crisis be understood in theoretical and political terms? Third, to what extent was this crisis connected to NGOs' engagement in the burgeoning array of peacebuilding programmes initiated after the signing of a ceasefire agreement in 2002? Fourth, to what extent were NGOs capable of influencing processes of de-legitimation that occurred during the crisis?

The detailed examination of processes of NGO legitimation and de-legitimation presented here challenges the mainstream view of NGO legitimacy which has depicted it as a primarily technical phenomenon, closely related to stable benchmarks of performance, transparency and accountability. I argue that for national NGOs working in the Sri Lankan context during the crisis period, legitimacy is better understood as a highly contested and politically symbolic set of properties, intimately shaped by changes in the broader political climate.

This study of NGO legitimacy also serves as a useful lens for critical reflection on NGO political action and NGO peacebuilding. The detailed account of NGO legitimation processes presented here sheds light on NGOs' tentative and at times contradictory engagement in political work. By examining the extent to which national NGOs' involvement in peacebuilding work during the ceasefire period impacted upon legitimacy, the research also highlights some of the contradictions, dilemmas and limitations inherent in contemporary liberal peacebuilding interventions.

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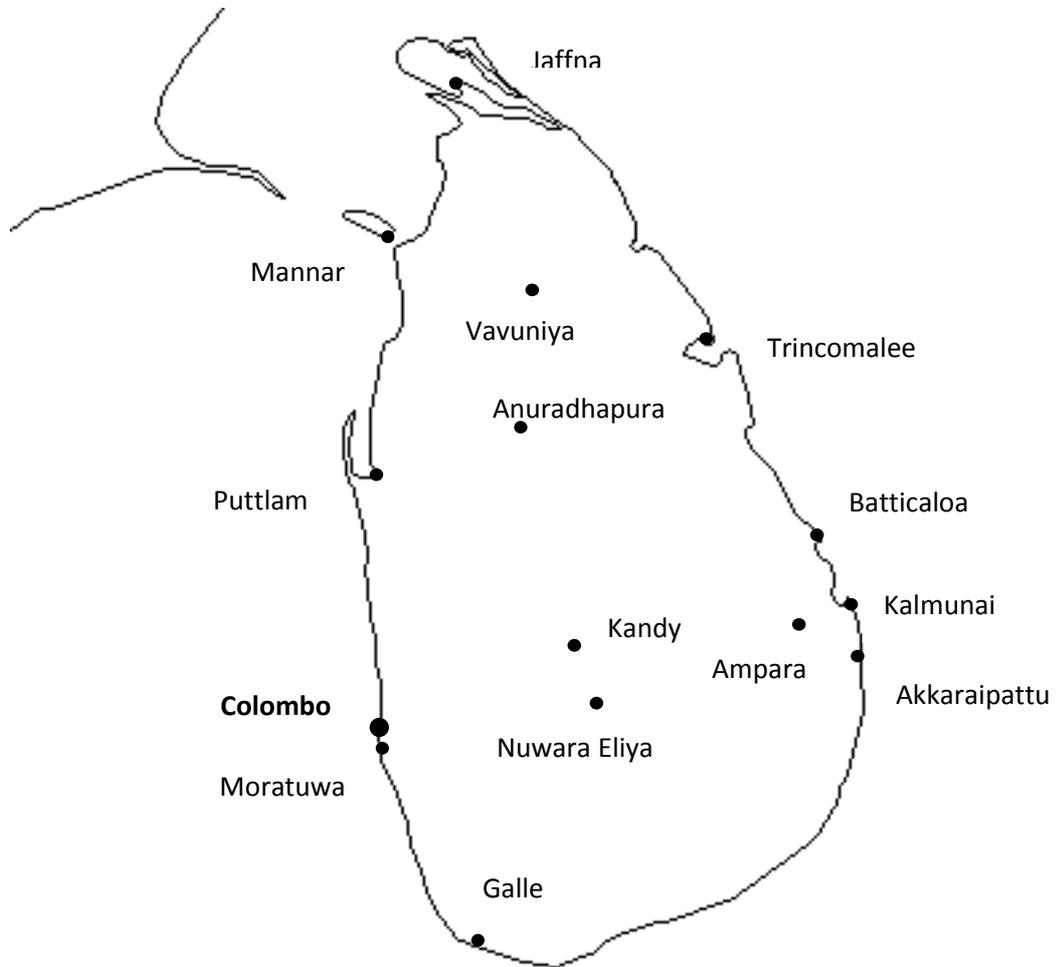
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MAP OF SRI LANKA



ABBREVIATIONS

ADB	Asia Development Bank
AED	Academy for Educational Development
APC	All Parties Conference
APRC	All-Parties Representative Committee
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CBO	Community Based Organisation
CEPA	Centre for Poverty Analysis
CFA	Ceasefire Agreement
CHA	Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CPA	Centre for Policy Alternatives
CRM	Civil Rights Movement
CSO	Civil society organisation
DAC	Development Assistance Committee
DFID	Department for International Development
DIIS	Danish Institute for International Studies
DRC	Democratic Republic of Congo
EC	European Commission
EPRLF	Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front
ERD	External Resources Department
EU	European Union
FCE	Foundation for Co-existence
FEWER	Forum on Early Warning and Early Response
FLICT	Facilitating Local Initiatives for Conflict Transformation
GoSL	Government of Sri Lanka
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HRW	Human Rights Watch
HURIDOCS	Human Rights Documentation Systems Exchange International
IA	International Alert
ICES	International Centre for Ethnic Studies

ICG	International Crisis Group
ICISS	International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IGO	Inter-governmental Organisation
IMPACS	Institute for Media, Policy and Civil Society
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
INPACT	Initiative for Political and Conflict Transformation
ISGA	Interim Self Governing Authority
IPS	Institute of Policy Studies
IPKF	Indian Peace-Keeping Force
ISD	Institute for Social Development
JHU	Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party)
JVP	Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (Peoples Liberation Front)
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Norway)
MIRJE	Movement for Inter- Racial, Justice and Equality
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NAWF	National Anti-War Front
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NMAT	National Movement Against Terrorism
NORAD	Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
NPC	National Peace Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ODA	Overseas Development Assistance
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OTI	Office of Transitional Initiatives
PA	People's Alliance
PNM	Patriotic Nationalist Movement
PSCNGO	Parliamentary Select Committee for investigation of the Operations of Non-Governmental Organisations and their Impact
PRIO	International Peace Research Institute, Oslo
P-TOMS	Post-Tsunami Operational Management Structure
RADA	Reconstruction And Development Agency
RAW	Research and Analysis Wing (India's external intelligence agency)
SCOPP	Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process

SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
SLMM	Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission
SSA	Social Scientists' Association
TMVP	Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (Tamil Peoples Liberation Tigers)
TNA	Tamil National Alliance
TRO	Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation
TULF	Tamil United Liberation Front
UIA	Union of International Associations
UN	United Nations
UNP	United National Party
UNF	United National Front
UPFA	United People's Freedom Alliance
US	United States
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UTHR (J)	University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna)
World Bank	International Bank for Reconstruction and Development
YMBA	Young Men's Buddhist Association
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

Introduction: Questions and methods

1. Puzzles and research questions

This thesis examines how non-governmental organisations (NGOs) established and maintained their position as legitimate social and political actors in Sri Lanka. It focuses on organisations engaged in peacebuilding work during 2006 and 2007, a transitional period during which Sri Lanka's fragile ceasefire was unravelling and NGOs experienced a crisis of legitimacy. It aims to understand how and why a crisis of legitimacy occurred, focusing in particular on the extent to which this crisis was related to NGOs' engagement in the burgeoning array of peacebuilding programmes initiated after the signing of a ceasefire agreement in 2002. It also explores the ways in which NGOs were capable of mitigating the effects of this crisis.

My interest in these questions reflects the prevalence of NGO peacebuilding work and the volatile political climate that existed during the period between 2006 and 2007 when the research was conducted. The signing of a ceasefire agreement between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in February 2002 prompted a rapid intensification of international efforts to resolve Sri Lanka's long-running conflict.¹ This engagement was multifaceted and included security guarantees to create the preconditions for peace talks, the application of peace conditionalities, Track One facilitation, a monitoring mission, funding for reconstruction in conflict affected regions, and support for other Track Two and Three initiatives.² Many international donors, particularly smaller European ones, funded international and national NGOs in their pursuit of these objectives. A range of NGO peacebuilding programmes were launched with the diverse aims of strengthening public support for the peace process, reconciling inter-communal tensions, promoting development in conflict-affected regions and reforming or building the capacity of local government institutions. The existence of a large group of national NGOs staffed by a highly educated, English-speaking elite in Sri Lanka meant that

¹Full-scale conflict between these two parties began in 1983.

²'Track One' interventions involve government to government diplomacy, 'Track Two' interventions include more informal negotiations conducted outside official 'Track One' channels while 'Track Three' interventions refer to broader efforts which aim to improve damaged community relations.

the country quickly became one of the most popular sites for NGO peacebuilding activity (Walton 2008).

By the start of 2006, the climate for NGO peacebuilding had changed considerably. The United National Front (UNF) Government, which since 2002 had pursued a strategy that linked high levels of international engagement in the conflict with an export-led growth strategy, was defeated twice, first in parliamentary elections in April 2004 and then in Presidential elections in November 2005.³ In both elections, coalitions led by the left-leaning Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) won on a platform that opposed the UNF's economic policies and the heavily internationalised peace process. Shortly after the election of President Mahinda Rajapakse in late 2005, open fighting between the government and the LTTE resumed and by mid-2007, the government's military campaign had succeeded in wresting back control of all territories previously under the LTTE's control in the Eastern Province.

While the UNF government had actively encouraged (and indeed relied upon) international funding to support its peacebuilding efforts, the SLFP-led government sought to reduce Western engagement in the conflict. Driven by its electoral dependence upon two nationalist political parties that had long harboured deep-seated concerns about the role of NGOs on Sri Lankan politics and society, the Rajapakse government and its allies began to cultivate an increasingly hostile climate for NGOs. By the time I began my fieldwork in September 2006, the relatively supportive environment for NGO peacebuilding that had characterised the early years of the ceasefire period had been replaced with a political environment where highly critical accounts of NGOs occupied the political centre ground.

The increased power uncertainties that characterised transitional moments between war and peace (Woodward 2007) prompted intensified struggles for legitimacy between political forces in Sri Lanka. In particular, this transition saw a growing clash between the UNF's commitment to international engagement and liberal cosmopolitanism and the Rajapakse regime's efforts to reassert a nationalistic approach to governance and politics in Sri Lanka. These dramatic shifts in the political landscape prompted a crisis of legitimacy for NGOs operating in Sri Lanka. The hostile climate towards NGOs manifested itself in a number of ways including a widespread public condemnation of NGOs from politicians and

³ The UNF coalition was formed in 2001 and included the main opposition United National Party (UNP), a number of key dissidents from President Kumaratunga's People's Alliance (PA) government as well as members of the Sri Lankan Muslim Congress and the Ceylon Workers' Congress.

state officials, a parliamentary investigation into the activities of leading NGOs, a tightening of the regulations governing NGOs' work, a sharp increase in negative media coverage of NGOs and several incidents where NGOs' offices and staff were physically attacked.

My initial research plan had been designed to examine the power relationships that underpinned NGO peacebuilding programmes by exploring national NGOs' relationships with various domestic and international actors. From my preliminary interviews with a range of NGO personnel and donor representatives in Colombo, however, it became clear that questions about how peacebuilding work was conducted had been overtaken by a concern with issues of how the hostile political climate was impacting on their organisational legitimacy, the way this affected their scope for work, and how they could mediate some of these problems.

As well as flagging up a widespread unease about the increasingly vociferous and vitriolic attacks emanating from the domestic political arena, my preliminary discussions with NGO and donor representatives highlighted these groups' significant dissatisfaction with their own contribution to peacebuilding efforts during the ceasefire period. Donors lamented their failure to engage beyond 'already convinced' groups, while many NGOs bemoaned the short-sighted, project-based approach insisted upon by donors (see Goetschell & Hagmann 2009). During these opening interviews it became clear that I was observing a particularly intense struggle for NGO legitimacy, where NGOs had to work hard not only to escape rebuke from nationalist critics but also to maintain their standing with international funders and NGO peers. This period of crisis seemed to provide an excellent opportunity to study 'legitimation politics' in action (Hilhorst & Van Leeuwen 2005).

This thesis sets out to understand processes of NGO legitimation and de-legitimation by addressing **four central research questions**. First, how do national NGOs generate and maintain legitimacy in Sri Lanka? Second, why did a crisis of NGO legitimacy occur and how might such a crisis be understood in theoretical and political terms? Third, to what extent was this crisis connected to NGOs' engagement in the burgeoning array of peacebuilding programmes initiated after the signing of a ceasefire agreement in 2002? Fourth, to what extent were NGOs capable of influencing processes of de-legitimation that occurred during the crisis?

I found that the existing literature on NGO legitimacy offered only limited assistance in tackling these questions. The majority of the mainstream literature on this topic was

designed to grapple with the growing dilemmas of NGO accountability, representativeness and performance that had accompanied the global expansion of NGO activities in the 1990s, and came from a practitioner perspective focused on 'technical' deficiencies in NGOs' work. As a result, the concept of legitimacy has often been treated as a normative rather than a sociological concept and this work offered few useful insights.⁴

More promising was a socially constructed approach to legitimacy of the kind advocated by authors such as Lister (2003) and Brown (2008). This perspective placed greater emphasis on the interplay between NGOs' operating environments and their relationships with various different actors: 'Not only do different organisations operate within slightly different environments, each organisation operates within a number of environments with different stakeholders' (Lister 2003, 179). Furthermore, this approach recognises that different actors privilege different aspects of NGOs' work and that these 'approaches, interests and perceptions of the stakeholders, not the agency, determine which characteristics create legitimacy' (*ibid.*). This kind of perspective sees legitimacy as a 'fundamentally contested process' (Brown 2008, 41) involving 'struggles and negotiations about what NGOs do and who has what rights to influence organizational decisions' (Edwards, 1999, 260).

Whilst this work offered useful theoretical grounding for my enquiry, it was mostly focused on international NGOs (INGOs) working in the West and said little about the specific legitimacy problems facing national NGOs or issues associated with working in 'delicate and contested political fields' such as Sri Lanka (Korf 2006). The processes of de-legitimation that I observed were highly politicised. The stakeholders or audiences identified by Lister (2003) did not simply constitute passive groups, judging NGOs' behaviour in accordance with their own frameworks for cognitive and normative legitimacy. Instead, these groups seemed to use campaigns to de-legitimise NGOs as a mechanism for articulating broader political visions or agendas. While most mainstream accounts saw NGO legitimacy as related to NGOs' qualities or behaviour and presented it as something primarily controlled by the organisations themselves, NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context seemed to be more closely determined by the political agendas of domestic audiences.

Most of the NGO literature also had very little to say about the potential for NGOs themselves to play a role in processes of legitimation or de-legitimation. Raymond

⁴ See Hashemi & Hassan (1999, 124-5) for an example of this normative conception of legitimacy.

Bryant's (2005) study of environmental NGOs in the Philippines helped to overcome some of the literature's shortcomings by exploring the way in which environmental NGOs in the Philippines were able to mould other actors' impressions of their moral standing; or as he termed it, their quest for 'moral capital'.⁵ Bryant's key insight is that the financial, territorial and political strategies NGOs use to generate legitimacy are not separate from their moral visions. Instead, he argues that we must see NGOs as engaged in a 'complicated social and political process of "resource mobilization"...in which cultural dynamics and strategic rationality are inextricably intertwined' (2005, 4).

While Bryant's account provided a useful template for understanding NGO strategising, his model was difficult to apply directly to the NGOs that I encountered for two reasons. First, his work described strategies that played out over several years and decades, while the kinds of actions I wanted to understand were happening much more quickly in response to an urgent need to negotiate significant threats to organisational reputations and were best seen as a form of 'reputational crisis management' rather than a long-term quest for moral capital. Second, while NGOs' moral characteristics remained highly relevant for the organisations I was studying, questions of legitimacy were highly politicised and judgements about NGOs' moral credentials were primarily made in relation to political discourses.

This thesis understands legitimacy as 'the generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a social system' (Suchman 1995, 374-5). It refers to a sense that a social entity or organisation 'is lawful, proper, admissible and justified in doing what it does, and saying what it says, and that it continues to enjoy the support of an identifiable community' (Edwards 1999, 258). I view legitimacy as a matter of degree rather than as an absolute quality (Collingwood & Logister 2005) and maintain that where NGOs are deemed legitimate, this legitimacy is almost always contested. Furthermore, I recognise that legitimacy can be generated in a variety of different ways, in relation to a range of often conflicting normative and cognitive frameworks.

In understanding organisational legitimacy, I argue that it is important to distinguish between the legitimacy of individual organisations and legitimacy at the sector or domain

⁵ Bryant (2005, 41) describes the process of accumulating 'moral capital' as 'a purposive endeavour that is concerned to build an organizational reputation for moral and altruistic action'.

level. I maintain that although the legitimacy of individual organisations was linked to a more general sense that the NGO sector or various sub-sectors of this category were legitimate, some organisations were more vulnerable to criticism than others. Legitimacy is a problematic concept because it can be understood 'both [as] a belief held by subjects, or by some subjects, and a claim made by rulers' (Barker 1990, 59). This thesis recognises both aspects of legitimacy and whilst my aim is to study legitimacy in the sociological sense, I also recognise the relevance of the more normative or self-serving side of legitimacy, particularly in understanding NGOs' own efforts to influence processes of legitimation.

The thesis also distinguishes between legitimacy and reputation. An organisation obtains a reputation as an outcome of two events: first, an observer must make a dispositional attribution to a particular organisation (e.g. that organisation A is reliable) and second, this observer must use an analysis of past behaviour to predict similar behaviour in the future (organisation A will be reliable because it has been in the past). When both of these conditions are met, a reputation is forged (organisation A has a reputation for being reliable) (Mercer 1996). Reputations tend to involve an element of social comparison that is lacking in legitimacy (Deephouse & Carter 2005). Reputations are usually more volatile than legitimacy and, importantly for our purposes, can be forged without much reference to actual evidence of an NGO's activities or behaviour. This research sees the process of establishing legitimacy as a longer-term project of building up social acceptance by adhering to norms and adapting to changes in the social and political environment.

The term 'NGO' covers a diverse array of entities from small community-based organisations, to large transnational advocacy groups. I adopt Gerard Clarke's (1998, 2-3) definition: NGOs are 'private, non-profit, professional organizations with a distinctive legal character, concerned with public welfare goals'. My focus in this research is on organisations that have used the label of 'non-governmental organisation' to describe themselves, excluding a range of other bodies often included under the broader banner of 'civil society'.⁶ In doing so, it utilises the term 'NGO' principally as a 'claim-bearing label': a public indication that an organisation conforms to expectations of a certain kind of Westernised, professionalised, development organisation that receives foreign funding (Hilhorst 2003, 6).

⁶ This broader civil society includes media organisations, trades unions and some religious and political groups.

My approach to researching non-governmental organisations draws on both an 'outside-in' perspective that examines the contextual factors that shape NGOs' work such as global trends in aid policy and shifts in domestic politics, and an 'inside-out' view that assesses the internal decision-making processes of NGOs (Goodhand 2004). As a result, this study is situated within a broader social constructionist approach to NGOs and NGO legitimacy which emphasises the interaction between individuals and organisations and their social environments in determining social and political phenomena. This approach sits between, on the one hand, a mainstream, positivist approach to development studies, which has tended to overplay the extent to which development actors, such as NGOs, can influence their operating environment and interpret NGO legitimacy as something that is largely within the NGO's own control (Edwards & Hulme 1995, Eade 1997, Attack 1999, Hudson 2000) and, on the other, a critical approach to development, which draws on Foucauldian modes of analysis and sees development actors as largely constrained by broader structures (Ferguson 1994, Kamat 2002). While the former approach tends to underplay the significance of NGOs' operating environment in shaping their actions, the latter tends to ignore the 'incoherencies, inconsistencies and contradictions' of NGOs' work (Hobart 1993 cited in Lewis & Mosse 2006, 4).

This research draws on an actor-oriented approach to NGO legitimacy which acknowledges a multiplicity of social actors and the existence of 'multiple realities' (Long 2001). As a result, studying NGO legitimacy becomes concerned with exploring the 'critical interfaces that depict the points of contradiction, or discontinuity between the different (and often incompatible) actors' lifeworlds' (Long 2001, 240). Understanding how NGOs are able to generate or maintain legitimacy, why they adopt or abandon certain political positions, or associate themselves with a particular set of discourses is best understood via a rigorous analysis of the various discourses they use, their relationships with other actors and their everyday practices. This thesis also draws on insights from the recent literature on NGO discourse which, whilst acknowledging the importance of international actors in introducing new ideas and practices to NGOs, also recognises that 'NGOs are not passive recipients of these discourses and are actively involved in contesting and reshaping them' (Ebrahim 2003, 2). I argue that this process of discursive contestation and negotiation is central to determining NGO legitimacy.

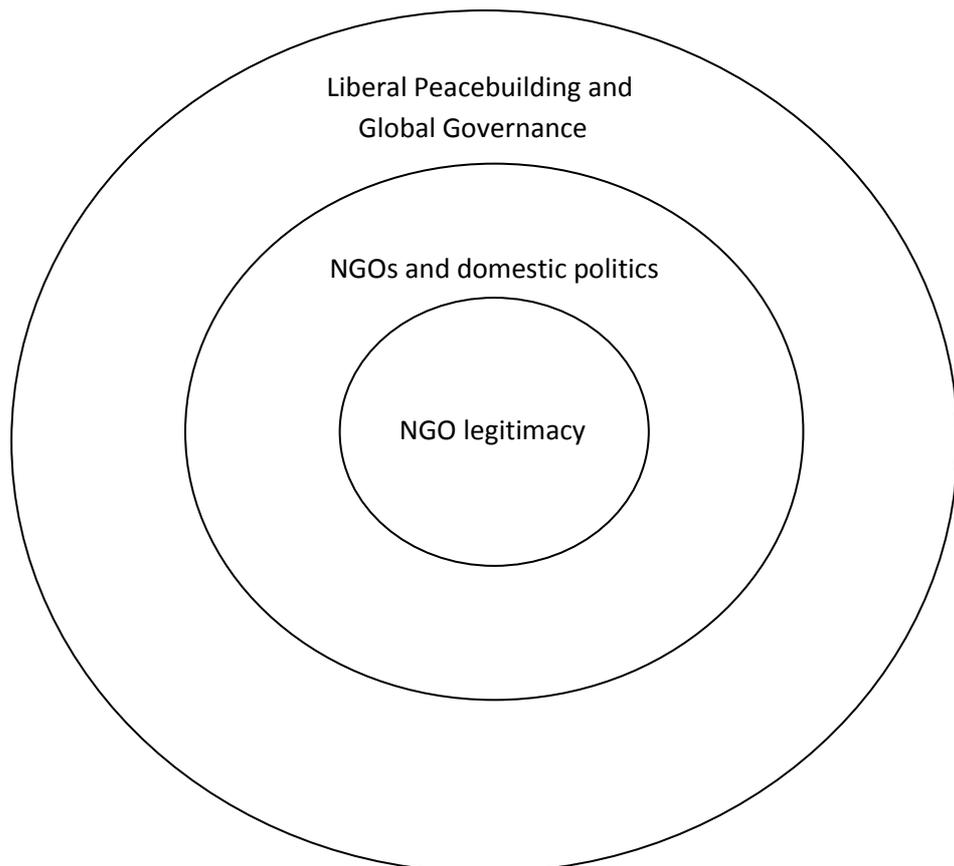
My research examines NGOs' involvement in processes of negotiation between the competing demands or expectations of a range of different actors. The following chapters

will describe how NGOs play a part in reshaping the agendas of external actors and reconciling them with local interests. As Lewis & Mosse (2006, 15) have argued, NGOs do not perform brokering roles or create social meaning on their own: 'the work of producing and protecting representations occurs through diffused agency in networks'.

2. Significance

The primary aim of this study has been to generate a series of theoretical findings which will make a significant contribution to the existing literature on NGO legitimacy. This study of NGO legitimation processes, however, has also noted how these processes have been influenced by both the domestic political arena and also by broader trends in international intervention in peace and conflict issues. As a result, the thesis contributes to three distinct sets of literature (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Positioning the main findings of the thesis



First, by providing an in-depth examination of processes of NGO legitimation and de-legitimation, this study challenges the mainstream view of NGO legitimacy which sees it as

a primarily technical phenomenon related to stable benchmarks of accountability, transparency and performance. Instead, it is argued that for national NGOs working in Sri Lanka, legitimacy is better understood as a highly contested and politically symbolic set of properties closely shaped by changes in the broader political climate. The research asserts that, as well as being liable to fluctuate in relation to the prevailing political climate, the legitimacy of national NGOs is likely to be closely influenced by the agendas of dominant political actors and these players' own struggles for legitimacy. This thesis advocates a context-specific and historically-rooted approach to understanding NGO legitimacy. It contends that, in the Sri Lankan case, NGO legitimacy can only be understood with reference to the history of conflict and international engagement in Sri Lanka. It also argues that it is difficult to construct a meaningful account of NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context without first considering the clash between cosmopolitan, liberal discourses emerging from the international arena and the political and moral discourse of Sinhala nationalism that has dominated post-independence politics in Sri Lanka. The legitimacy-related questions addressed by this thesis are central to understanding how NGOs behave, how NGOs are able to influence other actors and how these actors respond to these manoeuvres. These issues have featured prominently in the existing literature on NGOs (Edwards & Hulme 1997, Atack 1998, Edwards 1999, Hudson 2000, Maragia 2002, Slim 2002, Hilhorst 2003, Lister 2003, Ganesh 2003, Van Rooy 2004, Hilhorst & Van Leeuwen 2005, Collingwood & Logister 2005, Brown 2008). More broadly, the research contributes to an emerging approach to the study of NGOs that approaches NGOs as 'standard object[s] of dispassionate enquiry' (Bryant 2009, 1548) rather than adopting a normative perspective that views them as agents of progressive politics (Fisher 1993, Korten 1990) or a critical perspective designed to challenge 'myths' about NGO practice (Slim 1997, Smillie 1995, Sogge et al 1996, Tvedt 1998).

Second, the thesis contributes to the literature on non-governmental political action, providing an in-depth account of how and why NGOs embark upon particular courses of public action, emphasising the fact that this political work is often closely bound up with strategies of organisational legitimation. The thesis examines the various ways in which NGOs' peacebuilding work can be considered political, providing an in-depth account of the shifting strategies employed by a variety of national NGOs in their efforts to build peace. The research argues that NGOs' engagement in politics constitutes an important site for the re-interpretation and reframing of legitimacy, playing a significant role in determining

NGOs' relations with domestic political groups, international donors and other NGOs. It contends that during the ceasefire period, national NGOs became problematically positioned in relation to a broader clash between a liberal cosmopolitan view of politics promoted by the UNF government, business groups and Western donors in Sri Lanka that sought to maximise the involvement of international actors in Sri Lanka and a nationalist perspective promoted by the SLFP-led government that sought to minimise the role of these external groups.

Third, by providing an in-depth and bottom-up account of international peacebuilding interventions, and in highlighting the deeply contested character of these interventions, the research provides evidence to support various findings growing out of an emerging critical literature on liberal peacebuilding interventions which has emphasised the role of domestic political actors in mediating the outcomes and dynamics of peacebuilding interventions (Cooper 2007, Goodhand & Walton, 2009). This thesis describes a complex process of negotiation, where peacebuilding strategies are determined by a complex mediation of donors' and NGOs' hard and soft interests, which in turn are forged in relation to the political agendas of domestic actors and the shifting configurations of power that underpin these objectives. The research also intersects with recent work which has traced the failure of many contemporary liberal peacebuilding interventions to the propensity of intervening powers to ignore how legitimacy is constructed locally (Barnett 2006, Goodhand and Walton 2009) and highlighted the extent to which a perceived lack of legitimacy of external intervention is likely to be exploited and instrumentalised by local actors (Williams 2007). Finally, by emphasising the incompatible interpretations of NGO legitimacy that emerged from nationalists and liberal peacebuilders respectively, the thesis highlights some of the broader tensions, limitations and irreconcilable differences associated with the liberal peacebuilding project.

3. Scope and limitations

The research concerns a particular subset of NGOs which I refer to as 'national NGOs'. I define NGOs as 'national' on the basis of their spatial rather than territorial coverage.⁷ National NGOs, in other words, are organisations that claim to be operating across Sri Lanka or whose work aims to address the problems of Sri Lanka as a whole, as opposed to

⁷ NGOs' territorial coverage refers to the actual scope of their work while their spatial coverage refers to the areas they aim to influence (as presented in their operational mandate, for example).

the issues of some distinct region or community within it (see Bryant 2005). In practice, there is often a wide gap between NGOs' spatial claims and their actual territorial coverage. National NGOs also vary considerably in terms of their size, organisational character and objectives.

National NGOs, sometimes called 'intermediary' NGOs, can be distinguished from both INGOs and community based organisations (CBOs) and serve as classic 'interface experts' (Lewis & Mosse 2006, Hilhorst 2003) capable of providing a bridge between international NGOs or funding agencies and local populations. Their appeal to funders lies primarily in their capacity to combine a degree of local knowledge with an understanding of international development discourse.

My decision to focus this research on national NGOs was based on two factors. First, the role played by these organisations in liberal peacebuilding projects was growing and yet under-explored in the existing literature on liberal peacebuilding which has tended to ignore the agency of local actors and the ways in which global strategies of peace, security and development are refracted through the lens of local political discourse (Duffield 2001, Paris 2004). Second, national NGOs' role as intermediaries meant that they were more prone than either INGOs or CBOs to crises of legitimacy that emerged when the demands and expectations of their various audiences clashed. While the findings of this study apply specifically to national NGOs working in Sri Lanka, it is hoped that the theoretical frameworks developed to make sense of NGO legitimacy and NGO politics in the Sri Lankan context will provide useful correctives to the existing accounts and may be applicable in other conflict affected regions.

This research addresses contemporary NGO practices in the field of peacebuilding but, in contrast to the bulk of the NGO literature, is not primarily concerned with questions of how far these programmes have been successful, or understanding how existing peacebuilding modalities could be improved. The primary aim here is to understand processes of legitimisation, although by doing so I generate some tentative conclusions about the feasibility of recent attempts by international actors to build peace.

The assumption that NGO legitimacy is primarily based on popular support is widely held in the existing literature. This view reflects the normative bias of the 'new orthodoxy' of

development which 'attempts to readdress the balance towards popular participation and local knowledge' (Ganesh 2003, 565) and can be seen in NGOs' own organisational literature as well as in much of the mainstream literature on NGOs. My experience of working with Sri Lankan NGOs and my initial observations of the NGO legitimacy crisis I encountered during the fieldwork period encouraged me to question this assumption. During the crisis period, it seemed that NGO legitimisation processes were dominated by more direct legitimisation tactics that focused on maintaining good relations with key actors or acting defensively to minimise rebuke in the media. NGO legitimacy during this period appeared to be determined more by NGOs' relationships with the state or with donors than it was based on their standing with local communities. As a result, the research focuses largely on these aspects of NGO legitimisation and there is little detailed investigation into how NGO legitimacy related to popular perceptions of NGOs. While my neglect of these aspects makes it difficult to argue that these bottom-up mechanisms of legitimisation were insignificant in the Sri Lankan context, there is some evidence to suggest that there was limited public awareness of NGOs' actions and that popular views of NGOs were influenced by politicians and the state-controlled media, particularly during the crisis period.⁸

The research argues that NGOs generated and maintained legitimacy in different ways at the national and local levels. Due to a number of methodological considerations, which are detailed below, this research focuses on how NGO legitimacy is generated and maintained at the national level. Although an examination of legitimisation at the local level would have been an equally interesting focus of research, it is not given a great deal of coverage here. Instead my primary focus is on the way in which NGOs were perceived at the centre, an analysis based primarily on the impressions of national level politicians, the media, Colombo-based donors and NGOs.

4. Research Methods

Ex-post facto writing about research projects tends to overstate the continuities between research objectives at the pre-fieldwork and fieldwork stages (Lancaster cited in Goodhand 2004). In practice, research questions and methodologies often change in response to conditions encountered in the field or to compensate for the discovery of new, unexpected

⁸ This evidence is discussed in greater detail in chapter three.

phenomena. While the principal object of my research (national NGOs that were engaged in peacebuilding work) remained the same, the kinds of phenomena I was exploring and my research questions changed considerably during the fieldwork period.

My interest in national NGOs initially stemmed from my experience of working with two national NGOs in Sri Lanka between September 2003 and September 2005. During this period I developed an interest in NGOs' involvement in peacebuilding, and in two aspects of this work in particular. First, observing donor-funded peacebuilding programmes from inside a large, national, development NGO in Ampara district highlighted the superficiality of much peacebuilding practice in Sri Lanka during the ceasefire period (see Goetschel & Hagmann 2009, Denskus 2007). In many of the projects I was involved in, both the donor and the NGO implementing the project were happy to base their peacebuilding projects on a simple repackaging of existing development work, without much critical reflection on the social and political dimensions of conflict and peace in Sri Lanka. The theories of change underpinning these peacebuilding programmes were also often poorly conceived. Second, I became interested in the way in which these peacebuilding interventions were structured by unequal power relations between donors, NGOs and local populations. While policymakers and academics had written about NGO peacebuilding work in Sri Lanka, there was little discussion of the way in which these programmes were affected by these uneven relations, and the complex reputational and political effects they produced. Although the research plan changed during the fieldwork period, my thinking about NGOs has nevertheless remain significantly informed by the experience of working within the national NGO sector, and the concerns that emerged during this period.

My first two research questions (how do national NGOs generate and maintain legitimacy in Sri Lanka? and why did a crisis of legitimacy occur?) involved developing a clear understanding of the various mechanisms, ideas and values that moulded NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context. Addressing these questions required an historical assessment of NGOs' relations with the state, the development of civil society in Sri Lanka, international intervention in Sri Lanka as well as an examination of the various proximate causes and triggers of the more recent backlash against NGOs. In order to understand the decline in NGO legitimacy, it was necessary to understand the diverse ways in which NGOs had generated legitimacy in the first place. On the basis of my experience of working in the NGO sector and my initial interviews, it became clear that different NGOs generated

legitimacy in very different ways. The first step in answering these questions was to explore a number of key dependent variables that might influence organisational legitimacy. These variables could then be tested through the preliminary case studies and then explored further in the two in-depth case studies. By comparing the strategies and tactics employed by different NGOs, I was able to judge which aspects of legitimation were most important. While some organisations focused principally on relations with donors, for example, the strategies of other NGOs might be more geared towards making sense to local audiences or to the state.

My third question (to what extent was this crisis related to NGOs' engagement in peacebuilding work?) required an understanding of the range of goals and objectives pursued by a variety of NGOs and donors under the broad umbrella of 'peacebuilding'. This research was conducted at two levels; first, examining broad developments in donor and NGO peacebuilding practice and second, exploring the range of activities being conducted in Sri Lanka before and during the ceasefire period. This research question involved not only assessing why peacebuilders were attacked, but also understanding how NGOs' engagement with the peacebuilding agendas of donors had, over time, affected the way in which they were perceived by others.

Tackling the fourth question (to what extent were national NGOs capable of maintaining legitimacy in the face of the crisis?) relied on evidence drawn from the preliminary and in-depth case studies. This part of the research involved examining the kinds of work NGOs were engaged in and documenting how the content and location of these activities might have changed over the course of the crisis period. It also included an investigation into how NGOs presented their work and how they adapted the discourses employed to describe their activities. This phase involved collecting evidence of NGOs' organisational and inter-personal relationships with other NGOs, donors and with political actors.

Understanding NGOs' responses to crisis was reliant upon an appreciation of NGO decision-making processes. As Morrison & Salipante (2007) have argued, these processes are difficult to observe. The challenges associated with understanding how NGOs made decisions were exacerbated in the Sri Lankan context where organisations were typically dominated by powerful charismatic leaders and decisions tended to be taken without formal consultation processes. I examined these processes via in-depth interviews with a

range of staff members; an approach designed to understand these processes from a range of perspectives and to provide a degree of triangulation.

Large national NGOs engage with a complex range of political arenas, confounding and challenging 'the hierarchies commonly employed in tracing macro-micro articulations' (Markowitz 2001, 42). Understanding these organisations required a flexible, composite approach, capable of combining insights from the micro-level analysis of NGO practices and organisational decision-making with analysis of macro-level trends in aid flows and elite politics. This study asserts that in order to understand the way in which NGOs are perceived by other actors, and their own efforts to influence these impressions, it is important not only to assess their missions and objectives, but also to investigate the more quotidian aspects of their work (Markowitz 2001, Hilhorst 2003, Lewis & Mosse 2006). As a result, the research has used in-depth case studies and drawn on ethnographic approaches to the study of NGOs.

Research design

The fieldwork began with a strategic mapping exercise, which aimed to develop an overview of the aims and peacebuilding activities conducted by all donors and international or national-level NGOs operating in Sri Lanka. This information allowed me to identify a pool of national NGOs which could then be used to select organisations for second interviews. This information was eventually used to position the results of the in-depth and the preliminary case studies.⁹

I then began my examination of the case studies; first by focusing on a group of six preliminary case study organisations and then by conducting further research on two of these six in the form of in-depth case studies. Case studies are useful when the aim is to study complex processes or to look for evidence in relation to the questions 'why' and 'how' rather than 'what' (Bryant 2005, 58) or where there are 'many more variables of interest than data points' (Yin 1994, 13). They allow researchers to investigate not only which variables may be of greatest importance but also how and why variables may be connected to one another. As Goodhand (2004, 92) argues, case studies can be seen as 'detailed process-tracing which help to distinguish among several different causal

⁹ There was little satisfactory survey information about NGOs operating in Sri Lanka. I was able to gain a fairly accurate impression of the number of operational organisations involved in peacebuilding work by comparing a number of directories of NGOs created by umbrella bodies, and analysing the registry book at the NGO secretariat.

mechanisms that explain the same outcomes'. This approach is particularly helpful in contexts characterised by multiple sources of evidence, and where explanation is derived from data triangulation rather than data repetition, as in surveys (Barakat et al 2002).

The most significant problem with case study approaches is that the broader applicability of these findings is questionable (Forman & Patrick 2000, 10). This issue can be overcome by adopting a structured, focused comparison approach, as this research has done, where the case study asks uniform questions of each case and only certain aspects of the cases are emphasised (Bennett & George 2005).

Preliminary case studies

The brief analysis of the dynamics of NGO legitimacy in Sri Lanka identified from the strategic mapping exercise made me cautious about moving straight into in-depth case studies. During the fieldwork period, NGOs were generally attacked *en masse* rather than as individual organisations. These dynamics warranted further exploration of how large NGOs operated as a group. Were they interested in pursuing group-based reputational strategies and if not, why not? The preliminary case studies consisted of second and third interviews with staff members and their donor partners as well as an analysis of any 'grey' material, secondary literature or media reports relating to these organisations.

The preliminary case studies performed several functions. First, they allowed me to develop hypotheses by serving as 'plausibility probes' to identify dependent variables and propositions regarding the research questions (Esser 2008). Second, at a more practical level this phase allowed me to test the feasibility of conducting more in-depth research with these organisations. Third, the preliminary case studies allowed me to position the in-depth case studies more effectively (see Flyvbjerg, 2004, 423). Evidence from the preliminary case studies also provided a useful source of supplementary examples with which to frame the in-depth case study data during the writing up phase. This allowed me to draw broader conclusions from the two principal case studies and to set clearer boundaries for generalisation.

In-depth case studies

The in-depth case study phase allowed me to examine in greater detail the connections between an NGO's objectives, its relationships with other actors and its operating context.

These case studies involved extensive interviews with a range of organisational staff, direct observation of organisations' activities as well as discussions about the case study organisation with a range of other actors including donors, academics, politicians and representatives from other NGOs. This phase was particularly important for understanding the extent to which NGOs were capable of shaping others' perceptions of them, and the different ways in which NGOs were constrained or were able to exercise agency in these processes. This part of the research was useful for understanding differences and commonalities in NGOs' legitimisation strategies. This phase also provided an historical perspective on NGO legitimacy, providing space for reflection on the extent to which an NGO's capacity to respond to change is closely linked to organisational roots, its development over time and in particular to its historical relationships with other actors.

Case selection

My first task in selecting case studies was to identify those NGOs that were operationally involved in peacebuilding and were of a sufficient size and complexity to warrant investigation into their tactical and strategic behaviour (c.f. Bryant 2005). A group of approximately twenty organisations fitted into this category. The aim of the research project was not, therefore, to select a representative selection of NGOs, but rather to understand a small but increasingly dominant subset of the NGO sector in Sri Lanka. These groups were likely to develop sophisticated relations with international and state actors, and were most liable to show up on the radar of political groups that were opposed to NGOs. As such, the way in which these organisations generated and maintained legitimacy was not representative of the NGO sector as a whole.

The second task was to select the preliminary case studies. This selection was conducted on the basis of the dependent variables generated from the strategic mapping exercise. During this phase, I conducted first interviews with representatives from the initial list of national organisations and identified a number of dependent variables which appeared important in explaining divergence in the way in which NGOs generated, maintained and repaired legitimacy. These dependent variables were primarily based on my own intuition

but also drew support from the existing literature on organisational legitimacy which has identified a number of theories regarding NGO legitimacy.¹⁰

The dependent variables identified for my case studies included the degree and sources of funding, organisational objectives, age, size and focus, territorial coverage, relationships with the state and socio-political background. Another important set of potential dependent variables concerned the length of time NGOs had been engaged in peacebuilding work and whether or not peacebuilding activities made up all or part of their operational mandate. The final six preliminary case study organisations included a mixture of peacebuilding specialists and multi-mandate organisations (development or humanitarian organisations that had become involved in peacebuilding and other additional activities).

The two in-depth case studies were selected on the basis that they provided room for comparison across several of the main dependent variables including organisations' socio-political roots, age, funding sources and operational focus. The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement is an old, large organisation, with a broad operational mandate, a diversified funding base that included a range of INGOs and governmental donors, socio-political roots in the politics of independence and Sinhala Buddhist culture, and a broad territorial coverage. The Foundation for Co-existence (FCE), on the other hand, is a young and relatively small organisational with a more specialised operational mandate, a narrower range of funders, a more limited territorial coverage and with cosmopolitan liberal socio-political roots that were similar to those of its Western funders. While there were important differences between the organisations, they nevertheless shared a number of similar characteristics (such as charismatic leaders and a top-down organisational structure) and both organisations had adapted to meet the demands of a common operating environment. Although in some senses both organisations constituted 'extreme' case studies (FCE was unusual in its use of the technical peacebuilding discourse of human security and cutting-edge technological approaches to conflict monitoring and prevention while Sarvodaya was probably the best known and biggest organisation in Sri Lanka in terms of staff members and beneficiaries), they nevertheless shared many characteristics

¹⁰ These included theories relating to legitimacy and the type of organisation: between generalist and niche organisations (see Massey 2001), the age of the organisation (Stinchcombe 1965) and the level and sources of its funding (Hager, Galaskiewicz & Larson 2004).

with other large national NGOs. The 'purposive sampling' approach used in this research is suitable for qualitative research design, where the population is well known to the researcher and the aim is to conduct an in-depth study of a small number of cases. While it is helpful in capturing some of the variety in critical areas within the wider population, the approach also limits generalisation (Ritchie et al 2003).

Description of fieldwork period

During the first period of fieldwork (September-December 2006) I conducted a strategic mapping exercise. This phase aimed to discover which NGOs and donors were involved in peacebuilding and what their principal objectives were. After an initial round of approximately thirty interviews with donors and NGOs in Colombo and Kandy, I moved to Ampara district where I conducted another twenty interviews with donors, NGO and other civil society representatives. This work was useful for understanding how the changing security environment was affecting donors' and NGOs' plans.

During the second phase of fieldwork (December 2006 - February 2007) I focused down onto a smaller set of national NGOs identified during the strategic mapping exercise. Six organisations (the 'preliminary case studies') were selected for further investigation. During this period, I also conducted interviews with academics, experts and media representatives in order to better understand political and media attacks on NGOs.

I was principally based in Colombo for the third period of research (January – April 2007). During this phase, I continued my survey of donor peacebuilding initiatives and the peacebuilding activities of national NGOs, whilst beginning to conduct the in-depth case studies. I spent several days in the offices of the first organisation, Sarvodaya, and was able to interview a range of staff members. I also spent some time in the Sarvodaya library, going through old organisational literature, reports and secondary literature on the organisation. In addition, I visited some of their field activities including a mass peace meditation in Anuradhapura. During the main period of research 100 interviews were conducted with 106 people, of which 60% were representatives of local NGOs, 15% were representatives of INGOs and 15% were donor representatives, while a further 10% were representatives of government, political parties or other civil society groups.¹¹

¹¹ 75% of these interviewees were male and 25% were female. 40% of interviewees were Sinhalese, 30% were non-Sri Lankans, 15% Tamil and 10% were Muslim.

During the fourth period of fieldwork (April - May 2007), I was part of a team tasked with conducting an organisational assessment of the second case study organisation, FCE. The assessment involved numerous interviews with staff, donor and NGO partners and visits to project sites in the Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara districts of the Eastern Province. During the evaluation, I conducted a further 50 interviews with 59 people. 50% of interviewees were representatives of local NGOs (most of whom were FCE staff members), 20% were attached to INGOs and 30% were representatives of donors. A further 15% were representatives of civil society groups, government or political parties.¹² I also benefited from interviews conducted by other members of the research team (the total number of interviews conducted was over 100). As well as drawing evidence from interviews, my understanding of the in-depth case study organisations was also based on spending time in these NGOs' offices, observing the daily routines of their workers and the way in which staff members interacted. These observations provided a more comprehensive insight into the organisational culture and the internal dynamics of these NGOs.

Throughout the fieldwork period, I conducted daily reviews of the media, documenting references to NGOs in English language newspapers and discussing the content of Tamil and Sinhala newspapers with some interviewees. This analysis provided an insight into state-sponsored attacks on NGOs and a useful lens to analyse anti-NGO feeling in Sri Lanka. After the fieldwork period, I was able to track developments in the climate for NGO action to a more limited degree via the internet. Another important source of information on the in-depth case studies came from analysing these organisations' own websites. In the case of FCE, this was a particularly useful research tool as it allowed me to track the development of various sister organisations or initiatives established by Dr. Rupesinghe, the organisation's leader, after the fieldwork period. These post-fieldwork findings were bolstered through informal discussions with various Sri Lankan scholars and experts in London in 2008 and 2009.

¹² 85% of these interviewees were male, 15% female. 30% interviewees were Sinhalese, 30% were non-Sri Lankans, 30% were Tamil and 10% were Muslim.

5. Research Challenges

Researching NGOs

Investigating development processes is a complex task that addresses 'a great number of interactions between actors of different statuses, with varying resources and dissimilar goals' (Lewis & Mosse 2006, 1). Development NGOs are situated 'within a web of relationships that are inherently unstable among groups of people with whom one has widely varying relationships', and researching them involves working in a context where unequal power relations loom large (Markowitz 2001, 41).

Examining organisations and processes across such an undulating field of power generated a number of representational and ethical challenges. The first concerned managing expectations about my engagement with interviewees and their organisations. While I was conducting research, my role and status was interpreted by my interviewees in relation to these existing power relations. This was particularly problematic when engaging with smaller organisations. During these interviews it often seemed that individuals were eager to speak to me because of some perceived benefit they could derive from the encounter. In an attempt to alleviate any misconceptions about my work, I ensured that my purpose for interviewing the organisation was always made clear prior to the interview. This precaution was particularly important since NGOs in Sri Lanka had recently been exposed to a wealth of research studies in the aftermath of the tsunami, most of which was of little direct benefit to them.

A related challenge was negotiating my own pre-existing relationships with NGOs. Having worked for two national NGOs in Sri Lanka between 2003 and 2005, I was familiar with the NGO sector in Sri Lanka and had many pre-existing contacts. Whilst this knowledge was useful when mapping the sector and understanding local dynamics, particularly in the East, my dual identity as a former NGO worker and student researcher was also problematic. This challenge was particularly acute when interviewing former colleagues or contacts from my days working for two national NGOs. I was able to overcome this issue to some extent by applying particular caution when approaching these interviewees and taking extra care to clarify my role and research aims. My extensive knowledge of one of the organisations where I had worked prior to starting the PhD project made it an appealing candidate for in-depth analysis. I decided against selecting it for two main reasons. First, I judged that it

would be difficult to adopt an objective and unbiased account of the organisation with research findings likely to be skewed by personal biases and loyalties (see Markowitz 2001). Second, my role in the organisation would be difficult to articulate clearly and it might have been difficult to refuse to conduct some work on behalf of the organisation whilst carrying out the research (see Staples 2004). Another option I considered was becoming affiliated with a research-based NGO and to use this as a base from which to conduct research. Although this kind of affiliation would have been useful in terms of developing my ideas, it may have made it difficult to avoid the impression that my research agenda was aligned with a particular organisation.

Another issue was the potential for my research to cause undue disruption to the everyday work of NGOs. As Hulme has argued, it is important to be sensitive to the fact that co-operation with the researcher results in the diversion of resources such as transport and staff time away from these organisations' core activities (Hulme 1994, 271). To counter these problems in some cases, I was able to reciprocate by sharing information and preliminary findings. Most commonly, NGOs were interested to gather detailed and up-to-date information on funding sources. Similarly, donors often asked me for my own perspectives on Sri Lankan NGOs. I was happy to pass on the names of contacts, organisations, information about other NGOs where it did not compromise requests for anonymity from other interviewees.

A final challenge was the presentation of critical findings. In a competitive environment for NGOs, critical research findings may damage an organisation's position. For this reason it was important to carefully manage my findings to limit any detrimental impact on organisations' or their staff's standing. The anonymity of all individuals has been protected in the text. The only exception to this was for the in-depth case studies where it would have been impossible to disguise their identity. Case study organisations were given space to comment on my research findings, a process that produced some constructive criticism which I was able to feed back into the final version of the thesis.

Research in the context of violent conflict

There are a number of difficulties associated with conducting research in the context of violent conflict. In these environments methodological problems include a lack of unbiased accounts of events and an absence of reliable data, especially in the media (Barakat et al

2002, Wood 2006). In highly politicised contexts interviewees may be more cautious about divulging sensitive information and more suspicious about the motivations of a researcher. As Barakat and Ellis (1995, 149-150) have argued, 'the researcher in war is governed by a multitude of unpredictable parameters which tightly control appropriate action'.

Conducting research in such a context requires acute awareness of the shifting political boundaries of appropriate behaviour which will determine not only which areas research can be safely conducted in, but also what kind of questions can be asked.

In response to the considerable methodological issues associated with conducting research in conflict-affected regions, Barakat et al (2002) have advocated a composite research approach which draws on a variety of methods depending on the availability of information and access. As Goodhand (2004, 90) has argued, a process of methodological triangulation can help to compensate for the limitations imposed by conflict.

Perhaps the most significant challenge facing researchers in the context of violent conflict is the problem of access to information. Working in the midst of violent conflict attached significant logistical challenges to the research project. The most significant problems were encountered in the East where conflict caused problems with travel and communication, which made it more difficult to plan interviews. These logistical challenges also made it more difficult to study the dynamics of local legitimacy and contributed to my decision to focus primarily on the way in which legitimacy was generated, maintained and broken down at the national level.

Researching Legitimacy

Researching legitimacy is problematic since it is difficult to measure and likely to vary depending on perspective. As Suchman (1995) has observed, organisational legitimacy comes in many different forms which may require looking in different places to understand the way in which a particular organisation generates legitimacy. If an organisation was concerned with building popular legitimacy, assessing its legitimacy at the national level might involve getting a sense of how the organisation was viewed by ordinary people or was represented in the media. If the organisation kept a low profile and its strategy of legitimation was more concerned with simply maintaining a more limited degree of acceptable in the eyes of donor funders, legitimacy might be grasped more comprehensively by studying its financial relations with funding agencies.

The NGO sector in Sri Lanka is highly competitive and a range of political actors openly questioned the role of NGOs in society and treated NGO reputations opportunistically, by engaging in deliberate attempts to undermine the social and political positions of these groups. As a result, understanding NGO legitimacy involved navigating a murky world of rumour, scandal and, and slander, where contradictory or distorted accounts of NGOs' actions were common. Markowitz (2001, 44) sums up the dilemma facing the researcher of NGOs: 'steady doses of gossip and hearsay have left me occasionally feeling like a character in a Mamet play, with no idea which words to trust. What interests are being voiced, consciously or not, at a given moment?' These characteristics made data triangulation even more important than usual.

In this thesis, I argue that NGO legitimacy cannot be understood without reference to underlying power relations embodied in NGOs' relationships with political actors and funders. Understanding how NGO legitimacy works therefore involves not only looking at presentations and representations of NGOs' work, but also understanding their connections to powerful figures both domestically and internationally as well as the extent to which they are either constrained or empowered by these relationships. In order to make sense of these interactions, my research utilises an actor-oriented approach, which sees power as 'depend[ing] crucially upon the emergence of a network of actors which become partially, though hardly ever completely, enrolled in the "project" of some other person or persons' (Long 2001, 17). The actor-oriented approach provides a means of understanding how social actors 'engage in or are locked into struggles over the attribution of social meanings to particular events, actions and ideas' (*ibid.*). Methodologically, this approach has involved observations of NGOs' formal and informal practices and relationships, drawing on interviews with a range of staff members, donors, politicians, government and media representatives. Another important feature of this approach has been a focus on the history of the case study organisations and their leaders. To investigate this aspect of NGOs' work, I collected information on the life histories of leaders and analysed the historical roots of the case study organisations based on interviews and an analysis of organisational and secondary literature.

6. Thesis outline

The thesis is presented in two parts. The first part of the thesis (chapters two and three) examines some of the key theoretical issues raised by the research as well as providing background both to the relevant global-level trends affecting NGOs engaged in peacebuilding work, and to the Sri Lankan context. The second part of the thesis (chapters four, five and six) presents the main empirical findings of the research, developing arguments about NGO legitimacy, peacebuilding and politics, based on an analysis that switches between an investigation of the two in-depth case studies and a detailed examination of the broader dynamics at play during the crisis period.

Chapter 2 traces the crisis of NGO legitimacy observed during the fieldwork period by examining a series of broad changes in the institutional and political relations at the global level. It then moves on to explore NGOs' growing role in international peacebuilding interventions globally, sketching some of the general characteristics of this work and highlighting some of the problems that this posed for NGO legitimacy. Finally, the chapter surveys and critiques the existing literature on NGO legitimacy. It describes how NGOs' engagement in politics, their growing involvement in conflict-affected regions and their engagement in liberal peacebuilding programmes have provided particular sources of tension for NGO legitimacy.

Chapter 3 provides a detailed account of the way in which these broader dynamics played out in the Sri Lankan context. The first two sections examine how NGO legitimacy has been shaped by developments in Sri Lankan politics and society since independence. The next section examines the history of international engagement in post-colonial Sri Lanka and considers the extent to which these interventions have influenced notions of NGO legitimacy. The chapter then details the historical development of the NGO sector in Sri Lanka and these organisations' growing engagement in peacebuilding work. The chapter ends by sketching an actor-oriented framework for understanding NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context, which examines in turn the varied frameworks and criteria that guide key audiences' notions of NGO legitimacy.

In **Chapter 4**, the analysis turns to the two case study organisations. The chapter presents an account of the varied ways in which the two case study organisations generated legitimacy. While chapters five and six explore the more immediate responses to the crisis period experienced during the fieldwork (a process I have termed 'reputational crisis management'), this chapter focuses on more long-term processes of legitimation. This involved managing relationships with a range of domestic and international actors and developing organisational identities by utilising various cultural markers or discursive labels. Both cases emphasise several important structural constraints on NGO legitimation in the Sri Lankan context, highlighting in particular the importance of political elites in mediating NGO legitimacy. The introduction to the Sarvodaya case study includes an historical account of the organisation's development, describing the organisation's efforts to maintain legitimacy in the face of past crises and assessing the long-term implications of these crises.

Chapter 5 adopts a slightly broader focus, examining the crisis of NGO legitimacy that was underway in Sri Lanka during the fieldwork period from three different perspectives. First, it explores the structural causes of the crisis, examining the complex ways in which NGOs' engagement in peacebuilding work during the ceasefire period altered the dynamics of NGO legitimacy. Second, it examines the proximate causes of the crisis, assessing how and why a range of nationalist voices became more openly critical of NGOs during this period. Third, the chapter analyses the range of discursive tactics and operational strategies employed by NGOs to counteract the negative impacts this had on their legitimacy. These findings are drawn largely from the preliminary case studies and generate findings that contribute to an emerging critical literature on liberal peacebuilding interventions.

In **Chapter 6**, the focus again returns to the two in-depth case study organisations. This chapter provides a detailed account of the complex processes whereby these organisations' objectives and strategies were adjusted to account for changes in donors' funding priorities and the deteriorating political climate. It describes how these organisations negotiated a range of hard and soft interests by shifting the nature of their work and their alliances as well as altering the way in which they presented their work. The chapter contributes to the literature on NGO political action and NGO peacebuilding by presenting a detailed account of the role played by national NGOs in mediating and

negotiating contemporary peacebuilding interventions and highlighting the centrality of representations of NGO political action in processes of legitimation and de-legitimation.

Chapter 7 concludes by reflecting on the broader implications of the thesis and locating its contribution to the existing literature on NGO legitimacy, political action and peacebuilding.

CHAPTER TWO

A global crisis of NGO legitimacy? The rise of NGOs and liberal peacebuilding

During the course of my fieldwork, the extent to which NGOs were seen as legitimate social and political actors in Sri Lanka diminished considerably. One of the aims of this thesis is to explore why this downturn had occurred and to understand what, if anything, NGOs were able to do about it. This chapter examines the global context for this localised crisis of legitimacy, describing a more generalised decline in NGO legitimacy during this period. It begins by exploring the rapid global proliferation of NGOs since the 1980s, their emerging role as significant players in world politics and the more recent global backlash against their expansion. The chapter then moves on to explore NGOs' growing involvement in international peacebuilding interventions, sketching some of the general characteristics of this work and highlighting some of the problems this posed for NGO legitimacy. Next, the chapter critically assesses the existing literature on NGO legitimacy and highlights some specific drawbacks of applying these mainstream understandings of NGO legitimacy to national NGOs working in conflict-affected contexts. The chapter concludes with a discussion of a number of common sources of tension in processes of legitimation and de-legitimation stemming from NGOs' engagement with politics, their work in conflict-affected regions and their involvement in liberal peacebuilding, an increasingly dominant framework for international peacebuilding interventions that emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War.

Through this examination of recent work on NGOs, peacebuilding and NGO legitimacy, the chapter aims to position this research within three bodies of literature. First, it draws connections between this research and the broader NGO literature, which has focused on a steady growth in questioning of the credibility of the NGO sector since the 1990s (Edwards & Hulme 1995, 1997, Zaidi 1999, Slim 2002) and describes how these issues have related to the experience of national NGOs. Second, it provides an introduction to an emerging body of literature that in recent years has sought to understand a perceived 'crisis of the liberal peace' (Cooper 2007). By providing detailed local analyses of 'liberal peacebuilding' projects, this work has described the way in which these interventions have been negotiated, reinterpreted or instrumentalised on the ground (Barnett & Zuercher 2009, Richmond & Franks 2007, MacGinty & Williams 2008, Goodhand & Walton 2009). This emerging critique of liberal peacebuilding has increasingly been framed with reference to

problems of legitimacy (Barnett 2006, Williams 2007, Pugh, Cooper & Turner 2008, Narten 2008). Third, this chapter places my research within a broader literature on NGO political action which has attempted to grapple with the peculiar difficulties associated with NGOs' diverse attempts to engage with the political realm (Clarke 1998, Bryant 2005, Feher 2007).

1. Non-governmental Organisations

Expansion and diversification

NGOs have proliferated rapidly since the 1980s. The number of INGOs doubled from 19,000 in 1986 to 38,000 in 1996, rising slightly less rapidly to a total number of around 59,000 in 2004 (Agg 2006, UIA 2004). According to one estimate, the number of development NGOs registered in OECD countries nearly doubled between 1980 and 1990 from 1,600 to 2,500 (Lindenberg & Bryant 2001, 3).¹³ In the South, the growth of the NGO sector has been even more rapid (Carroll 1993, Edwards & Hulme 1997). The scope and density of NGOs' presence appears even more dizzying when smaller community-based organisations (CBOs) are included in these estimates. In Sri Lanka, for example, where I have judged there to be around 800 NGOs operational at the national level in 2007, the combined number of CBOs has been estimated as lying somewhere between 20,000 and 50,000 (Wickramasinghe 2001: 82-3).

The precipitous rise of the NGO sector during the 1980s and 90s was facilitated by a rapid growth in the availability of financial resources. After tripling during the 1980s, official funding for NGOs doubled again in the 1990s rising from \$47 million (or 0.18% of total overseas development assistance (ODA)) in 1980 to just over \$4 billion (or 6% of ODA) in 2002 (Reimann 2005, Agg 2006).¹⁴ By the mid-1990s, funding from donors accounted for an average of 30% of NGOs' total income, compared with 1.5% in the early 1970s (Edwards & Hulme 1997). Private funding to international NGOs also increased, and net grants made

¹³ Edwards and Hulme (1997, 4) give a similar set of figures: 2,970 development NGOs were registered in OECD countries in 1993, compared with 1,600 in 1980.

¹⁴ Fowler has estimated the actual figure to be somewhere between \$12 and \$15 billion in 2000, taking into account money received via their national governments through foreign loans (Fowler 2000a). Stoddard argues that the figures for overall aid to NGOs would be higher if money channelled through UN agencies was included (Stoddard in Macrae and Harmer 2003, 25). Similarly Edwards and Hulme argue that the real figure for 1993 may be \$8.7 billion (\$3 billion more than the figure given by the OECD) because they excluded funds from the US government, the EU, UN and the World Bank (Edwards and Hulme 1997, 6). It is worth noting at this stage that it is extremely difficult to obtain accurate figures for NGO funding and for aid funding levels in general due to a divergence of reporting formats, terminology and because of the complex relationships between bilateral and multilateral donors, IGOs, INGOs, national NGOs and local NGOs and the problems of tracing aid that arise from this.

by NGOs have grown steadily since 1990, rising from \$5.2 billion to a peak of \$14.7 billion in 2005 (OECD 2008).¹⁵

Donors' growing enthusiasm for NGOs reflected a number of global, political and ideological shifts. First, these trends were related to donors' mounting dissatisfaction with state-driven development interventions since the 1980s. Many Western governments saw NGOs as a useful antidote to the failed state-led development efforts of the 60s and 70s, providing flexibility and the capacity to transform societies from the bottom up, instead of the perceived inertia and top-down solutions presented by states (Edwards & Hulme 1997, Zaidi 1999). Second, NGOs were linked to an associated need to counterbalance the retreat of the state associated with neoliberal structural reforms (see for instance Jackson in Igoe & Kelsall, 2005, 170, Hodson 1997, Wickramasinghe 2001). Third, the rise in funding reflected a growing optimism about the scope for civil society to contribute to political transformation in the aftermath of post-Cold War revolutions in Eastern Europe (Lewis 2002 cited in Goodhand 2006). Fourth, as will be explored in greater depth below, the ascendancy of NGOs was linked to a burgeoning interest from Western governments and multilateral institutions in bringing peace to conflict-affected regions by undertaking more intricate hybrid interventions that combined diplomatic and bi-lateral intervention with measures designed to foster societal transformation (Duffield 2001, Goodhand 2006).

As NGOs grew both in number and in their geographical range, they also began to expand their operational scope beyond traditional humanitarian and developmental roles. This expansion was perhaps most conspicuous in conflict-affected regions where NGOs' developmental and humanitarian work was increasingly supplemented with monitoring, advocacy and peacebuilding roles (Goodhand 2006). Over the same period, NGOs began to occupy a more prominent place in the global political arena. NGO coalitions such as the International Campaign to Ban Landmines, the World Social Forum and Jubilee 2000 were able to apply greater pressure on inter-governmental organisations and conferences, encouraging governments to sign a treaty banning landmines in 1997, pushing through agreements to ban greenhouse gases at the Earth Summit in 1992, or helping to bring about a dramatic reduction in the debts of poor countries (Shaw-Bond 2000, Economist 1999). NGOs were widely seen as sitting at the forefront of an 'associational revolution'

¹⁵ These net grant figures include grants from private and governmental contributions. In 2006, grants made by NGOs fell slightly to \$14.6 billion.

capable of disrupting the established hierarchies of world politics by swamping international conferences and promoting new, more participatory forms of bottom-up governance (Fisher 1993, Salamon 1994, Edwards and Hulme 1997).

A backlash against NGOs

If the 1980s and early 1990s were characterised by a mounting confidence in NGOs' capacity to foster political change and perform an expanded array of technical roles, by the end of the millennium an emerging critique of NGOs' usefulness and motivations was gaining ground (see Sogge et al 1996, Edwards & Hulme 1997, Edwards 2000, Fowler 2000, Van Rooy 2004, Reimann 2005). By the mid-2000s, the era when NGOs could be seen as international donors' 'favoured child' seemed to have passed (Lewis & Opoku-Mensah 2006, 666). This critique grew out of internal debates within the humanitarian and aid community in the mid 1990s, but by the late 1990s had been taken up by the wider academic literature and the popular press (Reimann 2005).¹⁶

In many ways this backlash was a product of NGOs' phenomenal success during the previous decade. As NGOs became bigger and more influential, they lost some of the qualities that had formed the basis of their initial appeal, in particular their close links with the populations they claim to represent or serve and their capacity to bypass the bureaucratic inertia of the state (Shaw-Bond 2000). The critique of NGOs that emerged during this period had a number of different strands but centred on three core issues.

First, criticisms focused on issues of NGO effectiveness and performance. While numerous donor evaluations had charted small-scale success for NGOs' work, more long-term and aggregation evaluation studies highlighted NGOs' failure to provide basic levels of humanitarian protection (Uvin 1998), to foster sustainable social, economic or political change and in particular to live up to their claims to empower communities (Sogge 1996, Smillie 1997, Tvedt 1998).¹⁷ Growing disillusionment with the outcomes of NGOs' work was connected to an emerging concern about the negative consequences of aid, particularly in conflict-affected regions which started in the academic literature but filtered

¹⁶ Criticism of NGOs also built on more long-standing Marxist and post-structuralist critiques of NGOs (See Petras 1999, Kamat 2001, Hearn 2007).

¹⁷ The problems of 'scaling-up' have been a long-standing issue for contemporary NGOs and were first highlighted by authors such as Korten (1990)

down into policy documents during the late 1990s and 2000s (De Waal 1998, Anderson 1999, Terry 2002, Rieff 2002).

Second, opposition focused on questions of accountability and legitimacy. The growth of NGOs, their emerging consultative role within intergovernmental organisations, their string of successes in lobbying intergovernmental organisations and their apparent capacity to wield a growing influence on the world political stage prompted a growing chorus of questions about NGO accountability (Slim 2002, Collingwood & Logister 2005, Brown 2008). These concerns were perhaps best captured in *The Economist's* headline in 1999 'Who Elected Oxfam?' (Economist 1999). To some extent these problems were linked to the fact that development aid was becoming concentrated in the hands of a small group of 'mega-NGOs'. The 'big eight' humanitarian families, for example, 'routinely account for 75% of emergency aid flows' (Slim 2007).¹⁸ As will be discussed in the next chapter, the NGO sector in Sri Lanka mirrored this global trend.

The issue of NGO accountability reflected broader uncertainties over the distribution of power in transnational politics. The landscape of world politics after the Cold War was characterised by multiple sources of legitimacy and authority (Maragia 2002). As Collingwood (2006, 446) has argued, the crisis of legitimacy facing NGOs is best seen as part of a wider 'institutional dilemma concerning how to put effective limits on all types of power' and an outcome of the 'general sense that the current distribution of power under the conditions of "globalisation" are somehow illegitimate, and that key actors in international society...lack sufficient legitimacy'. While NGOs have made attempts to bolster accountability by introducing standards and oversight mechanisms, paradoxically, these efforts may have contributed to the breakdown in relationships between NGOs and their primary stakeholders (Edwards 1999a).

Third, criticisms related to the impression that NGOs were becoming too intimately linked with their governmental funding partners (Farrington et al 1993, Edwards & Hulme 1997). Working more closely with governmental donors not only prompted claims that NGOs' core values and autonomy were being compromised, it also led to fears that these relationships were encouraging a projectised approach that distanced NGOs from their core constituencies (Biggs & Neame 1996, Perera 1997, Roberts et. al. 2005, Goodhand 2006).

¹⁸ The eight federations are: World Vision, Save the Children, CARE, Oxfam, Medecins Sans Frontiers, Caritas, The Lutheran World Federation and the International Rescue Committee.

These critiques were also based on the impression that the contractualisation of NGO work had introduced a degree of competition amongst NGOs; eroding solidarity in the field and prompting dysfunctional outcomes which clashed with NGOs' normative goals (Cooley & Ron 2002, 7-8).

This declining confidence in the NGO sector was reflected in funding trends, with many donors reducing funding for NGOs in recent years, particularly in countries where the state was deemed by donors to be effective (Agg 2006a, 7-8, Höhn 2008). The total proportion of ODA channelled through NGOs dropped from a peak of 8.2% in 2003 to 4.2% in 2007, although net grants by NGOs have continued to rise, largely due to a rise in private donations and an increase in overall levels of aid (OECD 2008).

National NGOs

As NGO activities expanded and diversified in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a corresponding shift in responsibility towards national NGOs in many developing countries. The development orthodoxy that emerged in the 1980s and 90s emphasised values of sustainability and local ownership, which implied new and subtle political roles for NGOs including more complex relationships with other NGOs, often couched in the ambiguous language of 'partnership' (Stirrat & Henkel 1997). INGOs reduced direct implementation and donors increasingly relied on national NGOs as key players in a chain of intermediaries.¹⁹

The appeal of national NGOs lies in their capacity to inhabit both the professionalised world of INGOs and donors, while at the same time keeping one foot in the communities from which they have arisen. As well as being tied by their relationships with both donors and the grassroots, however, national NGOs also show up most frequently on the radar of the state and other domestic political actors. These NGOs have varied histories and have typically emerged from complex interactions and ties with the state, political parties and religious or workers' movements. While local NGOs' comparative advantage rests in their affinity with local communities, national NGOs' appeal stems from their ability to combine

¹⁹ It is difficult to provide clear empirical evidence to back up donors' growing rhetorical commitment to direct funding for NGOs from the developing world. A study by INTRAC in 1998 found considerable evidence that direct funding was significant and that one donor was providing more funds directly to NGOs in Bangladesh than for their entire 'co-funding scheme' in Europe (Pratt et al 2006). There is some evidence that overall funding for national NGOs may be on the wane in some regions. Agg (2006a, 13) shows, for example, how funding for BRAC, a large development NGO from Bangladesh, has actually fallen in recent years.

a foothold in the community with a capacity to address issues on a national scale. National NGOs are classic 'interface experts' who typically combine a knowledge of local languages with a level of expertise in the dominant languages of development discourse (Hilhorst 2003). This multi-sited quality is particularly attractive to donors who tend to seek both to exert influence at the national level and to promote local ownership. These changes in international development practice encouraged a growing interdependence between national NGOs and their international donor and INGO partners.²⁰ While greater support from donors provided clear material benefits, these arrangements also weakened national NGOs' claims to represent the communities they purported to serve, thus diluting their political leverage (Bebbington & Riddell 1995, Edwards 1996, Lewis & Sobhan 1999, Reimann 2005; Edwards and Hulme 1997, Wickramasinghe 2001, Ebrahim 2003). Rather than constituting a 'counterpoint to the logic of the real world', national NGOs became 'inevitably involved in the mundane world of power, patronage and inequality' (Stirrat & Henkel 1997, 74).

In many developing countries, opposition towards NGOs focused on the actions of national or local NGOs. In countries where funding for NGOs had increased rapidly (such as Kenya, Congo and Bangladesh), fears that NGO expansion was driven by rent-seeking entrepreneurs were widespread (Lacey 2003, Jackson 2005, Haque 2008). In the Philippines, Bryant has described how these 'fake' NGOs grew out of attempts by the political elite to capture NGO resources (Bryant 2002). Powerful anti-NGO discourses existed in many developing countries, and were usually based on fears that NGOs were providing a surreptitious means for foreign governments to influence domestic politics. For this reason, the sites of experiments in 'liberal peacebuilding' of the 1990s and 2000s (an emerging approach to violent conflict described in greater detail in the next section) provided particularly fertile ground for domestic opposition to NGOs. In these contexts, funding for NGOs grew rapidly, whilst NGOs became simultaneously associated with the often highly contentious political objectives of their Western governmental backers. The backlash against NGOs in Sri Lanka bore similar characteristics to 'crises of credibility' observed in the NGO sectors in other key sites of liberal peacebuilding interventions such

²⁰ It was unusual for large NGOs in Sri Lanka to generate much non-donor funding. The main exceptions to this were diaspora groups such as the Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation, which in 2003 generated around 84% of its total income (which totalled around \$10million) from sister organisations in the West.

as Palestine (Hammami 2000, Jensen 2005, Jad 2007, Wake 2008) and Nepal (Heaton Shethra 2008).

2. Peacebuilding

One of the aims of this thesis is to consider how processes of NGO legitimation and de-legitimation were related to these organisations' engagement in peacebuilding work. This section places these processes in the broader context of geopolitical change in the aftermath of the Cold War, which saw a growth in foreign intervention in conflict-affected regions. The concept of peacebuilding covers an increasingly broad and shifting range of practices and aspirations. Understandings of the term have often relied on an uneasy combination of pragmatic problem-solving approaches and idealistic visions based on broad models of societal and political change (Heathershaw 2007). As Heathershaw (2008, 604, citing Buzan 1984) argues, broad concepts such as peace are contested and contain contradictions which 'prevents their being expressed in universally accepted definitions'. As a consequence, 'peace and peacebuilding are not terms with a proper descriptive utility and normative value...but they are political discourses which represent and serve to justify certain political interests and ideas' (*ibid*, 604). This chapter develops a disaggregated account of these complex hybrid interventions, and locates NGOs' position within them. It pays particular attention to the way in which, within the fabric of the liberal peacebuilding project, these contradictions were transposed into a series of tensions for the legitimacy of peacebuilding NGOs.

This thesis understands 'peace' as a value relative and often deeply contested term, which is likely to be defined by more powerful actors. A range of understandings of the term exist, and different actors understand the concept in different ways. Galtung (1996) has made a particularly important distinction between 'negative peace' (the absence of organised physical violence) and 'positive peace' (the elimination of structural violence perpetuated by social inequalities and injustice). While NGOs have tended to understand peace in the 'positive' sense, governmental actors have tended to be more concerned with peace in 'negative' terms.

The emergence of liberal peacebuilding

In the aftermath of the Cold War, a growth in Western governments' geopolitical space for intervention and an unprecedented sense of confidence in the defining ideologies of the

West (democracy and capitalism) combined to create a renewed assurance in the West's capacity to intervene in areas of instability. This prompted several key actors, including the UN, to take a more active role in resolving conflict (see Boutros-Ghali 1995). This proactive stance was also driven by actual changes in the nature of global conflict in the post-Cold War period. Both intra- and inter-state conflict declined during this period, but intra-state conflict became proportionally more significant, accounting for 95% of all wars in 2004 (Human Security Centre: 2005).²¹

These changes in the geopolitical context for international relations prompted several important shifts in the way in which conflict, peace and interventions were understood and framed. First, the growing prominence of internal violence together with a perceived decline in the threat posed by hostile states changed the way security threats were perceived by Western countries. Policymakers' increased focus on the links between underdevelopment and conflict resulted in an enhanced emphasis on the potential for violence in relatively insignificant regions to endanger the developed world by contributing to immigration pressures or promoting terrorism.²² Intervention was seen less as a means of containing military threats from hostile states and more as a way of preventing conflict and forestalling the potentially negative outcomes this might inflict on the Western world. Insecurity, even in geo-strategically insignificant regions, was increasingly seen as dangerous and threatening to the West's broader interests.

Second, this changing understanding of security threats produced a shift in the responses of Western states towards internal conflict. This framework implied a 'radicalisation of the development agenda', which saw a shift towards a more comprehensive model of societal transformation and encouraged development actors to engage more directly with conflict issues (Duffield 2001).²³ These concerns were reflected in the peacebuilding approaches

²¹ While claims that contemporary civil conflicts represented a qualitative break with civil wars of the past have been overstated, there were significant changes in the nature of conflict. Intra-state conflicts in the post-Cold War period often involved states that were as weak and decentralised as the insurgents they were fighting, placing greater reliance on criminal networks, which were often linked to the global economy to sustain the war effort (Kalyvas 2004). Considerable continuities remained, however, between the pre- and post-Cold War periods, which are particularly evident in long-running conflicts such as the Arab Israeli and Sri Lankan conflicts.

²² See the National Security Strategy of the United States (White House 2002) and The National Security Strategy of the United Kingdom (Cabinet Office 2008).

²³ Duffield (2001) has argued that multilateralism served both a defensive and a legitimising role for western governments. It legitimised the expansion of the liberal capitalist system while at the same

pursued by Western governments and the UN which increasingly framed peace as an outcome of the simultaneous pursuit of development and democratisation, and aimed not only to resolve existing conflicts, but to prevent new ones by addressing root causes.²⁴ New policy goals led to institutional changes within many Western governments and multilateral organisations such as the formation of the World Bank Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Unit, the UN Peacebuilding Commission and the UK government's Conflict Prevention Pool (jointly run by the Ministry of Defence, the Foreign Office and the Department for International Development).

Conflicts in the post-Cold War period have tended to be framed as internal problems with external solutions. The roots of conflict have been viewed as stemming from a mixture of indigenous factors such as misgovernance and uneven development while the solutions are seen as lying in the hands of international actors whose interventions can alter institutional arrangements and preferences of conflict actors towards peace (Goodhand & Walton 2009). Confidence in these approaches was spurred by the influential Human Security Report of 2005, which argued that increased international peacebuilding efforts have been responsible for a decline in global levels of violent conflict in the 1990s (Human Security Centre 2005).

Third, the changing nature of international intervention reflected a subtle redefinition of state sovereignty. The commitment to the principles of self-government and non-intervention which had characterised the Cold War period was quickly eroded in its aftermath. Sovereignty was seen less as a set of rights to be weighed against the right to intervention (Chandler 2004) and was instead increasingly framed as conditional upon upholding certain standards of behaviour. These changes were captured in the ICISS's (2001) 'Responsibility to Protect' report, in which sovereignty was seen as dependent upon the state's capacity to protect and provide for populations. As Chandler (2003) has argued, the associated rise in 'ethical interventions' that accompanied these ideological

time helping to build a consensus around protecting liberalism from 'unruly parts of the world' (Ibid).

²⁴ Boutros-Ghali (1993) 'Without peace there can be no development and there can be no democracy. Without development, the basis for democracy will be lacking and societies will tend to fall into conflict. And without democracy, no sustainable development will occur; without such development, peace cannot be maintained' (cited in Heathershaw 2008, 600). This was in contrast to policy during the Cold War when US policy placed greater emphasis on political stability over democratisation (Bastian 2007, 11). Both Boutros-Ghali (UN general secretary between 1992 and 1996) and Kofi Annan (1997-2007) placed a growing emphasis on conflict prevention (Woodward 2007).

developments was also motivated by Western governments' need to boost moral authority and legitimacy at home.

A Liberal peacebuilding model?

The geopolitical and conceptual shifts described above produced an emerging consensus amongst inter-governmental actors, multilateral and bilateral donors concerning the most appropriate methods for building peace (Duffield 2001, Richmond 2006).²⁵ The model that surfaced during the 1990s involved a more aggressive pursuit of long-standing international policy goals of economic and political liberalisation, with aid increasingly made conditional upon governments' implementation of these reform agendas (Paris 1997). The belief that the goals of building democratic and accountable political systems and reforming the economy could be pursued simultaneously represented a distinct departure from international policy norms that characterised the Cold War period (Bastian 2007). In addition to promoting economic and governance reforms, the model asserted that violent conflict could be alleviated and overcome by reaching an internationally backed peace settlement and by managing local level conflicts through a range of measures designed to improve the security of local populations.

A key feature of this new approach was the belief that these different strands would be mutually-supporting or that 'all good things come together' (Goodhand & Walton 2009). With this emerging consensus amongst Western and multilateral donors about the key tenets of liberal intervention, donors increasingly sought to align their interventions, stressing the importance of integrated missions and harmonisation and leaving less room for alternative visions for achieving peace. In the context of a broad political consensus amongst international actors, the only choices remaining were technical ones related to sequencing and prioritisation (*ibid.*). This framework involved the blurring of domestic and international policy goals, leading departments for foreign affairs, immigration, trade and development to work together more closely (*ibid.*).

Regional variation

Recent empirical work on liberal peacebuilding interventions has highlighted significant diversity in the way in which these interventions have been implemented. While much of

²⁵ It is easy to overstate the newness of the liberal peacebuilding model of engagement. Rather than a pioneering range of novel practices, it is best seen as intensification and blurring of existing agendas. These new practices built on existing models of international engagement which had been promoting political and economic liberalisation since the 1970s.

the recent literature on liberal peacebuilding has focused on the tensions prompted by highly conservative and military-led interventions such as those pursued in Iraq and Afghanistan, most cases have followed a more 'orthodox' approach of the kind pursued in cases such as Cambodia (1991), El Salvador (1991), Rwanda (1993), Bosnia (1995), East Timor (1999) and Kosovo (1999). In these instances, the agencies involved maintained a strong underlying emphasis on state-building and pursued a range of objectives including rewriting national constitutions, redrafting criminal laws, administering elections, training civil servants and guiding economic reform (Paris 2004).²⁶ In other contexts, such as Sri Lanka, where conflict had not undermined state capacity, liberal peacebuilders tended to take a more hands-off approach. In these cases, donors often struggled to find satisfactory instruments to induce peace, with the quest for coherence (upon which a policy of conditionality relied) often proving elusive (Frerks & Klem 2005).

Liberal peacebuilding interventions often evade simple categorisation because a range of actors are involved, pursuing multiple objectives and using a variety of approaches. In some respects, Sri Lanka represented a 'thin' version of the liberal peace: there has been no coordinating UN presence, intervention has not been driven by a concern with statebuilding and 'illiberal' regional actors have played a significant role. Other aspects of the Sri Lankan case, however, suggest that it represents a 'thick' version of the liberal peace model; for example, the early liberalisation of the economy in the 1970s and the heavy internationalisation of the peace process since 2002 (Moore 1990, Herring 2001).²⁷ As the next chapter will argue in greater detail, liberal peace in Sri Lanka has been pursued to varying degrees over different periods.

More fine-grained analyses of conflict-affected regions and interventions have stressed the importance of domestic politics in shaping the way in which liberal peacebuilding is pursued in different contexts. Rather than simply being foisted on vulnerable conflict-affected countries from the outside, liberal peacebuilding is best characterised as a product of complex negotiations between internal and external actors (Goodhand & Walton 2009). Furthermore, the case of Sri Lanka emphasises how liberal peacebuilding could be utilised

²⁶ Even in these situations, however, international organisations often worked at crossed purposes. In El Salvador, Paris (1997, 87) has shown how the IMF advocated a rapid cut in public spending while the UN pressed for a more gradualist approach.

²⁷ These 'thin' versions are more likely to arise in relation to non-strategic states whilst more strategically significant states tend to involve thick versions (Goodhand 2006, 120).

to perform a range of political functions, not all of which were concerned with building peace in the way liberal peacebuilders envisaged. President Rajapakse, for example, used the perceived over-internationalisation of the peace process as a tool for articulating his own political agenda, which emphasised a commitment to the welfare and security of the Sinhalese majority community.

The instrumentalisation of liberal peacebuilding resonates with Barnett & Zuercher's (2009) argument that processes of negotiation between domestic and international actors have led to outcomes that often depart significantly from liberal peacebuilders' initial aims and expectations. They argue that liberal peacebuilding interventions are often hijacked by state elites who wish to protect existing power relations and rural elites who thwart any attempts to bolster the state at their expense. Rather than resulting in peacebuilding interventions that are unconditionally accepted by peripheral and state elites, liberal peacebuilding interventions are more commonly *co-opted* to satisfy international peacebuilders' hopes for stability and legitimacy and domestic actors' existing interests, *captured* so that distribution of resources is entirely redirected to meet the interests of domestic actors or result in *conflictive peacebuilding* where either international or domestic actors resort to violent means to achieve their objectives. This thesis aims to supplement Barnett & Zuercher's investigation of the ways in which liberal peacebuilding projects can be negotiated to meet the interests of state and rural elites, by exploring NGOs' involvement in this process of renegotiation. I contend that NGOs are important agents in processes of brokering peacebuilding contracts, based on their relationships with and knowledge of the discursive worlds of actors in both the domestic and international spheres.

Multiple political strands

Another challenge to the idea that liberal peacebuilding constitutes a coherent model comes from an in-depth analysis of the various agencies involved in peacebuilding work. As Goodhand & Klem (2005) have argued in the case of Sri Lanka, and Barnett et al (2007) have noted in their more wide-ranging analysis, international actors pursue divergent agendas, often intervening on the basis of a range of interests which may be conflicting both internally (between different government departments) and with each other.

Richmond (2000) highlights a number of strands captured within the liberal peacebuilding framework spanning from a hyper-conservative version (a war for peace of the kind

pursued initially in Iraq) to an emancipatory model (which focuses on social aspects of peacebuilding) via conservative (force and diplomacy leading to ceasefire/ negotiation and constitutional settlement) and orthodox approaches (constitutional and institutional peace with more long-term measures for political and economic development). While NGOs would tend to articulate their peacebuilding work through an emancipatory framework, the new discourses of international engagement that accompanied the rise of liberal peacebuilding framework such as human security, meant that these aims became increasingly blurred with more conservative models. The balance between these different strands typically changed over time. An intervention may start by conforming to a hyper-conservative or conservative model, but may draw on orthodox or emancipatory approaches in order to generate legitimacy over time or to justify continued engagement (Richmond 2006). The existence of multiple strands and divergent discourses of peace constitutes a source of instability within the fabric of liberal peacebuilding interventions. In the case of Sri Lanka, tensions emerged between some Western governments' peacebuilding goals and their concern with tackling international terrorism. There were also tensions between the normative outlook of some human rights and peacebuilding NGOs, and donor agencies such as USAID, whose contribution to peacebuilding was focused on promoting entrepreneurship and economic development.²⁸ As Mehta's (1999) work on liberalism in the nineteenth century demonstrates, the close intertwining of these emancipatory and conservative strands of liberal thought is nothing new; liberalism has repeatedly been used to justify essentially illiberal interventions in developing countries.

Several authors have explored how the broadened scope and hybrid nature of contemporary peacebuilding interventions was facilitated by new discourse capable of fostering collaboration between a growing array of governmental and non-governmental actors and minimising tensions between their respective normative standpoints. Paris (2001, 88), for example, has argued that the emerging concepts of human security and peacebuilding that accompanied the rise of liberal peacebuilding were made 'slippery by design' in order to hold together a 'jumbled coalition of "middle power" states, development agencies and NGOs'. International reports written in the 2000s have increasingly involved an intensification of this merger between emancipatory and orthodox or conservative models of peacebuilding. The 'Responsibility to Protect' document, for example, simultaneously seeks to spur a more interventionist approach whilst placing

²⁸ Interview with representative of small peacebuilding NGO, Colombo 29th September 2006.

greater emphasis on the individual rather than the state (Heathershaw 2008, 613-4). This fusion is even more apparent in the UN's 2004 *A More Secure World* – which, as Heathershaw (2008, 612) argues, seeks to please 'both humanitarians who demand that the rights of individuals must be placed above the sovereignty of the state, and statebuilders who believe that juridical sovereignty should be built from without in the case of 'failed states'.

The balance between these various strands of the discourse of liberal peacebuilding changed over time. After the perceived failure of several peace missions in the early 1990s, which relied on rapidly implemented political and economic reforms, a growing emphasis was placed on the importance of building robust state institutions (Paris & Sisk 2007).²⁹ These more prolonged state-building interventions raised a series of tensions around issues such as local ownership, legitimacy, dependency and accountability (*ibid.*). Such tensions impacted upon the legitimacy of peacebuilding NGOs, whose emancipatory agendas were often subsumed by the more orthodox state-building goals of their donor partners.

Liberal Peacebuilding in Crisis?

By the mid-2000s, the liberal peacebuilding model was widely criticised both in the academic and the practitioner literature, with several commentators arguing that the model was in crisis (Richmond 2006, Cooper 2007). This assessment was partly a response to the problematic experience of an increasingly conservative and militaristic model of liberal peacebuilding pursued in Iraq and Afghanistan. It was also based on evaluations of the orthodox or institutionally oriented interventions conducted in the 1990s in countries such as Bosnia, Kosovo, Cambodia and East Timor.³⁰ Authors such as Richmond & Franks (2007) and Chandler (2008) argued that interventions often fell well short of their expectations, failed to improve standards of living and meet the security concerns of target

²⁹ As Chandler (2008) has noted, this represented something of a U-turn in international policy making. From seeing states as an obstacle to be bypassed in the pursuit of peace, interventions increasingly saw building robust states as a central tool by which peacebuilding could be pursued.

³⁰ This critique also built on a more long-standing scepticism of the impact of international peacebuilding and peacekeeping efforts. Some authors used cross-country empirical data to question the effectiveness of internationally-sponsored peace agreements and peace processes, arguing that military victories had proven more sustainable than negotiated settlements (Licklider 1995, Luttwak 1997) while others highlighted the potential for peace processes to exacerbate and incentivise violence in certain circumstances (Steadman 2001, Tull & Mehler 2005). Others have drawn more positive conclusions about the broad success of international peacebuilding efforts. Mack (2007), for example, argues that a global decline after the Cold War is attributable to a rapid expansion of preventive diplomacy and peace support operations from the UN and other multilateral institutions.

populations, creating a 'virtual peace' and often inadvertently entrenching the political dominance of existing elites or undermining the emergence of a legitimate state.³¹ As will be examined in greater depth in the next chapter's analysis of the Sri Lankan case, criticisms also stemmed from the domestic political arena of conflict-affected countries. Local technocrats who aligned themselves with the international liberal peacebuilding agenda often lacked legitimacy of their own and were viewed as puppets of the West by nationalists. Finally, the crisis has also been driven by a growing assertiveness of non-traditional donors such as China and Russia, whose resurgence in world politics undermines the assumption of shared global values that underpinned the liberal internationalist project.

As Cooper (2007, 613) has argued, a broad consensus has emerged in the literature on liberal peacebuilding that the mix between external regulation and local voice and accountability needs to be rebalanced in favour of the latter, with a greater emphasis on the creation of 'effective states accountable to local populations'. Agreement has also emerged around the need for greater scrutiny of the local context upon which interventions are imposed. The political economy critique (represented by authors such as Cramer (2006) and Goodhand (2006)) maintains that in order to build peace effectively, it is first necessary to understand the nature of conflict and power relations through an historical analysis of conflict, and the way in which conflict involves the complex interaction of global and domestic politics and power relations.

Beate Jahn's (2007) work reminds us that this crisis of contemporary peacebuilding interventions has been played out before in the failure of modernization theories and the policies pursued in the early Cold War period. This failure, Jahn argues, stems from a liberal view of history that sees democracy, capitalism and security as mutually constitutive and which has produced interventionist approaches designed to instil the market democracy model in regions considered insufficiently mature in political terms to develop this approach without outside assistance. As the case of Sri Lanka demonstrates, and as will be discussed in the next chapter, the implementation of liberal policies has often been accompanied by decidedly illiberal practices.

³¹ A more technical critique also emerged in response to these failures. Paris (2004), for example, argued that peacebuilding interventions were failing because of problems of sequencing and proposed a modified approach that prioritised institutionalisation whilst delaying programmes of economic and political liberalisation.

Issues of legitimacy have been emphasised in recent critiques of contemporary peacebuilding interventions. While liberal statebuilding projects have aimed to build legitimate political processes and rebuild state institutions, they have often simply equated legitimacy with liberal goals, ignoring the fact that in practice it is 'produced in forms of consent, institutions and rules, and maintained by beliefs' (Heathershaw 2008) and that 'what constitutes the proper means and what is the good life depends on time, place, and circumstances' (Barnett 2006). As Barnett (2006) has highlighted, liberalism provides one particular roadmap for achieving a legitimate state, neglecting more locally-rooted notions of state legitimacy. This point echoes the argument of David Chandler (2004) who contends that a focus on universal standards of *governance* sees developing states as devoid of legitimate social and political interests, giving 'priority to the framework of regulatory controls...established at an institutional level' rather than a focus on local *government* which stresses 'the importance of the political process...played out and mediated at a societal level' (p.478 f.).

As Williams (2007, 550) has highlighted, legitimacy problems have been an enduring feature of liberal interventions. Citing diverse examples from the reconstruction efforts of the Unionists in the aftermath of the American Civil War to the British after the Boer War, he argues that interventions failed because local opponents made appeals to local populations which challenged the legitimacy of the external 'invaders', and tainted the perceived motives of these external actors. As well as emphasising the fact that successful peacebuilding and reconstruction efforts are reliant upon the acquiescence of local populations, these historical examples underline the tendency for local political actors to exploit a perceived lack of legitimacy from international actors both to undermine interventions, and to shore up their own domestic position.

NGOs and liberal peacebuilding

While the emergence of new methods and frameworks for building peace in the 1990s saw a rise in the number of NGOs engaged in peace work, this engagement was by no means a new phenomenon. The religious or spiritual traditions that informed the work of many NGOs provided a strong normative orientation towards peace work, with Quaker and Gandhian organisations particularly involved (Woodhouse 1994). These non-governmental approaches were linked to a peace studies tradition which argued that strategies to end conflict needed to address not only the needs of the key parties in the conflict but also the 'human needs' of populations or 'structural inequalities' of society (Azar & Burton 1986,

Galtung 1996). These strategies advocated a shift from a 'conflict management' model that focused on resolving conflict through elite-level negotiations towards a 'conflict transformation' paradigm (Richmond 2000). This perspective, which was heavily influenced by the work of John Paul Lederach (1997), posited that building peace was reliant upon a broad portfolio of measures simultaneously focused on top (track one), middle-range (track two) and grassroots leadership (track three). This broad consensus papered over a number of latent tensions inherent in NGO peacebuilding strategies; for example, between the goal of ending violent conflict and the aim of building just societies (Lederach 1999).

By the early 2000s, the notion that peace was best achieved via comprehensive societal change (which had previously been the domain of radical civil society groups such as the Quakers) was fully entrenched in mainstream international policy. This change was embodied in the resolution of the UN General Assembly in 1999, which stated that peace and non-violence could only be achieved through a range of measures aimed at building a culture of peace, promoting sustainable development, democratic participation, respect for human rights, equality, the free flow of information, solidarity, understanding and tolerance (Alger 2007). These expanded notions of peace implied a more significant role for NGOs and encouraged growing co-operation between UN agencies and NGOs via follow-up and parallel conferences and partnerships in the field (*ibid.*). NGOs' engagement in peacebuilding work was also cemented by an important body of policy work led by Anderson's (1996) *Do No Harm* study, which highlighted the potential for NGOs to resolve conflict by engaging at the community level.

For Richmond (2005), engaging with civil society actors performed two primary functions for donor agencies. First, the access and flexibility of these actors permitted more intimate forms of intervention such as institutionalising bottom-up forms of governance which states on their own were unable to deliver. Second, involving civil society helped to fashion a 'peacebuilding consensus' capable of legitimising what was otherwise a primarily state-led project (*ibid.*).

The increasing demand for non-governmental peacebuilding partners was met by a proliferation of specialist peacebuilding organisations and a broadening of mandates from existing humanitarian and development NGOs (Goodhand 2006).³² The discourse of

³² Most NGOs engaged in peacebuilding work are development organisations that have added peacebuilding work to their existing portfolio of activities.

peacebuilding has been mainstreamed into development discourse and increasingly forms part of the normative and causal claims that national NGOs use to justify their work.³³ In sites of liberal peacebuilding intervention, a range of existing development and humanitarian practices were repackaged or reconceived to meet the new peacebuilding agenda (see Denskus 2007). While in some cases this led to a significant shift of focus, in most cases the malleability of peacebuilding discourse allowed most development actors to hedge their bets.³⁴ As the case studies examined in this thesis will show, NGOs moving into the peacebuilding field were often able to shift focus without sacrificing organisational coherence.

The categories of peace work that predominated in Sri Lanka during the ceasefire period are fairly typical and formed the mainstay of civil society's contribution to liberal peacebuilding interventions. As will be described in chapter five these focused on four main areas. First, they involved attempts to support track one negotiations through conducting track two work or assisting in bringing marginalised groups into the peace process; second, they involved efforts to address societal conflict by managing conflicts at the local level, conducting peace education programmes, facilitating links between ethnic groups and conducting relief and reconstruction work; third, they attempted to build a liberal polity by conducting policy, governance, advocacy and human rights-based work; and fourth they aimed to foster popular support for peace by conducting campaigns or public demonstrations.

Within this strategic complex of actors, the aims and interests of civil society actors (and their beneficiaries) were increasingly assumed to be aligned with the agendas of both donors and conflict actors (Duffield 2001, 2007). Rather than seeing civil society as a check on state power, funding agencies viewed civil society actors as an ancillary form of governmental authority. This framework of action encouraged a mutual dependency between governmental and non-governmental actors, with states relying on NGOs to boost legitimacy with local populations, and with NGOs reliant on states for funding. The close relationships between international donors and NGOs that characterised liberal

³³ The World Bank, for instance, claimed in 2006: 'Over the last decade, the role of civil society in peacebuilding has increasingly gained recognition. Today the main question in the international debate is no longer "whether" civil society has a role to play in peacebuilding, but "how" civil society can best realize its valuable contributions' (World Bank 2006, 7).

³⁴ Goodhand (2006) describes how the discourse of 'rehabilitation' performed a similar function, allowing donors and NGOs to overcome tensions between relief and development.

peacebuilding interventions had some negative implications for NGO legitimacy, distancing national and local NGOs from their constituencies and undermining their claims to represent local interests. As will be described in chapter five, these practices often denied political agency to local actors as donors sought to build 'peace by bureaucratic means' (Goetschel & Hagmann 2009).

Just as it is important to challenge the view that liberal peacebuilding is pursued consistently across different contexts, it is also important to stress that liberal peacebuilding was not accepted uniformly or unconditionally by NGOs. Instead, as this thesis argues, the various strands of liberal peacebuilding intersected in a complex way with NGOs' own normative and political agendas. As well as being able to negotiate the various peacebuilding agendas of their governmental partners, in several important instances NGOs and other civil society actors have been able to resist and subvert the model of liberal peacebuilding, providing alternatives to this framework of action (see MacGinty 2007, MacGinty & Williams 2008).

3. NGO legitimacy

The last two sections have highlighted the way in which the numerical and operational expansion of NGOs since the 1980s raised a number of tensions in the way in which these organisations were perceived by other actors. The first section examined the crisis of confidence in NGOs' aims, performance and motivations emerging from the growth and diversification of NGOs in the 1990s. The second explored NGOs' involvement in peacebuilding work during the 1990s and 2000s and described how their association with the increasingly interventionist state-building projects of foreign governments prompted additional problems for NGOs' organisational identities.

This section examines the existing literature on NGO legitimacy, highlighting some of its shortcomings and identifying some of the reasons why mainstream accounts of NGO legitimacy have been difficult to apply in the Sri Lankan case. It then moves on to examine three significant sources of tension in NGO legitimacy which are relevant to this study: their engagement with politics, their work in conflict-affected regions, and their engagement with liberal peacebuilding interventions.

Power and legitimacy

The term legitimacy harbours some of the most fundamental questions of social and political science: who has the right to rule and on what basis? A legitimate actor is generally seen as one that has a socially agreed right to exert force or influence in society. Suchman (1995, 573-4) has defined legitimacy as 'the generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a social system'. Similarly, Edwards (1999) defines legitimacy as 'having the right to be and do something in society – a sense that an organization is lawful, proper, admissible and justified in doing what it does, and saying what it says, and that it continues to enjoy the support of an identifiable community' (Edwards 1999, 258). Both of these definitions emphasise the fundamentally collective nature of legitimacy, viewing it as a process of consensus amongst a particular group, community or society of actors (Johnson et al 2006).

The process of generating this consensus, however, is rarely straightforward; several competing frameworks determining what constitutes legitimate behaviour may coexist within a society or group, and different groups or individuals may have different ideas about what might constitute a legitimate actor or legitimate acts (Edwards 1999, Lister 2003, Brown 2008). Furthermore, while legitimacy is dependent upon apparent consensus, this does not necessarily imply actual consensus; legitimacy can be maintained in spite of disagreement from some individuals (Johnson 2006, 57). The ambiguity of these processes of legitimation have led to accusations that the term 'legitimacy' is too woolly and vague to be analytically useful. These charges have been made in the political science literature on the grounds that it blurs the grounds for compliance or the framework for justifying action and the action itself, rendering it confusing at best and misleading at worst (O'Kane 1993, see also O'Connor 2007).

Whilst these criticisms highlight important issues with the term, a conception of legitimacy seems preferable to notions of power to explain how various non-governmental actors are able to influence others without controlling the distribution of resources or coercion. NGO power has an ephemeral quality: much of NGOs' strength and their capacity to influence is often dependent upon an appearance of vulnerability (Bryant 2005). When NGOs appear to be too powerful, their legitimacy can wane and influence can be lost.

Challenging mainstream accounts of NGO legitimacy

The term 'legitimacy' has occupied a central place in contemporary accounts of NGOs' work, being generally employed to grapple with the growing dilemmas of NGO accountability, representativeness and performance which accompanied the expansion of NGO activities in the 1990s (Lister 2003, see also Edwards & Hulme 1996, Fowler 1997, Pearce 1997, Attack 1998, Hudson 2000, 2001, Slim 2002, Brown 2008). Most of this work has come from a practitioner perspective which highlighted 'technical' deficiencies in NGOs' work and as a result, the concept of legitimacy has been poorly theorised in the NGO literature (Lister 2003). In many cases, rather than being treated as a complex sociological phenomenon to be unravelled via empirical analysis, these authors have tended to see legitimacy as a normative concept 'that defines what the proper political and legal constraints on power should be' (Collingwood & Logister 2005, 178).

These accounts have argued that as NGOs' work was becoming more diverse, and their financial and political clout had grown, the balance of accountabilities upon which their legitimacy rested had been distorted, and NGOs had become more focused on upwards accountability towards donors, distancing them from their core constituencies (Edwards & Hulme 1997) and eroding the roots in social solidarity 'that legitimize NGOs as independent actors in their own societies' (Edwards 1999, 266). In response, these approaches often emphasised a relatively standardised formula which NGOs could apply in order to rebuild legitimacy; by placing more emphasis on downwards accountability to beneficiaries and improving standards of organisational accountability and transparency (Edwards & Hulme 1996, Fowler 1997, Pearce 1997, Attack 1998, Edwards 1999, Hudson 2000, 2001).

While these perspectives were frequently invoked by the NGOs I encountered during my fieldwork, they seemed to offer few clues for understanding the crisis of NGO legitimacy I observed in Sri Lanka. In this context, NGOs were not simply being judged in relation to singular benchmarks of accountability and transparency, but instead were being critiqued in different ways by different audiences. Furthermore, the frameworks employed to assess NGO legitimacy were highly politicised and changeable.

Much more useful was Lister's (2003) socially-constructed account of NGO legitimacy. This approach placed much greater emphasis on NGOs' operating environments and relationships with various different actors:

'Not only do different organizations operate within slightly different environments, each organization operates within a number of environments with different stakeholders' (Lister, 2003, 179).

Lister's approach also recognises that different actors privilege different aspects of NGOs' work and that the 'approaches, interests and perceptions of the stakeholders, not the agency, determine which characteristics create legitimacy' (*ibid.* 181). Drawing on organisational theory and particularly the work of Suchman (1995), Lister (2003) saw NGOs as reliant on four different kinds of legitimacy including *normative legitimacy* (based on acceptable and desirable norms, standards, and values), *cognitive legitimacy* (based on goals and activities that fit with broad social understandings of what is appropriate, proper, and desirable), *regulatory legitimacy* (by abiding by laws and regulations) and *pragmatic legitimacy* (by conforming to demands for services, partnership or by receiving private funding). Different audiences will develop their own understandings of these different kinds of legitimacy. The fundamentally contested nature of NGO legitimacy is also acknowledged by authors such as Edwards (1999, 260) who describes how 'questions of [NGO] legitimacy involve judgements and choices, struggles and negotiations about what NGOs do and who has what rights to influence organizational decisions' and Brown (2008, 41) who identifies what he terms a 'constructionist perspective' on NGO legitimacy that 'assumes that legitimacy and accountability problems involve implicit and subjective standards held by actors with diverse interests, expertise and power'. These constructivist approaches draw on Foucauldian understandings of power and, in particular, the idea that power is structured by discourses, which determine which actions are thinkable and which are not (Foucault 1990). From this perspective, NGO legitimacy is seen as determined by NGOs' capacity to conform to dominant discourses in the global and domestic arenas, and their ability to negotiate inconsistencies that arise between these two realms. In chapters five and six, I argue that NGOs' changing use of discourse provided an important tool for maintaining legitimacy during the crisis period.

One of the problems with the existing literature on NGO legitimacy, for my purposes, has been the fact that, to date, it has focused on problems facing international NGOs, and in particular how these relate to changes in international politics (Slim 2002, Edwards 2003, Collingwood & Logister 2005, McGann & Johnstone 2005, Lehr-Lehnhardt 2005). As argued above, national NGOs are likely to address more concrete political concerns arising from their own national context and are likely to pose a greater threat to power holders

than INGOs, who tend to focus on more nebulous issues across a broader and more politically diffuse terrain.

This literature has also rarely touched on the specific legitimacy problems facing national (or local) NGOs or issues associated with working in 'delicate and contested political fields' such as Sri Lanka (Korf 2006). As Lister (2003, 184) has argued, it is important to consider "which legitimacy matters" and the relative "weights" of different organizational stakeholders in determining legitimacy'. These issues are particularly relevant in conflictual and transitional contexts, where the relative influence of various actors can fluctuate in relation to changing political conditions. As the next chapter will examine in greater detail, in the Sri Lankan context, NGO legitimacy is forged in relation to an unusually volatile matrix of political power.

In conflict-affected environments, the political incentives associated with legitimising or delegitimising NGOs are often of greater importance to understanding a decline in legitimacy than NGOs' own failure to conform to prevailing frameworks for understanding or justifying NGO action. In the Sri Lankan context, the stakeholders or audiences identified by Lister (2003) did not simply constitute passive groups looking on at NGOs' behaviour and judging it in accordance with their own frameworks for cognitive and normative legitimacy. Instead, these groups tended to use NGO legitimacy as a tool to highlight or articulate their own political agendas.

Another aspect of NGO legitimacy that has been underplayed in the existing literature is the role of the state in shaping processes of legitimation. In common with other actors engaged in development or peacebuilding work, NGOs tend to provoke a fundamental tension between projects concerned with 'improvement' and state sovereignty or the 'right to rule' (Li 2007). As Clarke (1998a) has described, perceptions of NGOs' legitimate political role varied widely according to context. Whilst in the Philippines NGOs were welcomed by some political parties since they were seen to provide a useful means of supplementing their efforts to fight elite interests, in Malaysia political parties opposed NGOs on the grounds that they constituted a threat to their values and interests (*ibid.*, 46). In Sri Lanka, the capacity for NGOs to engage in political action has been gradually curtailed since the 1970s as conflict on the island intensified and governance became more centralised. As I will argue in the next chapter, NGO legitimacy in Sri Lanka has been framed in relation to the discourse of Sinhala nationalism which stresses the importance of traditional norms

and the primacy of a strong welfarist state. As a result, the notion of a legitimate NGO has been highly ambivalent and NGO legitimacy has been closely related to the maintenance of good relations with state institutions. These characteristics imply that while qualities such as accountability, social solidarity or independence may still be relevant for NGO legitimacy in Sri Lanka, these qualities are not judged in an abstract sense and will be defined through the lens of Sinhala nationalism.

NGO legitimacy and strategic action

Just as much of the existing literature on NGO legitimacy was unhelpful for understanding the legitimacy concerns of national NGOs working in Sri Lanka, most of the literature on NGOs had very little to say about my fourth research question – how do NGOs influence other actors’ perceptions of them? Raymond Bryant’s (2005) study of environmental NGOs in the Philippines helps to overcome some of the literature’s shortcomings by exploring the way in which environmental NGOs in the Philippines generated ‘moral capital’.³⁵ He argues that perceptions of NGOs are based on complex and multiple interpretations of these organisations’ moral, financial and political qualities. Bryant’s key insight is that the financial, territorial and political strategies NGOs use to boost organisational legitimacy are not separate from their moral visions. Instead, he argues that we must see NGOs as engaged in a ‘complicated social and political process of “resource mobilization” ...in which cultural dynamics and strategic rationality are inextricably intertwined’ (Bryant 2005, 4).

Whilst Bryant’s approach to understanding the strategic aspects of NGOs’ behaviour was extremely useful, his notion that this behaviour was primarily driven by a ‘quest for moral capital’ failed to resonate with the experience of the Sri Lankan NGOs I encountered during the course of my fieldwork for two principal reasons. First, while some organisations generated legitimacy on the basis of their moral standing within communities (Sarvodaya was a good example of this), others (including FCE) seemed less concerned with cultivating impressions based on their identity as actors driven primarily by moral concerns, and instead were content to base their credibility primarily on their technical, political and communicative capacities. Second, while moral judgements were still highly relevant in the

³⁵Hilhorst’s (2003, 8) study of NGOs in the Philippines also stresses this aspect of NGO behaviour by highlighting the way in which NGOs were engaged in a constant cultivation of their legitimacy which involved: ‘convincing others that a situation or population needs development...convincing others that the intervention of the NGO is indispensable and appropriate, and that it has no self-interest...[and] convincing others that the NGO is able and reliable, in other words trustworthy, and capable of carrying out the intervention’.

heavily politicised environment I was analysing, these assessments were closely entangled with ideas about organisations' political aims and motivations.

I explore NGOs' attempts to shape processes of legitimation in chapters five and six and argue that by deploying a range of discursive tactics and programmatic strategies, NGOs were able to alleviate the negative impacts of criticism on their legitimacy. In claiming that NGOs were capable of influencing processes of legitimation, I am not suggesting that NGOs' action is the most significant determinant of these processes: as I have argued above, these processes were highly politicised and primarily driven by changes in the broader political climate. The decisions NGOs made during the crisis period, however, had important consequences for the way in which they were perceived by other actors. During the crisis period, NGOs pursued a more defensive strategy of maintaining legitimacy by tackling negative accounts and managing relationships with key audiences. As such, my argument is that NGOs were capable of limiting or perpetuating damage to their legitimacy, even though this damage was primarily driven by broader structural change.

Legitimacy and NGOs' political action

NGOs have an uncomfortable relationship with politics. This discomfort arises from the fact that despite primarily justifying their work in moral terms, NGOs are also concerned with pragmatic social action, and their objectives frequently overlap with the concerns of political actors. This starting point is problematic since it situates them on a knife-edge between sincere and contrived behaviour; altruistic behaviour can easily be confused with behaviour that is motivated by self-interest or an ulterior political motive and uses normative claims to disguise its baser objectives (Bryant 2005). As Edwards (1999, 265) notes '[t]he trouble with being values-based is that someone, somewhere is liable to check up on whether you are putting your values into practice'.

Many NGOs have used political mechanisms and tactics in the pursuit of more ethically-informed objectives. This tentative engagement in politics is reputationally risky since much of NGOs' credibility relies on their capacity to combine a disinterested moral concern with social action (Bryant 2005). If NGOs are seen to wield political or material resources, they can easily appear self-interested or politically motivated. As mentioned in the first part of this chapter, these tensions have plagued NGOs since the 1980s and 90s when they grew rapidly in size, wealth and political stature. The pursuit of explicitly political aims not

only risks drowning out NGOs' ethical, down-to-earth appeal, but also raises suspicions that they are using their normative appeal to conceal political objectives. As a result, NGOs (especially organisations with humanitarian goals) often downplay their political character by stressing their moral or technical characteristics (Feher 2007) or denying themselves a direct political role.³⁶

NGOs' tense relationship with politics is also closely linked to the fears of other political actors. NGOs possess significant popular appeal and in developing countries wield sizeable financial resources which can be utilised to influence the political arena. In the Sri Lankan context, NGOs' potential to influence political processes has been both appealing and threatening to politicians at different times. As will be explored in chapter four, Dr. Ariyaratne, the leader of Sarvodaya, was initially courted as a campaign supporter and later punished for the perceived undue influence his organisation was exerting on the Presidential election. The fact that NGOs are funded by foreign governments has fuelled concerns from nationalist political parties in Sri Lanka that NGOs are surreptitiously involved in furthering foreign political agendas.

The mixed response to NGOs' engagement in politics from domestic actors can be contrasted with the expectations placed on NGOs by international actors. These groups were generally more convinced of NGOs' potential to play a positive and transformative political role, based on their superior capacity to engage with society and the assumption that states can be changed from the bottom up. NGOs were perceived as playing a useful role by working as brokers or mediators between the state and society (Biggs & Neame 1996), helping to foster popular participation in government, prompting 'a gradual undermining of...narrow political monopolies' or by creating a fundamental shift in the nature of political systems, both globally and at a national level (Fisher 1993, 16).

Within this broad consensus regarding NGOs' capacity to facilitate political change, tensions have arisen between NGOs and between them and their funders around what

³⁶ While both case study organisations pursued different strategies of legitimation, they shared this tendency to deny themselves a direct political role. While Sarvodaya's mission statement declares that 'we are dedicated to the sustainable *empowerment* of people through self-help and collective support, to non-violence and peace', FCE's mission affirms their aim 'to be a leading *catalyst* to promote coexistence... through commitment and dedication to *create sustainable mechanisms* for conflict resolution, human security and development' (emphasis mine).

constitutes the most effective political strategy. Feher (2007) highlights three primary ways in which they can be distinguished. First, while some NGOs challenge governments by stressing the need to live up to a universal set of values or norms (as, for example, captured in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights or the Geneva Convention), others will critique government on the basis of accounts of the way in which governmental measures have inflicted suffering or have stifled opportunities (often drawn from the constituencies they claim to represent). Second, while some NGOs will execute this strategy publicly through advocacy campaigns, others will adopt an 'exit' strategy and eschew the prescriptions they oppose, instead concentrating on the development of alternative models of governance or political behaviour. Third, NGOs differ in the nature of their dissatisfaction with government. While some mobilised opposition principally on the basis of a government's abuse of power, others were primarily concerned with reducing the reach and influence of government *per se*. When considering national or local NGOs, it is worth stressing that NGOs' political strategies do not always clash with the aims of government. As will be described in the next chapter's examination of NGOs in Sri Lanka, these groups often resolved that their strategies could be best pursued by working with government.

The extent to which NGOs are permitted to engage in political action often hinges on locally-specific perceptions of what this 'political work' actually constitutes. The term 'politics' can be interpreted in a number of different ways. It can describe what governments do, the process by which resources are allocated or refer to the expression of political ideas. It can also refer, however, to a particular mode of conduct – behaviour that is 'judicious, expedient, skilfully contrived' or, more negatively, 'scheming, crafty, cunning' (Spencer 2007, 15). In Sri Lanka, this final category has particularly influenced impressions of NGOs' involvement in politics where being 'political' is connected to ideas about 'dirty politics' based on hard bargaining, patronage and corruption. A range of nationalist political actors including the JVP, the JHU, the LTTE as well as NGOs such as Sarvodaya defined their engagement in politics in terms of a rejection of the corrupt existing political system.³⁷ This anti-political approach sought to 'take the politics out of politics' and to forge a new, more morally-informed brand of politics. The position of NGOs as political

³⁷ The JVP (*Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna* or People's Liberation Front) are a youth-based Sinhala nationalist group which initiated two armed uprisings against the government in 1971 and between 1987-9. The JHU (*Jathika Hela Urumaya* or National Heritage Party) are a nationalist political party led by Buddhist monks founded in 2004.

actors then was not fixed. It was, as Li (2007, 190) has argued, 'claimed, fought over, ascribed and denied'. As the following chapters will demonstrate, this contestation over NGOs' engagement in politics was one of the most critical sites in processes of legitimation and de-legitimation in the Sri Lankan context. My understanding of NGO legitimacy draws attention to the 'politics of place' or 'the ways in which, in specific locations, populations become recognizable and governable and states imaginable and effective' (Hansen & Stepputat 2001, 308). As will be argued in the next chapter, it is difficult to understand NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context without reference to the ways in which state legitimacy is constructed and maintained.

NGO legitimacy and conflict³⁸

NGOs' engagement in politics is itself an important site of political debate; a debate which is contingent upon a complex interaction between local notions of politics and local political accounts of the nature of NGOs and their work. This debate, however, seems especially fraught in the context of war and in particular in the transitional moments between war and peace. Political action of all kinds becomes more contentious during a time of conflict because it tends to be framed in terms of its support for one or other of the conflicting sides, accentuating tensions between NGOs' multiple accountabilities (Goodhand 2004). Governments at war cannot be seen as fully legitimate in the sense developed by Beetham (1991) since legitimacy requires evidence of consent between the dominant and subordinate parties. Conflict is about a struggle for power between two or more parties attempting to pursue rival paths towards legitimacy, in accordance with different sets of rules and beliefs. In these contexts, NGO legitimacy becomes framed by a broader struggle for legitimacy between conflict actors.

War zones involve a high degree of contestation over the control of populations. As a result, the involvement of NGOs, either by distributing resources or attempting to influence the way in which power is distributed, is likely to be contentious. Efforts to strengthen the agency of civilians can raise the suspicions of power holders (Korf 2006, 56). In highly contested areas (such as the North and East of Sri Lanka), NGO projects are also liable to become instrumentalised as a means of boosting the legitimacy of other actors. This was particularly the case in LTTE-controlled areas, where rebels control development projects and use them for their own legitimising ends.

³⁸ This section draws on Walton (2008).

Conflict increases the *supply* of reasons to oppose NGOs or question their legitimacy by undermining their capacity to fulfil objectives and triggering changes in popular perceptions about what constitutes legitimate political behaviour. Conflict also increases the *demand* from other actors to undermine the legitimacy of NGOs, providing a low-risk opportunity to consolidate political support and promote their own visions for legitimate rule. This makes NGOs more likely to fall victim to ‘reputation entrepreneurs’, who instrumentalise the reputations of NGOs as a means of articulating their own political agendas (Bryant 2005). This instrumental aspect of NGO legitimacy is largely ignored in existing accounts of NGO legitimacy and will be developed when I present my alternative framework for understanding NGO legitimacy in the next chapter.

In societies where key political actors are at war, questions of accountability, representativeness and bias become charged with political symbolism. Conflict brings questions about where NGOs work under greater scrutiny, forcing them to make additional claims to sustain a neutral, multi-ethnic public image. These concerns are most acute in contested regions where NGO resources can inadvertently support the objectives or boost the legitimacy of conflict actors. By working in politically contested areas, or by working with people from a particular ethnic community, NGOs in conflict situations open themselves up to accusations of bias. These dynamics make it difficult for NGOs to engage in political action since any attempt to challenge government policy can be framed as providing support to their opponents.

The transitional moments between war and peace raise particular issues for NGO legitimacy. As the next chapter will describe in greater detail, NGO legitimacy is closely related to prevailing political norms and agendas, which are likely to change during times of transition. During the fieldwork period, Sri Lanka underwent a transition from a context of relative peace and stability, in which the ruling UNF regime was concerned with engaging in a negotiated settlement with the LTTE and pursuing a policy of peace through growth, to a situation of open conflict when the Rajapakse government was concerned with reasserting populist development policies and pursuing a military solution to the conflict. During this period, expectations from both domestic and international actors regarding what constituted legitimate political aims of NGOs shifted significantly. These transitional periods are often characterised by extreme power uncertainties where it is unclear whose accounts of legitimate political conduct will prevail (Woodward 2007).

NGO legitimacy and liberal peacebuilding

NGOs' growing involvement in state-led peacebuilding interventions caused a number of additional problems for their legitimacy. First, the expansion and increasing diversity of NGO activities associated with contemporary peacebuilding interventions made NGOs' objectives less tangible, raising issues of accountability and contributing to some actors' concerns about NGOs' motivations.

Second, donors increasingly prized NGOs' capacity to transgress political, institutional and territorial boundaries (Goodhand & Walton 2008). In the Sri Lankan context, this involved working more closely alongside or at times inside, government institutions, for example by providing training to government workers in conflict resolution. NGOs also became increasingly involved in facilitating interaction across territorial boundaries, particularly between government-held and LTTE-controlled areas. Donors saw NGOs as useful because of their capacity to facilitate interaction or build consensus between divergent or conflicting political groups. As the next chapter describes in greater detail, these transgressions became key focal points for criticism during the transition back to war as conflict actors increasingly worked to reassert or harden political boundaries such as the borders between sovereign countries, or the boundary between the state and the LTTE. Critiques often focused on situations where NGOs had overstepped the perceived boundaries of legitimate political action. NGO activities in LTTE-controlled areas became the focus of misappropriation scandals in which NGOs were accused of providing resources to the LTTE. Similarly, instances where NGOs were deemed to have become too heavily involved in the governmental arena (for example by engaging in projects such as conflict resolution or human rights training for the military) were often used to highlight the allegedly sinister motivations of nongovernmental action in Sri Lanka.

Third, weak NGO legitimacy was also related to the fact that the legitimacy of liberal peacebuilding interventions themselves was precarious. As mentioned above, liberal peacebuilding operationally and institutionally draws together several hitherto separate strands of political thought about peace (Heathershaw 2007). While NGOs have been typically involved in civil or socio-relational aspects of peacebuilding, the liberal peacebuilding approach also increasingly implicated them in the state-building strategies of their governmental or multilateral partners. The growing intimacy between NGOs and international donors was problematic and fuelled concerns that these organisations were

being used as Trojan Horses by Western donors (Ghani et al 2006). Liberal peacebuilding interventions were often challenged and questioned by domestic actors on the grounds that they are motivated by ulterior political agendas or because they are seen as attempts to undermine the legitimacy of sovereign states.

As argued above, liberal peacebuilding interventions were often built on fragile social and political foundations. This 'virtual peace' (Richmond & Franks 2007) left a vacuum for domestic actors to challenge the motivations and effectiveness of international engagement and to promote alternative visions, which often directly challenged the liberal norms implicit in international peacebuilding efforts. In Sri Lanka, while at certain stages the incentives for domestic actors to adopt liberal peacebuilding approaches encouraged a degree of congruence with the aims of these liberal peacebuilding approaches (as happened in 2002 when both the ruling UNP party and the LTTE saw the benefits of embracing a heavily internationalised peace process), these bonds proved to be fairly transient, and liberal peacebuilding strategies were vulnerable when the balance of incentives shifted. After the election of President Mahinda Rajapakse in 2005, the pursuit of an internationalised peace process no longer formed a central part of the governing party's political strategy, which placed greater emphasis on domestic sources of legitimacy.

4. Conclusions

The downturn in NGO legitimacy experienced by NGOs operating in Sri Lanka after 2005 did not occur in a vacuum. This chapter has argued that the legitimacy crisis facing national NGOs in Sri Lanka after 2005 can be traced to broader, global shifts in the funding and practices of NGOs. I began by examining a backlash against NGOs that emerged in the 1990s, which was related to their expanding numbers and growing influence in world politics. The expansion of NGOs and their increasingly close relations with governmental donors drove concerns about NGOs' effectiveness, their accountability and their ability to represent the communities that they aimed to serve.

I then moved on to examine changing patterns of international engagement in conflict-affected countries, and the emergence of a 'liberal peacebuilding' framework, which sought to build peace via rapid economic and political liberalisation. NGOs' role within this contested framework and various tensions arising from this engagement were considered.

Finally, I surveyed the existing literature on NGO legitimacy, highlighting a range of shortcomings which made these frameworks difficult to apply convincingly to the organisations encountered during the fieldwork period. I identified three important sources of tension for NGO legitimacy which were relevant to the organisations examined in this study: NGOs' involvement in political action, their engagement in conflict-affected regions and their involvement in liberal peacebuilding interventions. I also began to sketch some key features of my approach to NGO legitimacy, which draws on the concept of discourse and emphasises the importance of the local political environment in shaping legitimacy.

The implications of these tensions will be explored in the following chapters, where it will be argued that NGOs' engagement in peacebuilding work had a tangible, if complex and locally-specific, impact upon NGO legitimacy. The next chapter examines NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context through an historical analysis of the conflict, international engagement and the development of civil society. The picture that emerges is one of dynamic interaction between domestic and international politics, with NGOs often sitting at the forefront of material and symbolic engagements between these two political realms. Drawing the findings from these two background chapters together, I then present an alternative actor-oriented framework for understanding NGO legitimacy. The framework adopts a disaggregated view of NGO legitimacy, mapping the way in which an array of actors perceived NGOs in relation to different models of behaviour and boundaries of legitimate action.

Competing visions, colliding worlds: NGO Legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context

The last chapter provided background to the crisis of NGO legitimacy in Sri Lanka by examining the broader global institutional and political context for these events. This chapter gives a more detailed account of the way in which these broader dynamics played out in the contemporary Sri Lankan context. The central argument presented here is that NGO legitimacy cannot be understood without reference to its social and political context, and that this context can only be grasped with reference to the historical development of various social, institutional and political structures over a long period of time.

The first section begins by exploring the way in which NGO legitimacy has been moulded by developments in Sri Lankan politics and society during the post-independence period. It presents a brief background to the armed conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the LTTE, and surveys the extensive literature on the social, economic and political roots of conflict. The second section gives a brief overview of the history of international engagement in Sri Lanka since independence, highlighting the complex interaction between domestic and international politics and tracing some of the broader shifts in the aims and objectives of external actors in Sri Lanka. The third section examines the role of civil society actors in Sri Lanka, and the more recent emergence of the NGO sector. It emphasises the limits placed on NGOs by the state and highlights some of the dangers facing NGOs that attempt to build peace or influence political processes.

A central finding emerging from this historical overview of Sri Lankan politics and NGOs in the post-independence period is that NGO legitimacy was heavily influenced by an ongoing confrontation between two competing models of politics and development: on the one hand a nationalistic, inward-looking agrarian populism that privileged Sinhala culture and tradition and on the other an outward-looking, market-oriented approach rooted in liberal and cosmopolitan values. As Orjeula (2009, 164) has noted, this clash between nationalist and cosmopolitan can perhaps be seen as more significant and intractable than the clash between competing Sinhala and Tamil nationalisms. By relying on links with both international donors and domestic political elites, national NGOs often found themselves uncomfortably positioned in relation to this fault line.

The fifth and final section draws together the findings from these two background chapters by presenting a theoretical framework for understanding NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context. This section begins by situating my approach in the broader theoretical literature on NGOs. It then provides a brief sketch of the different ways in which NGOs were perceived by their key audiences in the Sri Lankan context, detailing the various normative, cognitive, pragmatic and instrumental dimensions of NGO legitimacy that influenced these impressions for each of the key actors.

1. Conflict in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a small island of approximately 20 million people, situated in the Indian Ocean approximately forty miles off the Southern coastline of India. The country's population consists of approximately 74% Sinhalese, 18% Tamils, 5% Plantation Tamils and 8% Muslims.³⁹ The coastal regions of Sri Lanka were colonised by the Portuguese and the Dutch in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries before the British gradually gained control over the whole island after 1815. Sri Lanka finally gained independence in 1948.

The conflict between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE (a militant Tamil separatist group), which began in earnest in 1983 and ended in 2009, has claimed the lives of approximately 80,000 people and is typically classified as an ethnic war.⁴⁰ The secessionist struggle, however, was not the first incidence of widespread violent conflict in post-independence Sri Lanka. In 1971 and in the late 1980s, the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a youth-based Sinhala nationalist group in the South, attempted to wrest power from the government through violent means. Conflict in Sri Lanka is therefore best seen as an outcome of a 'broader crisis in the identity, policies and legitimacy of the state' (Goodhand 2001, 30).

³⁹ These figures are from the 1983 and 2001 censuses (Available from www.statistics.gov.lk). The Sinhalese population is largely Buddhist, Tamils are predominantly Hindu. Around 7.5% of the population are Tamil-speaking Muslims, whilst a further 7.5% are Christian (whose numbers are fairly evenly split between Sinhalese and Tamils).

⁴⁰ Confrontations between the LTTE and the GoSL began in the late 1970s. At the end of 2005, the Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission (SLMM) estimated the total number killed in the conflict to be 69,000. By March 2008 this figure had increased to over 77,000 according to government figures. According to the UN, approximately 8,000 people were estimated to have been killed between January 1st and mid-May 2009 (Economist 2009). A paper in the British Medical Journal in 2008 estimated that these official figures grossly underestimated the total number killed in connection to the conflict in the North and East, arguing that there had been 215,000 conflict-related deaths in the period before 2002 (Obermeyer, Murray and Gakidou 2008).

The conflict is unusual in that it appears to contradict several prevailing orthodoxies concerning the relationship between conflict, democracy, governance and economic growth.⁴¹ Unlike most late twentieth century internal conflicts, Sri Lanka did not represent a case of state failure and was able to maintain high levels of growth and a functioning electoral democracy in spite of ongoing conflict. Before analysing the socio-economic and political roots of conflict further, I shall briefly outline the key events in the conflict since open hostilities began in July 1983.

Eelam War I: 1983-1987

The Tamil separatist struggle that had seen the birth of a number of paramilitary groups in the 1970s was transformed into a full-scale military conflict when Tamil militants ambushed and killed 13 Sri Lankan soldiers in July 1983. This incident sparked a nationwide pogrom, involving widespread attacks by Sinhalese mobs on Tamil families, their properties and businesses.⁴² By this time, the LTTE had grown to approximately 5,000 soldiers on the basis of international fundraising and support from the Indian Research and Analysis Wing (RAW) (Rotberg 1999, 8). Over the next few years, the LTTE gradually gained control of the Jaffna peninsula and much of the Eastern coast, developing a civilian administration to govern regions under their control. In 1987, the GoSL began a fresh offensive to wrest back control of Jaffna, prompting an escalation of violence and resulting in a military stale-mate between the two parties.

This period saw some nascent peacemaking efforts, first internally with the All Party Committee (APC) in 1984, where the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and the SLFP rejected the governing UNP's proposals for devolution, and second with an Indian-driven process where talks were organised in Thimpu, Bhutan in 1985.⁴³ At Thimpu, the LTTE rejected a similar set of proposals to the ones rejected by TULF at the APC.

Indian Peace-Keeping Force 1987-1990

⁴¹ These policy orthodoxies have been widely criticised. See for example Mann (2005) or Cramer (2006).

⁴² Various studies have highlighted the role played by the government and the ruling party both through its failure to quell the rioting and, by actively supporting the violence by providing transport and organising violence and the destruction of property. See Manor (1984) for a more full account of the events of July 1983.

⁴³ The TULF was an influential coalition of various Tamil political parties formed in 1972 which won 18 seats at the 1977 parliamentary elections.

Indian engagement escalated after Thimpu, and culminated in 1987 with the Indo-Lanka peace accord signed between the GoSL and the Indian government, which attempted to resolve the conflict through an agreement to devolve power to the provinces (Venugopal 2003, 19). Crucially, however, the Accord did not involve representatives from the Sri Lankan Tamil community, and while it succeeded in disarming several Tamil militant groups, it failed to neutralise the LTTE, cementing their pre-eminence in the Tamil political and military arena.

An Indian peace keeping force (IPKF) was sent to enforce the ceasefire, but this soon became embroiled in a protracted guerrilla war with the LTTE, who refused to accept the conditions of the Accord. The IPKF left in 1990 having not only failed to stabilise the North, but also having succeeded in destabilising the South by contributing significantly to fears about external intervention. These anxieties contributed to the second JVP uprising in 1989 (Bullion 1995, Bose 2002).

Eelam War II: 1990-1994

During this phase of the conflict, Tamil militant groups such as the Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front (EPRLF) sided with the government, which won back several key towns in the East. The LTTE embarked on a number of significant political assassinations, including the killing of the Indian Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, in 1991 and the Sri Lankan President, Ranasinghe Premadasa, in 1993. There was a brief cessation of hostilities after the election of the People's Alliance (PA) government in 1994 led by President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga. Negotiations were conducted between the LTTE and the Government in 1995 but the government's proposals were rejected both by the LTTE and the UNP.

Eelam War III: 1995-2001

Following the failure of the peace process, the PA government embarked on a 'war for peace' strategy. This military approach succeeded in wresting back the Jaffna Peninsula from the LTTE, but further progress was limited and there were high casualties. In 2000, the LTTE won back much of the recently lost territory and staged several high profile terrorist attacks in the South on the Dalada Maligawa in Kandy and on the Banadaranaike International Airport outside Colombo in 2001. The latter attack had a catastrophic impact

on the Sri Lankan economy, prompting negative growth for the first time since independence.

Ceasefire and peace negotiations 2001-2004

In the context of this military stalemate, the UNP won the parliamentary elections of 2001 on a peace ticket. By February 2002, the Government and the LTTE had signed a ceasefire agreement. Peace talks brokered by Norway followed in September of that year.⁴⁴ The government de-proscribed the LTTE and six rounds of peace talks were conducted between September 2002 and April 2003. During the third round of talks in Oslo, the LTTE expressed its willingness to explore a political solution based on a federal structure within a united Sri Lanka, representing a significant departure from the principles outlined in the Thimpu talks.⁴⁵ These positive steps, however, were quickly reversed when the LTTE withdrew from the peace process in April 2003, in response to a decision to hold a donors' seminar in Washington D.C.. Since the LTTE were banned in the U.S., they were not able to send representatives. Anton Balasingham, the LTTE chief spokesman, argued that this represented a deliberate snub to the organisation and was indicative of a broader strategic ploy by the government to corner the LTTE into an internationally backed 'peace trap' (Balasingham 2004).

Eelam War IV and the Defeat of the LTTE 2004-2009

The peace process unravelled further after President Kumaratunga called a snap election in April 2004 which resulted in the defeat of the incumbent UNF government. The new PA coalition relied on support from the JVP and was more critical of the peace process and the LTTE. The LTTE's support for the process was also diminished both by the defection of its Eastern Command led by Vinayagamoorthy Muralitharan (most widely known by his *nom de guerre* 'Colonel Karuna') in early 2004 and the new government's rejection of its Interim Self Governing Authority (ISGA) proposals later that year. A 'shadow war' between the LTTE with the Karuna faction began in the East, involving regular tit-for-tat killings between the two factions and an escalating number of political killings in the East.

⁴⁴ Norwegian involvement had been initiated by President Kumaratunga in 1998.

⁴⁵ The principles laid out in the Thimpu talks were: 1. Reorganisation of the Sri Lankan state; 2. Recognition of the existence of a Tamil homeland comprising the Northern and Eastern Provinces of Sri Lanka; 3. Recognition of the right of self-determination of the Tamils in Sri Lanka.

The PA candidate, Mahinda Rajapakse, won the Presidential election in November 2005. Rajapakse's coalition, which relied on support from nationalist political parties, was less receptive to international engagement, and more cautious about making concessions to the LTTE. Although three more rounds of peace talks were held during 2006, there was little progress, and the government increasingly began to act upon the strategic opportunity offered by internecine fighting in the East to weaken the LTTE through its illicit support of the Karuna faction (ICG 2008). Rajapakse's government also took significant steps to move away from the incipient political consensus between the two major political parties in the South around issues of conflict resolution. Rajapakse reversed the decision to de-merge the Northern and Eastern Provinces, focusing instead on the discredited Provincial Councils system as his primary tool of devolution. The PA government won the Provincial Council elections in the East in May 2008, and Pilliyan, Karuna's second-in-command was elected Chief Minister.⁴⁶

A return to open hostilities was signalled in April 2006, when the government shelled the Sampur area in retaliation for an assassination attempt on the Army Commander, General Sarath Fonseka. Fighting escalated when the government bombed Mavil Aru in July 2006 in response to the LTTE's blockading of a sluice gate. In August, the LTTE launched counter-attacks on Mutur and Jaffna. Government offensives in Sampur and then later in Vaharai, led to mass displacement of local populations. By mid-July 2007, the GoSL had largely cleared the East of LTTE cadres, and military operations moved northwards. By May 2009, GoSL forces had regained control of all of the previously LTTE-controlled areas in the Wanni. Civilian casualties rose sharply as fighting pushed the LTTE back towards an ever-shrinking strip of the Mullaitivu coast. The LTTE's key leaders, including their chief Velupillai Prabhakaran, were killed in the final stages of the battle.

Political roots of conflict

The roots of conflict in Sri Lanka can be traced directly to the country's colonial inheritance. By 1948, when Sri Lanka achieved independence, the constitution left behind by the British had already set in place a pattern of vertical political mobilisation. Unlike in India, where the independence movement had forged political parties around class loyalties, Sri Lanka's post-independence politicians quickly came to rely upon ethno-nationalist forms of political

⁴⁶ The PA coalition that contested elections in the East included the Tamil Makkal Viduthalai Pulikal (TMVP), the political party of the Karuna faction.

mobilisation to shore up popular support, with politicians in the South catering to the needs of the Sinhalese majority, and Tamil politicians in the North and East looking after Tamil interests.

Crucially, the electoral system lacked sufficient safeguards to protect the interests and entitlements of minority communities. Although a number of measures were included in the constitution, these proved insufficient in the face of growing pressure from ruling parties that increasingly sought to alter both the identity of the state and the distribution of state resources to the population.⁴⁷ Sri Lanka's post-independence history has been read as a failure of the state to reconcile the interests of minorities with those of the Sinhalese majority. Bastian (1999) argues that this failure occurred at three levels: in terms of the failure of the state's institutions to generate a means of power-sharing between ethnic groups, in terms of the state's identity, and finally, in the implementation of public policies.

The rapid escalation of ethno-nationalist forms of political mobilisation was intimately linked to the system of democratic majoritarianism instituted at independence (Goodhand 2004). As DeVotta (2005) has described, the system promoted a pattern of 'ethnic outbidding' whereby the major Southern parties competed to achieve popular status as the defender of Sinhalese interests. This process began during the 1956 election when SWRD Bandaranaike and the SLFP ran on a 'Sinhala Only' platform. After winning the election, Sinhala replaced English as the official language, leading to public protests from Tamils in Colombo.

The language policy formed part of a broader process of Sinhalisation of the state. The number of Tamils employed in the civil service fell from 30% to 5% between 1956 and 1970 (DeVotta 2005, 151).⁴⁸ Political competition in the South increasingly revolved around the

⁴⁷ These measures included a special clause in the constitution that made it unconstitutional to 'confer on persons of any community or religion any privilege or advantage which is not conferred on persons of other communities or religions' and a distribution of seats in Parliament that ensured some balance of seats between Sinhalese and minority communities (Bastian 1999, 6). Some attempts were made to bolster these protections. The Bandaranaike-Chelvanagam and the Senanayake-Chelvanagam Pacts, signed in 1958 and 1965 respectively, attempted to provide some form of regional autonomy for Tamils, but both were rejected by opposition parties. In 1966, the UNP attempted to reverse the Sinhala Only Act through the Tamil Language (Special Provisions) Act but these changes were later thrown out by Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike in 1972.

⁴⁸ Tamils had been disproportionately represented under the British (DeVotta 2005, 46-7).

need to rebalance entitlements, and these policies were extended into the educational system in the 1970s through the policy of 'standardisation', whereby ethnic quotas were introduced in the university and civil service admissions process as a means of boosting the representation of marginalised Sinhalese populations in the South.

As well as limiting the availability of state resources to minority groups, these policies also contributed to a gradual shift in the identity of the state. The policies of agrarian populism designed to win support with the Sinhalese majority were couched in a discourse of Sinhala Buddhist revivalism (Korf 2006). These projects also involved the resettlement of poor Sinhalese farmers, eroding the electoral influence of the Tamil and Muslim communities in the East. Cultural Sinhalisation of the state was accelerated in the 1970s. In 1972, Buddhism was made the official state religion and a more prominent place was granted to Buddhist cultural symbols and practices in state functions (Bastian 1999, 12).

Post-independence politics saw a deepening of the state's patrimonial character whereby elite groups maintained power on the basis of their capacity to channel state resources or protection to their constituencies, rather than on the basis of performance (Stokke 1998, Dunham & Jayasuriya 1998, Bastian 2005). Clientelism fuelled discontent amongst Sinhala youth in the peripheral rural areas of the South, and contributed to the JVP uprising in 1971 as well as the more protracted insurrection of 1986-9.

The steady course of state Sinhalisation that followed independence encouraged growing political protest from Tamil groups, which by the early 1970s had led to the emergence of a number of militant groups. The government of J.R. Jayawardene, who was President between 1978 and 1989, exacerbated grievances by pursuing a repressive response to Tamil militancy, and undermined democratic governance further by overseeing an accelerated centralisation of the state through the introduction of an Executive Presidency. Before moving on to look at the social and economic aspects of the conflict, it is important to stress that economic and political aspects have been separated for illustrative purposes. These two sets of factors are, in fact, closely linked.

Social and economic factors

Between 1956 and 1976, the government attempted to implement an ambitious programme to transform the colonial economy based on exports from the plantation

sector through a process of import-substitution. This strategy involved the rapid expansion of the state sector, which allowed pre-existing patrimonial political relationships to be rapidly extended. The failure of these policies to provide sustainable growth increased the grievances of the rural poor by promoting inflation and unemployment (Venugopal 2003). The rapid liberalisation of the economy between 1977 and 1983 played an ambiguous role in the development of the conflict. The implementation of a raft of neo-liberal policies in the late 1970s saw a retrenchment of the welfare system, which prompted a reversal of some of the human development gains made since independence (Goodhand 2004). This process of liberalisation produced a range of new inequalities, which fuelled tensions between various societal groups and exacerbated divisions between Sinhalese and Tamil populations.⁴⁹ The opening up of the Sri Lankan economy intensified the reproduction of Sinhala nationalism by providing an opportunity to stress potential threats to Sri Lankan sovereignty and to reassert traditional forms of national identity (Rampton & Welikala, 2009).

In the 1980s and 90s, these inequalities were further exacerbated by the military conflict, which stalled economic growth in the North and East whilst allowing development to continue in other regions, particularly the Western Province.⁵⁰ GDP growth has consistently exceeded 4% in the years since the war began. After the setback caused by the LTTE's attack on the international airport in 2001, the economy continued to expand during the ceasefire and maintained impressive growth rates in 2007 and 2008 (of 6.8% and 6.0% respectively) despite the return to war (CIA 2009).

The conflict between the government and the LTTE transformed the Sri Lankan economy. Military spending grew from 1.6% of GDP in 1985 to 6% of GDP in 1996. Income from

⁴⁹ Gunasinghe (1984) has argued that small-scale Sinhala industrialists were worst hit by economic reforms, fuelling resentments that fed directly into the violent retaliation against Tamils and their businesses in 1983. Others contend that the radical reform process and the increasingly authoritarian style of governance used to implement them, contributed to growing regional inequality by increasing poverty in the North and East, driving the disillusionment of the Tamil minority (Manor 1984). Moore (1985) argues that these regional inequalities arose because liberalisation largely benefited the export sector (which was based largely in the South) whilst damaging the prices of domestic food crops (which were largely grown in the North).

⁵⁰ One study estimates that the conflict has slowed economic growth in Sri Lanka by an average of 2% per annum (Arunatilake et al 2000). This growth was largely restricted to the South West which, barring occasional terrorist attacks, was relatively unaffected by the conflict (Shastri 2004). Sri Lanka's growth rates were considerably lower than those of its regional neighbours (*ibid.*). By 2005, 50% of Sri Lanka's GDP was concentrated in the Western Province (Goodhand & Klem, 2005, 26).

armed forces personnel became a central part of the rural economy as the military expanded to its current size of around 200,000 troops. As the war continued, there has been a gradual accumulation of vested interests in its continuation from both sides (Rajasingham-Senanayake 1999, Goodhand & Klem 2005). The war permitted a pattern of 'military fiscalism' whereby the army provided a significant source of jobs for the rural Sinhalese population, offsetting the cuts to state employment caused by economic reforms (Venugopal 2008).

These powerful economic changes had important social dimensions. Growing inequalities and the perception that entitlements had been lost were driven by powerful discourses that framed Sinhala/ Tamil relations in terms of mutual threat (Bush 2003). Sinhala and Tamil nationalism was driven by a 'double minority complex' in which Tamils felt endangered by the Sinhala-dominated state, and the Sinhalese remained fearful of the threat posed by the Tamil population in South India.⁵¹ Both nationalisms drew on mythical histories that asserted their group's traditional homelands and ancient aggression between Tamils and Sinhalese, despite evidence of long standing accommodation between these groups (Spencer 1990). As Herring (2001) has observed, perceptions of inequality or a loss of resources or influence were often more significant than actual changes.

Sri Lankan political actors developed different interpretations of the root causes of the Sri Lankan conflict to suit their own agendas. While Ranil Wickramasinghe's UNF government emphasised the role of economic factors in conflict, for example, Mahinda Rajapakse's regime largely rejected a structural interpretation of the conflict, preferring to articulate the problems through a discourse of terrorism.⁵² As Woodward (2007) has argued, conflict actors engage in a competitive process to shape external actors' understanding of the root causes of conflict.

The roots of the conflict also formed an important focus for debate both amongst NGOs, and between NGOs and the wider society. Although most NGOs' assessments of the roots

⁵¹ S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike argued during the 1956 election, for example, that the Sinhalese were engaged in a 'life and death struggle' to maintain their language and that 'parity to both Sinhalese and Tamil will only lead to the deterioration of Sinhalese which may disappear from Ceylon within 25 years' (cited in DeVotta 2005, 148).

⁵² Ranil Wickramasinghe has been the leader of the UNP since 1994 and was the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka between December 2001 and April 2004. Both of these interpretations denied the ethno-political roots of conflict in Sri Lanka.

of conflict tended to favour a Galtungian analysis that traced the roots of conflict to deep-seated socio-relational factors, there were considerable variations in emphasis. Sarvodaya's peacebuilding strategy, for example, was unusual in the extent to which it was linked to a broader, radical plan of political transformation that attributed conflict to deficiencies in the spiritual health of the population and in the existing political system. More technical peacebuilding organisations, such as FCE, tended to attribute war to a range of institutional deficiencies. Inevitably, these assessments of the causes of conflict were intimately linked to organisations' own capacities, normative orientation and histories (see Barnett et al 2007). As will be explored below, these differences became important sites of debate around what constituted 'real' peacebuilding work and were critical for defining which organisations were authentic or relevant in the turbulent period that developed after 2005.

The social, economic and political developments associated with conflict had a significant impact on the character of NGO legitimacy that emerged in the Sri Lankan context. These impacts will be examined more fully in section three but I will briefly sketch some of the most important aspects here.

First, during the post-independence period, Sinhala nationalism became the dominant mode of political mobilisation in Sri Lanka. Sinhala nationalists saw the state both as the protector of Sinhala culture and as the defender of the interests of marginalised Sinhalese. As Venugopal (2008, 357) has described, Sinhala nationalism was imbued with 'anti-colonial, anti-globalisation, anti-elite, and anti-capitalist' sentiments, all of which were problematic for the liberal cosmopolitan NGOs that emerged since the late 1970s, which tended to be foreign funded, linked to the political elite and often espoused capitalist modes of development. NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context came to be viewed through the lens of Sinhala nationalism. NGOs' aims or activities were deemed legitimate or illegitimate to the extent that they undermined the state's role as protector of the small-holder peasant, vernacular culture, religion and language. Similarly NGOs' implicit support for neoliberal economic development or liberal peacebuilding policies were judged in accordance with the same framework, meaning that attempts to reform the state or the political system were viewed as running contrary to the values and interests of marginalised Sinhala Buddhists. Nationalism fed off, and was fortified by, the perceived threats to its existence provided by the liberalisation of the Sri Lankan economy, cultural

globalisation and the expansion of liberal NGOs and thus these dangers became central to the political debate, particularly as conflict intensified. The escalatory dynamics of competing Tamil and Sinhala nationalisms undermined the space for moderate politicians and groups, which in turn narrowed the space for civil society activism.

As Venugopal (2008) has argued, the clash between cosmopolitan and nationalist forces in Sri Lanka had an important class dimension. Since the 1950s, nationalism has been associated with an aspirant rural middle-class, while cosmopolitanism was associated with the ruling English-speaking elite. Sinhala nationalism constituted an 'instrumentalisation of the masses' whereby the leaders of the SLFP utilised this discourse as a means of legitimising the ambitions of poorer Sinhalese groups for state-assisted upward mobility (*ibid.*). The clash between these two, class-delineated groups found its most virulent expression in the ethno-nationalist scapegoating that emerged during the 1956 election.

Second, the emergent clientelism of the post-independence period and the enhanced power of the state resulted in the dominance of political parties, and limited the space for NGOs to influence political discourse or to engage in political activity. Third, as NGOs became increasingly concerned with addressing the needs of conflict-affected communities or resolving conflict, their work became more contentious, straining their relationships with the state and other powerful political groups. Fourth, the political climate of ethnic outbidding that fed into the emergence of violent conflict and drove growing social and economic inequalities in Sri Lanka made NGO legitimacy both more volatile, by encouraging dramatic shifts in government policy towards the conflict, and more fraught, by creating a more marked juxtaposition between the predominant domestic political discourses of nationalism and an international discourse rooted in cosmopolitan liberal values.

2. International engagement in Sri Lanka

This section provides an historical overview of international engagement in Sri Lanka. Understanding this engagement is central to understanding NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context for two main reasons. First, international involvement in Sri Lanka has played a central role in shaping political development and the emergence of conflict in post-colonial Sri Lanka. Second, perceptions of NGOs from domestic political actors were often closely bound up in broader critiques of international engagement.

International actors have had a significant impact on the emergence and trajectory of conflict in Sri Lanka. The influence of Western donors and Japan grew in the period after 1977 when the Sri Lankan state became the first South Asian country to adopt liberal economic policies. The period between 1978 and 1985 saw an 'explosion of aid' (Herring 2001), when 70% of the total \$6,140 million aid received between 1960 and 1985 was remitted (Bastian 2007 citing Sorbo et al (1987)). While there were cuts in some areas of public spending, Sri Lanka was by no means a straightforward case of 'structural adjustment' (Spencer 2008). The rapid influx of foreign funds allowed overall government expenditure to rise. This 'minor Keynesian boom' helped to entrench and extend existing patrimonial modes of governance, increasing the opportunities for ethnic-based rent-seeking, particularly in the expanding police and military sectors (Dunham & Jayasuriya 2001, Herring 2001, Spencer 2008). This raised the stakes for political elites, providing incentives for them to fight harder to stay in power, and producing more authoritarian governments (Moore 1990).

International funding was used to support large development projects such as the Mahaweli Scheme launched in 1977, which involved the resettlement of Sinhalese communities in the East. These schemes tightened the grip of Sinhalese parties on the electoral system and formed part of a state-led project of Sinhala Buddhist revivalism. As well as providing funds to support populist policies favouring Sinhalese communities, external funding allowed Jayawardene's authoritarian UNP regime to maintain the high levels of public sector spending that helped to ensure its political survival (Herring 2001).

India has played a critical role in determining the trajectory of the Sri Lankan conflict. In the 1980s, India attempted to manage the Sri Lankan conflict by simultaneously supporting Tamil separatist groups, and offering support for peaceful negotiations (Venugopal 2003). This approach ended after the ill-fated intervention of the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF), when India pursued a more arms-length strategy (Bullion 1995, Bose 2002).⁵³ As with the rapid internationalisation of the Sri Lankan conflict after 2002, the intervention of the IPKF emboldened nationalist forces in Sri Lanka, providing the JVP with an important justification for its second uprising (Rampton & Welikala, 2005).

⁵³ The IPKF was operational between 1987 and 1990. There were a number of factors that drove India's disengagement including the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the end of the Cold War, internal political instability and the eruption of insurgency in Kashmir (Venugopal 2003).

Another important strand of international engagement has come from the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, which grew rapidly after the early 1980s to reach between 600,000 and 800,000 in 2006 (HRW 2006). The diaspora played an significant role in providing funding for the LTTE after the disengagement of India in the early 1990s (Gunaratna 2006, HRW 2006) and has proved an important channel via which the LTTE has been able to lobby the international arena in the absence of diplomatic channels (Venugopal 2003). The effectiveness of this channel waned after 2001, when a growing global concern with international terrorism led a number of countries to ban the LTTE and clamp down on civil society groups supporting it.

Liberal peacebuilding in Sri Lanka

Until the 1990s, liberal-minded donors' engagement in Sri Lanka was largely focused on economic development (Bastian 2007). After this period, these donors broadened their scope to include efforts to promote liberal democracy, build the capacity of cosmopolitan civil society, and support community work designed to transform Sri Lankan society (*ibid.*). By the late 1990s, these frameworks of international engagement were increasingly oriented towards the resolution and management of conflict. Empirical experience of economic and political liberalisation in Sri Lanka brought some of the core assumptions of the liberal peace into question by providing evidence of a more ambiguous relationship between development assistance, rapid liberalisation and peace. Nonetheless, donors tended to suffer from 'liberal amnesia' (Cramer 2006) and often failed to take account of the potentially destabilising social and political effects of combining relatively radical economic reform with an internationally backed peace process. The antecedents of liberal peacebuilding in Sri Lanka can be traced as far back as the introduction of liberal democracy in the 1930s and 40s. Liberalisation continued with economic reform in 1977, a concern with good governance in the 1990s, and finally with a growing interest in conflict and instability in more recent years.

As argued in the last chapter, liberal peacebuilding was not simply exported to developing countries; its acceptance was dependent upon local various importers, who translated and instrumentalised the agendas of external actors (Goodhand & Walton, 2009). In the Sri Lanka case, the degree to which policies of liberal peacebuilding were pursued closely reflected the incumbent governments' strategies of political mobilisation and other tactical considerations. Liberal peacebuilding was first pursued by the PA government led by

Chandrika Kumaratunga in 1994, which combined policies of state shrinkage, outward-oriented growth and devolution of state power. While President Kumaratunga pursued a liberal peace agenda to the extent that she believed peace could be encouraged by pursuing policies of economic liberalisation and promoting greater engagement with the global economy, she did so at the same time as limiting the role of international actors in the peace process (Rampton & Welikala, 2009). Kumaratunga's attempts to liberalise the economy were not simply a product of her belief in the key tenets of the liberal peace but also an outcome of the withdrawal of foreign aid committed during the Presidency of Premadasa (Shastri 2004, 76 cited in Rampton & Welikala 2009).

International engagement in the Sri Lankan conflict intensified around the time of the ceasefire agreement in 2002. Intervention was multi-faceted and involved security guarantees, efforts to support peace negotiations, mechanisms for monitoring the ceasefire as well as the provision of development assistance. Total aid to Sri Lanka increased significantly after the ceasefire, rising from \$572 million in 2002 to \$991 million in 2003 (ERD 2003). In 2003, donors pledged \$4.5 billion to help development and reconstruction in Sri Lanka and delivery of these funds was contingent upon progress in peace negotiations. As well as attempting to avert the resumption of conflict by applying peace conditionalities, aid was designed to address both the consequences and the causes of conflict (Goodhand & Klem 2005).

There was considerable variation in the motivations and modalities of aid provision from different donors. Many of the largest donors such as Japan, ADB and the World Bank tended to channel funds through the GoSL and continued to work 'around' conflict (Burke & Mulakala 2005). A smaller group of Western bilateral donors placed greater emphasis on addressing the conflict-development nexus, focusing on reconstruction and rehabilitation in the North and East alongside a number of measures aimed at improving governance, building civil society and protecting human rights (*ibid.*). These modes of engagement built on more long-standing work on issues of human rights and conflict by church-based non-governmental donors, and by some bilateral agencies such as the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).

In practice then, liberal peacebuilding is best seen not as a hegemonic policy framework but rather as the over-layering of a number of often loosely complementary and sometimes contradictory agendas. The internal contradictions in donors' peacebuilding

strategies were accentuated by Western governments' more hard-line response to international terrorism after the events of September 11th 2001. The peacebuilding strategies of a variety of Western donors including the US, the UK, the EU and Canada were undermined by moves to proscribe the LTTE (Goodhand & Walton 2009).

There was often a significant gap between the expressed aims of liberal peacebuilders and the actual outcomes of their interventions. The heavy internationalisation of the peace process invigorated nationalist forces by heightening the perceived threat to Sri Lankan sovereignty. In an effort to balance concerns of groups that were resistant to the peace process, the cautious step-by-step approach embodied in the peace process also led to limited humanitarian and human rights gains for vulnerable populations in the North and East. By denoting the LTTE as the principal representatives of Tamils, the peace process also permitted a decidedly illiberal peace in the North East by entrenching LTTE's monopoly on power (Goodhand & Klem 2005). In this sense, the peace process can at best be seen as a 'virtual peace', wherein there was a deferral of some of the fruits of the liberal peace project such as enhanced security via greater respect for human rights.⁵⁴ This situation has parallels with Richmond & Franks' (2007, 4) description of liberal peacebuilding in Cambodia, which they argued left 'vast swathes of the population to a secondary and uncertain status while elites hijack the institutions of the liberal peace'.

As the peace process broke down, a number of Western donors became increasingly disillusioned with supporting peacebuilding in Sri Lanka, and a number of bilateral donors withdrew support after 2005.⁵⁵ Perhaps more significantly, several key multilateral donors such as the ADB and the World Bank reduced funding to Sri Lanka: total multilateral aid fell from \$502 million in 2006 to \$356 in 2007 (De Mel 2007). Despite these cutbacks, overall aid levels to Sri Lanka have increased (see figure 2), with a decline in support from some donors in response to the breakdown of the peace process being offset by an unprecedented boost from tsunami funding, a growth in export credit loans and new

⁵⁴ There is a lack of consensus around what these fruits should be; this question provides one of the most significant sources of tensions within the existing literature. For many donors the goal of peace reflected a narrower vision of stabilisation, while many NGOs worked towards a more comprehensive vision of peace which sees its goal as building a society where human rights (including broader social and economic rights) of all citizens are protected.

⁵⁵ Germany stopped new development aid and the UK cancelled \$3 million in debt relief in 2007. The US's Millennium Challenge Account's commitment of \$110 million to Sri Lanka was put on hold in December 2007 'pending an improvement in the security situation'. Several important European donors such as Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands began winding down commitments to Sri Lanka in line with broader policy changes.

funding from China and other regional donors such as Iran and Malaysia. The resurgent role of these regional players in Sri Lanka provided a counter-balance to the influence of Western liberal donors.

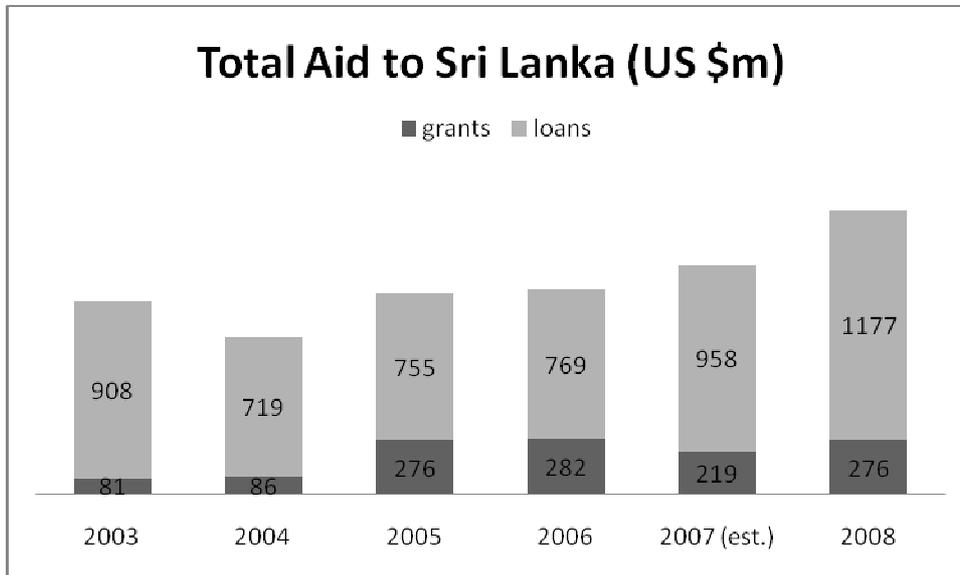


Figure 2: Total Aid to Sri Lanka (US \$m) (ERD 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2008)

3. Civil Society and NGOs in Sri Lanka⁵⁶

Just as international donors tended to adopt a functionalist explanation of the relationship between historical patterns of economic management, governance and conflict, their approach to civil society often ignored the historical development of civil society in Sri Lanka and, in particular, its close and at times volatile relationship with the state. This section outlines some of the key features of the development of civil society and the NGO sector in Sri Lanka. I begin by providing a brief introduction to the unusually politicised historiography of civil society in Sri Lanka. This discussion is followed by an analysis of the important constraints placed on civil society actors by the state in Sri Lanka. I then move on to explore the rise of the NGO sector in Sri Lanka, before examining the history of NGO peacebuilding work in Sri Lanka.

The historiography of civil society in Sri Lanka

The historiography of Sri Lankan NGOs has proved to be an important site for political debate in Sri Lanka, and has been used by nationalists to highlight the pernicious threat posed by international actors and their local allies to the contemporary Sri Lankan state.

⁵⁶ This section draws on a similar section in Walton with Saravanamuttu (2009).

The existing literature on the historical development of civil society in Sri Lanka has tended to emphasise a confrontation between two opposing forces. On the one hand, this literature stresses the significant role played by indigenous civil society organisations in the pre-colonial period. These organisations, it is argued, grew out of local temples and the need to coordinate collective work to maintain irrigation systems (see Goonatilake 2006). This strand in the literature also emphasises the important role played by home-grown social movements that emerged as a response to social and economic change prompted by colonial rule (Orjuela 2005, 122).

The second strand highlights the influence of Christian missionary groups such as the YMCA, the Baptist Mission and the Salvation Army which emerged during the period of British rule, and the significant role these organisations played in shaping subsequent forms of social organisation (Gombrich & Obeysekere 1990, Bastian 1999, Saravanamuttu 1999). Some more recent work on NGOs has traced a direct lineage between these colonialist civil society groups of the nineteenth century and contemporary foreign-funded NGOs, which, it is argued, are engaged in a project of 'recolonisation' (Goonatilake 2006).

Nationalists have played up the strength of indigenous civil society and described how these indigenous groups were undermined by 'Western colonial elements' which 'began to spread, overpowering the local grass root level community based organizations' (PSC 2008, Goonatilake 2006). Organisations such as Sarvodaya have drawn heavily on this nationalist account, presenting their model of development as a revival of indigenous, pre-colonial modes of community development. Critics of this view, led by Gombrich & Obeysekere (1990) have argued that rather than representing a revival of pre-colonial Buddhist values, Sarvodaya's ethos of *shramadana* is best seen as an invented tradition that drew on the 'Protestant Buddhism' approach of the great Buddhist reformist, Venerable Devamitta Dharmapala.

These debates about the roots of civil society and NGOs in Sri Lanka have served as important markers in efforts both to undermine and generate NGO legitimacy. While nationalists used stories of vigorous indigenous civil society as a means of underlining the threat posed by contemporary NGOs, Sarvodaya used the assertion that their work constituted a revival of ancient community-based practices as a means of bolstering popular legitimacy.

The state and civil society political action

The extent to which civil society can influence politics is likely to be closely circumscribed by the nature of state/ society relations (DeVotta 2004). In Sri Lanka, the capacity for civil society to play a role, either in challenging the state or in articulating popular concerns to the centre, was hampered by a number of interlocking factors. First, Sri Lankan post-independence politics was highly centralised and based around patron-client relations, with elite groups maintaining power on the basis of their capacity to channel state resources or protection to their constituencies, rather than on the basis of performance (Stokke 1998, Dunham & Jayasuriya 1998, Bastian 2005). Since these opportunities for patronage were threatened by normal democratic processes, successive governments accelerated the process of state centralisation in the 1970s and 80s, tightening the grip of the ruling elites on the state, and limiting the space for public dissent and bottom-up change. These aspects of Sri Lankan politics created a 'dominance of national, political over local, social organisation', which restricted the emergence of national groups capable of articulating the demands of social interest groups to the centre via mass mobilisation (Moore 1985, 228, Orjuela 2005, 123-4).

The second factor was the dominance of ethno-nationalism as the basis for political mobilisation in Sri Lanka. The recourse to ethno-nationalism in political discourse after independence strengthened civil society groups that mobilised along ethnic lines, whilst weakening groups that aimed to break down ethnic divisions. Historically, the largest and most influential civil society groups in Sri Lanka had been those mobilising on the basis of ethnicity, religion or language (DeVotta 2004). Many Sinhala Buddhist patriotic organisations had their roots in the nineteenth century, but more still grew out of the radical grass-roots politics of the JVP in the 1970s and 80s. These groups were increasingly used by the state and political parties as a means of maintaining influence at the local level and, at times, for violently suppressing rival factions (DeVotta 2004, 297). Ethno-nationalist political groups sought to harden social boundaries between Sinhalese and Tamils, which many cosmopolitan NGOs aimed to transgress or break down, placing their political agendas at odds with nationalist groups.

Third, violent conflict, and the increasingly authoritarian tendencies of successive governments that were associated with it, narrowed the scope for civil society to

contribute to democratic processes. At the time of the JVP uprisings in the early 70s and late 1980s, critics of the government in the South were often branded JVP sympathisers, while many groups critical of the war with the LTTE in the 80s and 90s were accused of being closet LTTE-supporters. The LTTE was intolerant of alternative voices in the Tamil political arena and the independence of civil society groups based in the North and East was gradually eroded throughout the 1980s. These patterns limited the space for NGOs to justify their work or to contribute to the emergence of more democratic modes of governance.

Fourth, public perceptions of NGOs in Sri Lanka have been heavily influenced by the media, which has been largely under state control since 1973, as part of the government's response to growing political instability and conflict.⁵⁷ As a result, politicians have been able to guide public opinion much more effectively than civil society groups.⁵⁸ The state's control over the media has made it difficult for NGOs to appeal directly to the general public in their efforts to build legitimacy. Instead, as will be demonstrated in the following chapters, NGOs tended to rely on personal relations with elite politicians to ensure organisational survival.

Fifth, NGOs enjoyed very limited legal protection from the state in Sri Lanka in comparison to other South Asian countries (Fernandez 1987). During periods when liberal NGOs' views on the conflict were odds with the views of the government, their activities were easily restricted by the state's application of emergency laws and the use of intimidation and violence against NGO workers.

Sixth, while the ruling party tended to occupy a strong grip on the mechanisms of power in the Sri Lankan context, there was also intense electoral competition between the two main political parties, and regular changes in government in the post-independence period. This volatility in electoral politics created a particularly fragile climate for NGO legitimacy: identifying too closely with the political agenda of the incumbent regime was liable to backfire if the government was turned out at the next election.

⁵⁷ For a detailed analysis of state-media relations since the 1970s see Coomaraswamy (1997). The erosion of press freedoms has followed patterns of conflict in Sri Lanka. In 2006 and 2007, for example, as both sides stepped up military activities, a dozen journalists were killed and many more abducted and intimidated.

⁵⁸ This point was made by Jehan Perera in a recent TV interview (Perera 2009).

The emergence of the modern NGO sector in Sri Lanka

The development of the modern NGO sector in Sri Lanka was heavily influenced by its close relationship with the state. During the 1970s and 80s, the state appropriated and co-opted the initiatives of progressive civil society groups by mimicking their discourses, methods and techniques or by establishing mechanisms for collaboration (Saravanamuttu 1999). This co-option was particularly used to counterbalance the rolling back of the state and cutbacks in welfare spending (Korf 2006).

The state's relationship with civil society became increasingly hostile after the JVP uprisings of the late 1980s. During this period, NGOs that questioned the emerging culture of impunity were threatened by the state (Saravanamuttu 1999). Growing authoritarianism also contributed to a process of depoliticisation within civil society by marginalising more radical civil society groups such as the Movement for Inter-Racial Justice and Equality (MIRJE), which had mobilised on a joint platform with leftist political parties in the 1970s.⁵⁹ This climate also reinforced civil society's reliance on state patronage; organisational survival became increasingly dependent upon the accommodation of the state. The non-governmental sector, as a consequence, came to mirror the patterns of Sri Lankan politics with groups largely based in Colombo and reliant upon elite patronage (Wickremasinghe 2001). Several large NGOs established in the 1990s were heavily reliant upon governmental support received through the World Bank and German Government-funded Janasaviya Trust Fund Scheme (Smillie 1995, Hudson 1997), and others were involved both directly and indirectly in the campaign to bring President Kumaratunga to power (Bastian, 1999; Saravanamuttu, 1999).

Many large NGOs maintained a distinct party-bias, with some leftist organisations such as the Marga Institute and the Social Scientists' Association (SSA) closely associated with the SLFP and others, such as the International Centre for Ethnic Studies (ICES), the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), aligned with the UNP. The leaders and senior staff members of many other large national NGOs, such as the Sewalanka Foundation, FCE or Sarvodaya, maintained personal relationships with elite

⁵⁹ Some remnants of more radical leftist groups have survived, for example, in the form of the Movement for National Land and Agrarian Reform, a network of farmers' organisations founded in 1990.

politicians that cut across party lines.⁶⁰ These inter-personal connections between NGO leaders and the political elite were often critical in determining the extent to which these organisations could influence politics.

While the emergence of the modern NGO sector in Sri Lanka was guided by interaction with the state, the sector's rapid expansion since the 1970s was primarily driven by foreign funding. The majority of modern national NGOs emerged relatively suddenly in the 1980s and 90s, in response to a contraction in government funding for welfare programmes and a concomitant growth in foreign funding (Fernando 2003, 27, Wickramasinghe 2006, 315).⁶¹ Before this rise in funding for NGOs from bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors, many important Sri Lankan development NGOs (including Sarvodaya) were funded by church-based international NGOs and foundations. These funders tended to adopt a less technical and more politically progressive view of NGOs (Fernando 2003). It has been estimated that a total of \$25 million was channelled through Sri Lankan NGOs annually in 1995 (Cleary 1995 cited in Fernando 2003).

Since the late 1970s, foreign funding has been focused on a small group of English-speaking, Colombo-based groups whose work reflects the liberal goals of funders. These groups became increasingly distinct both from regional or local organisations founded by former government officials or intellectuals, and from grass-roots organisations mobilising around themes of patriotism or ethnicity. The centralised nature of Sri Lankan politics encouraged NGOs to coalesce around the centre, base themselves in the capital Colombo, and from there to forge links with the districts. This pattern was accelerated by the growth of donor funding for NGOs in the 1980s and 1990s, and by the retraction of NGOs based in the Northern and Eastern Provinces, which accompanied the growing dominance of the LTTE in these areas since the 1980s. These patterns have produced an NGO sector that is overly-centralised, highly competitive and unusually market-oriented.

⁶⁰ For example, Harsha Kumara Navaratne, the Chairman of Sewalanka Foundation, worked alongside the UNP President Premadasa, but also maintained a close personal relationship with the SLFP President Rajapakse.

⁶¹ More NGOs were founded before this but many struggled in the much-changed funding environment of the 1980s and 90s (Fernando 2003). More popular civil society organisations in Sri Lanka such as the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Young Men's Buddhist Association (YMBA) and the Temperance Movement have a much longer history which stretches back the nineteenth century (See Bastian 1999, Saravanamuttu 1999, Wickramasinghe 2001, Orjuela 2005, DeVotta 2005). Over 65% of Sri Lanka's development NGOs were formed after 1977 (Wickramasinghe 2001, 78).

In 2007, there were approximately 800 active NGOs registered with the national coordinating body. Of these, around 350 were national NGOs, 250 were sub-national NGOs receiving foreign funds, and 200 were INGOs.⁶² While all national NGOs had a national spatial coverage, the vast majority worked in only a few districts (see IRED 1991, 10).

The amount of funding available to NGOs increased rapidly after the ceasefire, and spiked in 2005 as private and governmental funding for tsunami-related projects rushed into the country and around \$400 million was channelled through NGOs (Central Bank 2006). While overall funding to Sri Lankan NGOs probably declined slightly in 2006 and 2007, figures for total funding to the largest NGOs were still up on 2004 levels (see figure 4). Based on data gathered by the NGO secretariat in 2007, an approximate figure of around \$150 million could be estimated for combined income of Sri Lankan NGOs (with INGOs having an estimated total income of around \$200 million).⁶³

After the ceasefire, the sector became increasingly dominated by a small number of large organisations, which received the majority of donor and INGO funding. A survey of 81 national NGOs in 2007 based on Action Plans submitted to the NGO Secretariat showed that these organisations had a median annual income of Rs. 1.4 million (or around \$13,000). The three largest NGOs in the sample, however, had a mean annual income of Rs. 761 million (or \$7 million), with the largest having an estimated annual income of approximately \$14million (which came almost entirely from foreign donors and INGOs).⁶⁴

⁶² It is difficult to ascertain the number of NGOs operating in Sri Lanka because of the complexities of NGO legislation in the country and the failure of the national coordinating body to keep accurate records. These problems were exacerbated during the fieldwork period because of the unprecedented number of new organisations that either arrived in Sri Lanka or were formed there in the aftermath of the tsunami. The degree of funding for NGOs operating in Sri Lanka is similarly difficult to ascertain because of a lack of proper monitoring by the state, but also because of the complex funding arrangements between donors, INGOs, national and local NGOs. In February 2007, there were 1,073 NGOs registered at the NGO Secretariat in the Ministry of Social Services, the national coordinating body for NGOs. This figure only includes INGOs, Sri Lankan NGOs receiving foreign funding or Sri Lankan NGOs working in more than one administrative district. It does not include the estimated 10-12,000 local NGOs registered at the district or sub-district level (interview with NGO Secretariat 2007, 2nd February 2007). The estimated number of active organisations was reached after cross-checking NGO secretariat data with data from the government Centre for Non-Governmental Sector, OCHA and CHA.

⁶³ Based on data from the NGO secretariat in which projected income for a selection of 63 INGOs was \$132 million. A selection of 68 Sri Lankan NGOs had a combined projected income of just under \$19 million (NGO Secretariat 2007). The combined figure is based on the assumption that over half of the funding received by Sri Lankan NGOs came from INGOs. This assumption was based on more detailed analysis of the funding sources of several large national NGOs.

⁶⁴ In 1991, a sample of 182 NGOs showed a median annual income of Rs 0.5 million and the top three had a combined income of Rs. 37.3 million. While in 1991 the top 5% of organizations ranked

These trends were accentuated by the tsunami, after which there was a rapid influx of funders seeking experienced local NGO partners. In 2005, the year following the tsunami, the three largest organisations had a combined annual income of around \$55 million (which amounted to around 25% of total NGO funding). Funding fell fairly rapidly in 2006, leaving the three richest organisations with a combined income of around \$20million in 2007 (see Figure 3).

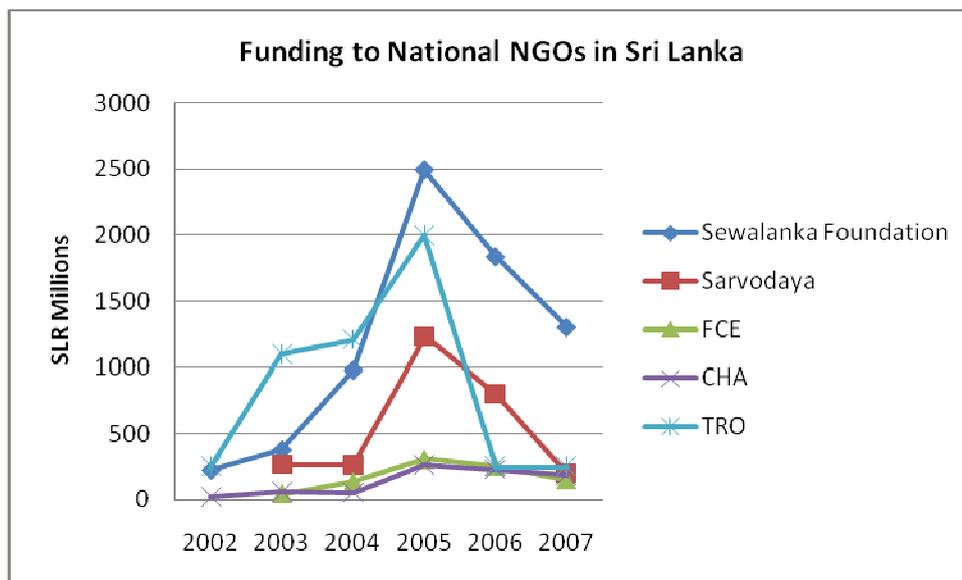


Figure 3: Annual incomes of five largest NGOs (by funding) in Sri Lanka (Sri Lankan Rupees millions)

by annual income accounted for 52% of the total funding and the top 10% accounted for 66%, in 2007 the top 5% of the sample made up 85% of the total and the top 10% of organizations accounted for 92%. During the tsunami response period, these figures were often dwarfed by grants made by INGOs. World Vision, the largest INGO operating in Sri Lanka during the period, spent between \$107million (or approximately \$36 million per year) in the country during 2005 and 2007, while Oxfam spent \$71million (approximately \$23million per year) over the same period.

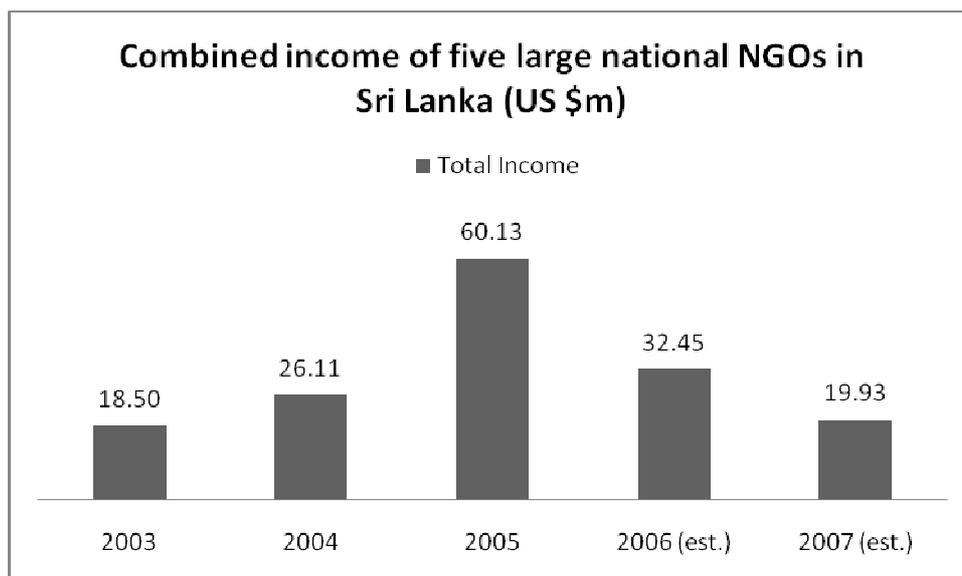


Figure 4: Combined annual income of the 'big 5' national NGOs (\$US millions).

Another important trend has been a decline in regional or district-based organisations.⁶⁵ In 1991, 40% of large functioning NGOs were based outside of Colombo (IREC 1991). In 2007, this figure had reduced to around 10%. The increased dominance of this small group of very large national NGOs is likely to have contributed to the perception that Sri Lankan NGOs are elitist and driven by foreign funding. These NGOs' large budgets, close relationships with Western donors and English-speaking staff make them easy targets for NGO critics, who argue that NGOs are pursuing a fundamentally Westernising agenda that is blind to the traditional social norms and values of Sri Lankan society.

NGOs and peacebuilding in Sri Lanka

The earliest attempts by Sri Lankan civil society to tackle conflict-related issues occurred in the early 1970s, and were motivated by the Southern uprising. These efforts were typically framed within a broader project to counter state repression (as in the case of the Civil Rights Movement (CRM)) or to address structural issues relating to conflict such as youth unemployment and uneven resource distribution (Bastian 1999). NGOs' engagement with conflict at the national level started in earnest after the ethnic riots of 1983. After 1983, NGOs increasingly focused on the social manifestations of the growing ethnic and political divisions in the country. Organisations such as MIRJE and ICES began actively exploring the

⁶⁵ These changes reflect broader trends in NGO funding. As the amount of funding for NGOs from governmental agencies has increased, there has been a growing concentration of funds in the hands of larger national and international NGOs, as smaller NGOs have found it more difficult to adapt to the bureaucratic demands of bilateral agencies (Bebbington et al 2007).

social factors underpinning ethnic divisions.⁶⁶ MIRJE conducted several campaigns against Sinhalese nationalist forces, activating a large membership base in the districts and collaborating with political parties such as the Ceylon Workers' Congress and the Muslim Congress.⁶⁷ Groups such as the Mother's Front, which reached national prominence in the 1990s and opposed the culture of impunity, were able to challenge government policy but were also susceptible to co-option by political elites. The Front was damaged by its connections to the SLFP party, which used the organisation as a channel to attack the then UNP government (De Alwis 1998). A number of human rights groups also emerged in response to state repression in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Policy-oriented groups such as the ICES worked with the state on conflict and peace issues in the 1980s. This work included facilitating discussions amongst politicians, which helped to generate much of the Sinhalese terms for concepts such as devolution, power-sharing and federalism that drove the political debate on these issues.⁶⁸ Until the mid-1990s, however, NGOs' engagement with the state on peace issues was restricted to lobbying and campaigning from the outside as the UNP government doggedly pursued a military solution to the conflict in the North and East (Phillips 2007). A greater degree of congruence between the aims of government and NGOs on the issue of peace could be observed in 1994, when human rights and peace activists participated in marches organised by the opposition PA's leader Chandrika Kumaratunga (Orjuela 2005). After the failure of the 1994-5 peace process and the launch of Kumaratunga's 'war for peace' strategy, however, many civil society actors felt betrayed. This experience prompted greater circumspection from NGOs towards the 2002-6 peace process (Orjeula 2005).

By the 1990s, as Bastian (1999) has documented, these home-grown NGO responses to conflict were increasingly overshadowed by a more generic, donor-driven approach to peacebuilding. Rather than attempting to foster long-term, locally-generated institutional reform, interventions increasingly relied on tool-kit approaches targeted at the community-level.⁶⁹ The increasingly depoliticised nature of these approaches was not a simple reaction

⁶⁶ Interview with national NGO representative, Colombo, 15th March 2007.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Interview with national NGO representative, Colombo, 26th March 2007.

⁶⁹ The growing focus on community level peacebuilding and the expanded set of activities that came under the term peacebuilding confuses the picture of where and how NGO peacebuilding emerged in the Sri Lankan context. Many organisations I encountered through the course of my interviews

to the changes in global responses to conflict. They were also a reaction to changes in the 'organization of dissent and politics' in Sri Lanka (Philips 2007). Philips argues that the growing formalisation and contractualisation of NGO work was closely related to constitutional changes since the late 1970s such as the establishment of the executive presidency, the marginalisation of the Left, and the outlawing of the TULF, which contributed to a breakdown in the links between the Left and trade unions.

After the ceasefire agreement in 2002, Sri Lanka became one of the most popular sites for international experimentation in NGO peacebuilding (Walton 2008). Most aid to Sri Lanka after the ceasefire was allocated to supporting the UNF's economic agenda (Bastian 2009), and peace-related activities tended to be funded by a small group western donors (led by the EC, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Canada, the US and the UK). It is difficult to measure the overall proportion of funding allocated to peacebuilding work because of a lack of data and problems of categorisation, but a few examples of donor spending can give a flavour of the levels of funding available to civil society for this work.⁷⁰ In 2005, for example, SIDA allocated around \$10 million (or approximately 50% of its total budget) on two thematic areas: 'human rights and democratic governance' and 'conflict, peace and security'. In the same year, NORAD allocated around \$6.3 million to peace and conflict issues, of which around \$2 million went to local NGOs. USAID committed between \$16-17million to Sri Lanka between 2004 and 2006, 28% of which was spent on democracy and governance, while 22% went to supporting the 'benefits of peace' programme designed to build popular support for the peace process. Most funding for civil society peace initiatives was channelled through large national NGOs and INGOs.⁷¹

Donor peacebuilding efforts tended to ignore a range of civil society groups that were either openly opposed to a peace deal, or adopted a partisan position with regards to the conflict (Bastian 1999, Orjuela 2003, Goodhand & Klem 2005, Liyanage 2006, Keenan 2007).

stated that they had been engaged in peacebuilding work for many years but that they simply had not labelled it as such (interview with national NGO representatives, Kandy, 29th September 2006, Colombo, 10th October 2006).

⁷⁰ Many peacebuilding projects (for example, exchange programmes, workshops or training programmes) required relatively small amounts of funding and were certainly dwarfed by the amount of funding allocated to some hardware projects. Therefore, the amount of funding allocated is not necessarily a good indicator of the relative scale and scope of peacebuilding activities in relation to other thematic areas.

⁷¹ One significant exception to this pattern was the Facilitating Local Initiatives in Conflict Transformation (FLICT), a fund jointly managed by various donors which provided small grants to smaller civil society groups engaged in peacebuilding work.

These included groups such as the National Movement Against Terrorism (NMAT), an umbrella organisation bringing together a number of patriotic Buddhist and professional groups in opposition to the peace process and the LTTE, and the Patriotic Nationalist Movement (PNM), which provided various nationalist political parties with an important platform to draw together various strands of opposition to the peace process. Another key subset of critical civil society groups were Tamil nationalist organisations. The most significant among these was the Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO), which played a central role in coordinating humanitarian and development activities in LTTE-controlled areas in the North, and, after being banned in Sri Lanka in 2007, played an important human rights lobbying role.

Before moving on to look in more detail at my approach for examining NGO legitimacy, it is worth briefly recapping some of the implications of this analysis of this chapter so far. First, I have argued that conflict in post-independence Sri Lanka has exerted a powerful influence over the way in which NGO legitimacy is interpreted and framed. Second, I have identified a number of features of the Sri Lankan political system which have made NGOs' involvement in political action particularly contentious, and therefore central to processes of legitimation. Third, I have demonstrated how NGO legitimacy has been heavily affected by a series of international interventions in Sri Lanka, and in particular how it became closely connected to competing political discourses about the role of the state. Fourth, I have described how the NGO sector in Sri Lanka has received more funding and grown more concentrated and professionalised in recent years. These trends have distanced NGOs from their core constituencies, and fed into nationalist critiques, which claim that the sector represents a corrupting influence on Sri Lankan politics and society.

4. A theoretical framework for understanding NGO legitimacy in Sri Lanka

Positioning my approach within the broader literature

The last chapter emphasised a number of shortcomings in the existing literature on NGO legitimacy, in particular highlighting this literature's failure to account for the multi-faceted and socially-constructed nature of NGO legitimacy. It argued that NGOs themselves played a critical role in responding to, and attempting to shape the impressions formed by other actors. It argued that working in context of violent conflict, engaging in political work, and

becoming involved in liberal peacebuilding interventions all raised particular tensions and problems for NGO legitimacy.

This section develops my theoretical approach to the study of NGO legitimacy by identifying several important characteristics I encountered in the Sri Lankan context, and positioning this approach within some of the broader theoretical traditions on NGOs. The framework presented here builds on Lister's (2003) socially constructed account of NGO legitimacy introduced in the last chapter which emphasised its multi-faceted nature, arguing that NGO legitimacy was in fact forged in relation to a range of sometimes conflicting normative and cognitive frameworks utilised by various actors. It presents a context-specific, disaggregated framework for understanding NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context by examining the way in which legitimacy was constructed by different audiences through different types of legitimacy (summarised in Table 1). Before presenting this more detailed approach, however, I will briefly position my approach to NGO legitimacy within the broader theoretical literature on NGOs.

NGO legitimacy, structure and agency

The interplay between operational context and organisational decision-making constitutes an important problem for this research and has been an underlying preoccupation in the wider literature on NGOs, especially in debates relating to the extent to which NGOs are able to operate independently from their funding partners (see, for example, Edwards & Hulme 1997). The existing work on NGOs involves varied assumptions about the degree of agency they command in relation to other players. While some depict NGOs as possessing minimal control over aims and resources (e.g. Williams & Young 1994, DeMars 2005), more technical accounts have tended to attach overriding responsibility for outcomes to NGOs themselves, reducing the failure of NGO projects to technical issues (Goodhand 2006).

The mainstream literature on NGO legitimacy has shared a tendency with the broader NGO literature to overstate NGOs' own capacity to control their reputations and legitimacy. As Lister (2003) has argued, this literature has tended to reduce legitimacy to a technical issue defined in terms of NGOs' representativeness, accountability and performance. Seen as a straightforward outcome of attaining these qualities, NGO legitimacy becomes something that falls largely within NGOs' sphere of influence. A number of authors have argued that NGOs can boost legitimacy simply by prioritising connections with communities (perhaps

by devolving responsibility to southern partners), by making their work and funding more transparent, or by establishing effective systems of monitoring and evaluation (see, for example, Atack 1998, Hudson 2000, Slim 2002, Van Rooy 2004).

Few studies of NGOs have explicitly explored the extent to which NGOs internal decision-making processes have related to their relationships with other actors or the social and political environment within which they operate. One useful perspective comes from the NGO management literature. Lewis (2007) has advocated an approach that sees NGOs as open systems – organisations that are ‘highly dependent on events and resources in their environment’. Building on the work of de Graaf (1987), Lewis presents a framework that places NGOs within a concentric system consisting of three spheres of influence (Lewis 2007, 165, see also Goodhand 2006, 163). While NGOs can control some aspects of their work (such as organisational, staff issues, selecting partners) and influence others (such as their relationships with other actors), environmental factors such as state decision-making may lie largely out of their control.⁷² Although this framework represents a fairly crude approximation to the realities facing NGOs (Lewis [2007, 165] himself argues that the boundaries between these spheres are fluid and subject to fluctuation), it is nonetheless useful for envisaging the extent to which NGOs are capable of influencing the institutional and political environment in which they operate.

This nested approach is also helpful because it avoids the tendency, prevalent in much of the NGO literature, to view NGOs as unitary actors or organisational ‘black-boxes’. The approach instead reserves a role for individual agents within organisations, recognising that NGOs ‘are filled with internal contradictions and conflicts’ and to examine how various different sets of values and cultural perspectives can co-exist within organisations (Lewis 2003, 3). As will be emphasised in the next chapter, such an approach is key in the Sri Lankan context where the relationships between NGO leaders and domestic and international elites played a prominent role in processes of legitimation.

My methodology also draws on insights generated by Long’s (2001) actor-oriented approach which has been applied usefully to the study of NGOs in a number of important accounts (Hilhorst 2003, Ebrahim 2003, Lister 2003, Van Leeuwen 2008). This perspective

⁷² Lewis (2007) notes that NGOs often lack an appreciation of the bigger picture. Similarly, Goodhand (2006) argues that NGOs have tended to focus on improving what they can control at the expense of the operating environment, or things they can influence.

acknowledges a multiplicity of social actors and the existence of 'multiple realities' (Long 2001). It can be used to identify the various ways in which different actors interpret NGO legitimacy and use notions of NGO legitimacy for different purposes. Understanding NGO legitimacy becomes concerned with exploring the 'critical interfaces that depict the points of contradiction, or discontinuity between the different (and often incompatible) actors' lifeworlds' (Long 2001, 240). The framework presented below represents a first step in grappling with one of the central challenges laid down by the actor-oriented approach: to 'look closely at the issue of just whose interpretations or models...prevail over those of others and in what circumstances' (Long 2001, 19).

Methodologically, the actor-oriented approach demands an analysis of NGOs' 'everyday practices' (Long 2001, Hilhorst 2003). This involves careful tracing of how organisations' multiple realities interact, dominate, facilitate and divide agents both within and outside of the organisation (Hilhorst 2003). Understanding how NGOs are able to generate or maintain legitimacy, why they adopt or abandon certain political positions, or associate themselves with a particular set of discourses is best understood by rigorously analysing the various discourses they use, their relationships with other actors, and both their formal and informal practices. This analysis also requires an appreciation both that NGOs are responding to a complex and shifting set of powerful actors, and that they themselves are capable of occupying multiple positions (Li 2007). In the course of this research, I emphasise that the extent to which NGOs have been able to influence or shape processes of legitimation is highly dependent on key features of their operating environment, including both largely static aspects such as the legislative framework, and fairly volatile elements such as the prevailing political climate.

NGOs and discourse

My understanding of NGO legitimacy draws on Foucauldian understandings of power, based on the insight that 'power is everywhere... because it comes from everywhere' and his argument that knowledge is a form of power expressed through *discourses* which dictate which actions are thinkable and which actions are not (Foucault 1990). Seen this way, power is not simply something that acts on or is possessed by individuals or institutions, but something that works through people. I understand discourse as an 'ensemble of ideas, concepts, and categories through which meaning is given to

phenomena' (Gasper & Apthorpe 1996, 2) or 'more or less coherent sets of references that frame the way we understand and act upon the world around us' (Hilhorst 2003, 8).

Organisational legitimacy here is considered to be dependent upon conformity to dominant discourses (Lister 2003, 188). An important strand in the recent literature on NGOs has focused on NGOs' role in transferring or reworking dominant discourses (Cooke and Kothari 2001, Kamat 2004). Some authors have emphasised NGOs' role in consolidating dominant discourses, and, in doing so, extending the 'tyrannical potential' of such discourses to facilitate 'the illegitimate and/or unjust exercise of power' (Cooke & Kothari 2001, 4). Others have emphasised NGOs' role as 'interface experts' (Hilhorst 2003) who, through their multiple links with a wide array of actors, are well positioned to bring together groups coming from different linguistic, ideational or normative perspectives to talk to each other, mediating between communities and donors/government and reforming discourses to make them more palatable to different groups (Woost 1997, Ebrahim 2003, Nauta 2005, Lewis & Mosse 2006). One of the key arguments of this research is that although dominant development discourses exist, the way in which these discourses manifest themselves in any given national context is closely shaped by domestic political discourses.

In the Sri Lankan context, national NGOs often found themselves caught between rival discourses about politics, conflict or development stemming from the international and domestic arenas. Because of their extensive links with both domestic and international actors, national NGOs often struggled to reconcile these two competing spheres of discursive influence. As will be seen from the case studies presented in chapters four and six, some organisations were more adept or better positioned than others to reconcile these competing discourses. The way in which NGOs' use of discourse was perceived was audience-specific and often highly contested. While using a particular kind of peacebuilding discourse, for example, may have boosted legitimacy with one set of actors, it may equally de-legitimise it in the eyes of another. Audiences' reactions were further complicated by the heavy politicisation of these processes and the tendency for a variety of actors to instrumentalise their criticism of NGOs in an effort to pursue a broader political agenda.

A central criticism of much of the Foucauldian-inspired critical literature on NGOs and development is that this work denies agency to the NGOs and the individuals that work in

them to resist the tyrannical potential of dominant discourses or maintain 'room for manoeuvre' (Rossi 2004). Following the work of authors such as Rossi (2004), my approach prefers to see the extent to which actors are bound by discourses as hierarchical and related to underlying power relations: some actors had more potential to shape the discourse than others. Some influential national NGOs and INGOs may possess 'field-setting' power while the power of others (such as smaller national NGOs or CBOs) may be limited to employing bargaining tactics to ensure beneficial outcomes. Such a perspective suggests that actors' behaviour is not simply prescribed by discourse but that these actors also possess 'positioned awareness' of the discourse and therefore are able to employ strategies to adjust the trajectories of interventions according to their own needs (Rossi 2004). Similarly, my approach acknowledges the capacity of organisations and individuals to subvert official discourses, juggle different interests at once and to generate counter-discourses (Mosse 2005).

Key features of my approach to NGO legitimacy

Before moving on to map the key audiences and discourses that shaped NGO legitimacy at the time of my research, I will briefly outline three key features that distinguish my approach from much of the literature on NGO legitimacy. First, I argue that NGO legitimacy is a highly *contextual* phenomenon. Rather than being reducible to generalisable qualities and benchmarks, NGO legitimacy is best understood in relation to the particular power relations and the social, cultural and political discourses that exist in any given national arena. In the case of Sri Lanka, as this chapter has highlighted, the most relevant features of the broader social and political context was the state's own long-running struggle for legitimacy against the backdrop of competing Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist political projects. As I have argued, these competitive political environment produced a particularly volatile climate for NGO legitimacy, which was especially strained during periods of transition.

My approach also emphasises that the extent to which NGOs are deemed legitimate may vary considerably from context to context and between different time periods. In Sri Lanka, the proliferation of NGOs in the 1980s meant that while many people understood what an NGO was and held some generalised expectations of the kinds of activities they were engaged in, their normative legitimacy (or the sense that they were 'doing good') remained highly contested. The failure to establish normative legitimacy was the result of a 'strongly

defined and widely held' nationalist conception of state legitimacy, which emphasised the paternalistic role of the state and the threat posed by external actors (Venugopal 2008, 362). As noted above, it was also linked to growing state centralisation in Sri Lanka since the 1970s, and in particular the state's dominance of the media. These factors meant that during times of political tension, such as the period observed during the field work period, NGOs' legitimacy became widely questioned in the public arena. Although NGO legitimacy was further damaged by the changing character of the NGO sector and changes in NGOs' roles, these effects played out onto a political terrain where NGO legitimacy was highly contested. The centralised character of the Sri Lankan state also meant that processes of NGO legitimisation were shaped by NGO leaders' relationships with important political figures, mirroring modes of legitimisation prevalent in Sri Lankan politics. Similarly, prominent expectations and norms of legitimate NGO behaviour, such as charismatic leadership and dynastic succession of leadership, reflected underlying norms in the political sphere.

Second, I emphasise that NGO legitimacy is likely to intersect with the agendas of various powerful domestic political actors, and that political actors may critique NGOs as a means of highlighting or supporting their own political agendas, thereby instrumentalising processes of legitimisation. An appreciation of these dynamics implies that critical groups' statements about NGOs may have very little to do with NGO behaviour, and can be primarily driven by their own political goals. By stressing the pernicious corrupting influence of NGOs, for example, a nationalist political group is able to highlight the urgency and relevance of their own political agenda based on a perceived threat to traditional social values or to protecting Sri Lankan sovereignty and thereby boost their own legitimacy. Conversely, the LTTE, by promoting the work of an organisation such as the TRO, were able to utilise this process of NGO legitimisation as a means of boosting their own credibility. NGOs used public criticism of their rivals as a means both of distancing themselves from organisations that had been attacked and as a tool for emphasising the positive aspects of their own organisation.

Third, my approach stresses that the nature of NGO legitimacy for each audience is framed in relation to various political, institutional and territorial boundaries or models of proper NGO action. There is considerable variation between the types of boundaries that are utilised by different actors. Nationalist groups emphasised broad boundaries governing

proper social and political conduct; for example, the divisions between Sinhalese and Tamil communities, or the international and national realms. The treatment of social and political boundaries by nationalist groups can be contrasted with the way in which boundaries were handled by liberal peacebuilders who sought to build peace by consciously blurring the boundaries between state and non-state, internal and external, international and national.

Boundaries were used to demarcate the limits of action for various actors including NGOs and the media. These boundaries tended to be multi-faceted. The division between the international and national realm, for example, had political, territorial and cultural dimensions. Nationalist groups' concern with NGOs' foreign links was related to fears about the corrupting influence this had on Sri Lankan culture as well as the potential threat this represented to Sri Lankan sovereignty. NGOs themselves were more concerned with symbolic boundaries articulated through familiar binaries of NGO behaviour such as the image on the one hand of a value-driven NGO, and a market-driven service contractor on the other, or between a cosmopolitan liberal organisation and a more locally-rooted organisation with a communitarian ethos.⁷³

5. Mapping NGO legitimacy in Sri Lanka

The aim of this section is to map the various key audiences, discourses, interests, agendas and boundaries that shaped NGO legitimacy in Sri Lanka during the fieldwork period. It plots NGOs' audiences on a sliding scale from groups that were fundamentally opposed to NGOs (*critical* actors such as patriotic political groups), through those who favoured cautious engagement (*ambivalent* actors such as the state and the LTTE), to groups that possessed a fairly firm and unwavering conviction of NGOs' place as legitimate actors (*convinced* actors such as other NGOs and donors). For each audience I shall highlight four central dimensions of the process of NGO legitimation (summarised in Table 1) – normative/ cognitive dimensions, pragmatic dimensions, instrumental dimensions and boundaries. Cognitive dimensions of legitimacy are based on cognition and the extent to which NGOs conform to dominant cognitive models (the quality of 'taken-for-grantedness'), normative dimensions are based on evaluation and the extent to which NGOs conform to various actors' ideals and pragmatic aspects are based on self-interest of

⁷³ For a discussion of the distinction between symbolic and social boundaries see Lamont & Molnar (2002). Similar binaries have been identified in several other accounts of NGOs. See for instance Heaton (2001) and Yarrow (2008).

other actors and the extent to which NGOs conform to demands (Lister 2003).

Instrumental dimensions are similar to pragmatic dimensions in that they relate to other actors' self-interest, but are more reflexive and involve attempts by other actors to utilise the process of legitimation or de-legitimation of NGOs as a means of pursuing their own political or reputational goals. Examples of these instrumental dimensions include the way in which other actors might consciously or unconsciously associate themselves with NGOs in order to boost their own legitimacy, or might criticise NGOs as a means of highlighting the broader dangers posed by international engagement.

Table 1: Key dimensions of NGO legitimacy by audience (adapted from Lister (2003)).

Stakeholder type	Stakeholder	Normative and Cognitive dimensions	Pragmatic dimensions	Instrumental dimensions	Key boundaries (social/symbolic)
Critical	Nationalist political parties	Prefer groups that are supportive of traditional, Buddhist values and interests of marginalised Sinhalese. Particularly opposed to groups that identify with liberal, cosmopolitan ideals or that undermine statist worldview.	Critical groups rarely work directly with national NGOs, therefore little pragmatic sources of legitimacy.	Used NGOs to stress dangers of international engagement and as a means of asserting the relevance and urgency of nationalist political agenda.	Socio-political- International vs. national; state vs. non-state; Tamil vs. Sinhalese
Ambivalent	State	Prefer organisations that are apolitical, focused on service delivery; NGOs that support government agenda. During fieldwork period, preferred organisations that are apolitical, focused on service delivery, conform to a	NGOs can attract funding, implement projects, fill gaps, provide technical skills, provide humanitarian relief, provide favourable election monitoring.	At times similar to above, can boost legitimacy of government policies – e.g. Reawakening East development plan; <i>ad hominem</i> attacks on NGOs provide a means of	Socio-political - During nationalist periods (esp. war-time) as above; Symbolic - 'good NGOs' vs. 'bad NGOs'.

		traditional model of charitable service and supportive of traditional culture and values.		deflecting attacks on government military action; criticism of NGOs as a means of redirecting criticism of state's tsunami response.	
	LTTE	Prefer NGOs with commitment to supporting Tamil communities, apolitical organisations. Concerned about NGO attempts to empower communities, organisations with political/ religious objectives, groups with links to Government/ explicit Sinhalese cultural agenda. Prefer organisations that share their Tamil nationalist frame of reference.	NGOs could provide resources to LTTE-controlled areas; influence international opinion via lobbying work; raise awareness about plight of Tamils during war.	Challenging NGO legitimacy as a means of highlighting the profligacy of donors and GoSL in the peace process. Boosting legitimacy by association, demonstrating LTTE's humanitarian objectives.	Socio-political - Tamil vs. Sinhalese; Symbolic - apolitical vs. political.
Convinced	NGOs	Generally privilege organisations with 'genuine' understanding of local needs; a	NGOs can share information; coordinate work at field level; work together to	Use judgements of other NGOs to differentiate themselves from 'bad' NGOs.	Symbolic - committed activist vs. professional; politically engaged vs. politically irrelevant; locally-rooted

		demonstrable connection with communities/ beneficiaries; understanding and expertise in prevailing development/ peacebuilding methodologies; local knowledge; technical proficiency. Prefer organisations that conform to dominant development/ peacebuilding discourse, are independent and autonomous (varies considerably amongst NGOs).	submit joint proposals to donors etc.; provide positive accounts of their work.		communitarian vs. cosmopolitan.
	Donors	Prefer efficient/ professional organisations; those with commitment to dominant development agendas (poverty-reduction, peacebuilding, improving gender relations etc); sufficient degree of technical/ political emphasis (varies amongst donors).	NGOs can provide links with communities, provide and share information about 'ground situation'.	Play up NGOs' popular appeal and impact to enhance the legitimacy of their own work.	Symbolic - politically engaged vs. politically irrelevant; representative vs. cosmopolitan.

The framework presented here should be tempered with a few additional caveats. First, the aim of this account is to sketch some of the key dynamics that structured processes of legitimation during the fieldwork period. As a result, it necessarily simplifies the relations

between these various groups and hardens these actors' positions; in reality these positions were more fluid. Second, these different perspectives on NGO legitimacy did not develop in isolation from one another: the state's behaviour altered the aims of donors, and the changing aims of donors shifted the expectations placed on NGOs. Third, the divisions between the three main categories (critical, ambivalent, convinced) are not clear-cut and actors can shift from one position to another. In particular, there was a fairly porous boundary between critical and ambivalent groups. In 2004, for example, two nationalist political parties became members of the government. Fourth, NGO legitimacy is forged against the backdrop of a complex field of power in which these different categories of actors vie for space and channels to articulate their own political agendas. The fortunes of these different groups often shift in a cyclical fashion: growing influence from international actors has, on various occasions in Sri Lankan history, opened up spaces for a nationalist backlash. When the ruling party encouraged international engagement there was more room for these actors to promote their agendas. By contrast, when nationalist groups joined with the government in 2004, the space for liberal or cosmopolitan perspectives became more limited. Fifth, this balance of power between different actors was unusually volatile in the Sri Lankan context, and dramatically shifted during war to peace or peace to war transitions.

Critical groups

NGOs' normative and causal frameworks often clashed with the worldviews of *critical* groups. DeVotta's (2005a) analysis of anti-NGO sentiment in Sri Lanka identifies several important strands, including the notion that NGOs represent a corrupting influence on Buddhist society (with ulterior political and religious agendas), the idea that NGOs represent the continuation of the collusion of the colonial period between Tamils and foreigners against the Sinhalese, and the view that, by encouraging a peaceful settlement, NGOs were challenging the Buddha's wish that Sri Lanka should remain a haven for Buddhism. NGOs' objectives often conflicted with the worldviews of Sinhala nationalist groups which stressed the importance of 'traditional' Sinhala Buddhist values, the protection of state sovereignty and national self-sufficiency, and opposed the 'interference' of foreign actors in Sri Lankan domestic affairs.⁷⁴ Criticising or attacking NGOs formed part

⁷⁴ While JVP statements often played on populist concerns about the corrupting influence of NGOs, private discussions with JVP MPs revealed a more nuanced view: the principal concern was not about NGOs *per se* but rather those that utilised donor resources to promote their own political,

of a broader effort to purify Sri Lankan society and, in doing, so to 'maintain the illusion that "the nation is the same people living in the same place"' (Spencer 2003, 3).

As Venugopal (2008, 24) has argued, nationalism provided 'a moral lens through which...the actions of the state could be evaluated and imbued with legitimacy (or lack thereof)'. In the same way, nationalism also provided the moral and cultural lens through which most nationalists assessed NGOs' actions. NGOs were viewed with suspicion since they had the potential to undermine the state's role as protector of traditional culture and the interests of the Sinhalese peasant class.

Nationalist views were a consistent and prominent feature of the Sri Lankan political landscape, and opposition towards foreign-funded civil society was not new (see Wickramasinghe 2001). These views, however, tended to become activated during transitional political periods, and particularly in response to periods of heavy international involvement. The potency of these anti-NGO discourses was also dependent upon changes in the balance of power between the two primary conflict actors and shifts in the balance between the various political parties in the South. The period between the PA coalition's victory in the parliamentary elections in April 2004, and the UNP crossover to Rajapakse's PA party in January 2007, represented the high point of nationalist influence, with anti-NGO discourses receiving the most prominence in early 2005.⁷⁵ The JVP and the JHU had 39 and 9 MPs respectively after the 2004 Parliamentary elections, which gave them considerable power over the government coalition, which began with a majority of 23 seats. This influence was gradually undermined by the JVP's departure from government in 2005, the cross-over of 18 opposition UNP MPs to the government in early 2007, and a split amongst JVP parliamentarians in 2008.

As mentioned in the last chapter, this research has not investigated the extent to which critical perspectives were shared by the general population. There is some evidence to suggest, however, that during the crisis period, the prominence of these anti-NGO messages in the media prompted a general concern about NGOs' role in Sri Lankan society

moral or religious agendas (interview with JVP politician, Colombo, 2nd April 2007). This chimes with the approach of the JHU who were more concerned with the potential for NGOs to encourage "unethical religious conversion", highlighting the dangers associated with Christian organisations such as World Vision. See, for example, TamilNet (2005).

⁷⁵ The prominence of these anti-NGO discourses was also related to the tsunami response. These developments will be examined in greater detail in chapter five.

and politics. An opinion poll conducted in March 2008 by CPA, a Colombo-based think tank, showed widespread acceptance of anti-NGO views of nationalist parties, particularly amongst Sinhalese respondents. 43.6% of Sinhalese respondents, for example, expressed their dissatisfaction in relation to NGOs' 'performance in preserving social values'. This survey also suggested that critical views about NGO rent-seeking, affiliations with the LTTE and the international community were also fairly widely held among a majority of Sinhalese populations. When asked which term best described someone working for an NGO, 27% of Sinhalese respondents chose 'someone who is looking for personal advancement and monetary gain', 19% chose 'an LTTE sympathiser' while another 19% chose 'an agent of an international conspiracy' (CPA 2008). These findings support the view that popular opinion about NGOs was closely shaped by politicians.

Since critical groups did not engage directly with NGOs, there was little pragmatic basis for them to value the role played by NGOs or to establish relationships with these organisations. On the contrary, because the ideals held by NGOs and the methods they employed to achieve their aims often clashed with the political and normative aims of nationalist groups, they often provided compelling opportunities to underline the political discourses of threat and fear that these groups relied on. Because nationalists' critique of NGOs was based on a fundamental opposition to their role in society, their attacks tended to be sweeping and were aimed at the NGO sector as a whole. At a PNM rally in 2005, for example, Wimal Weerawansa, the then JVP propaganda secretary declared: 'We should spit on NGOs and stop them from walking on our streets' (TamilNet 2005a). NGOs posed little direct threat to the legitimacy of nationalist groups at the national level.⁷⁶ As a consequence, attacks on NGO legitimacy had a primarily offensive rather than a defensive motivation. Often the aims associated with these attacks were primarily representational and performative, and aimed not so much to eliminate NGOs as to score a propaganda victory (see Keen 2006 citing Allen 2000). These attacks provide sustenance to Sinhala nationalist ideology which 'require[d] agitprop to mobilize and survive' (DeVotta 2007, 52).

Ambivalent groups

Power-holders such as the state and the LTTE adopted a more circumspect stance towards NGOs. Whilst certain NGOs at times presented a challenge to these actors, concerns about

⁷⁶ I encountered several examples of local level opposition to NGOs from the JVP which seemed to be motivated by a perception that NGOs threatened the patronage networks or influence of local politicians (interviews with national NGO representative, Kandy, 13th November 2006; Colombo 20th November 2006).

the threat posed by NGOs had to be balanced against the pragmatic benefits they could provide. In the case of the LTTE, for example, NGOs provided resources to areas under their control, which helped them to pursue their humanitarian objectives. Similarly, NGOs helped the state to fill gaps left by the retreat of welfare provision after the adoption of neoliberal economic strategies in the late 1970s. This gap-filling role often involved close collaboration between NGOs and state, most notably through the Janasaviya Trust Fund. For many national development NGOs formed in the 1990s, the JSF provided a vital first source of income. After the tsunami, a huge influx of NGOs, whilst not always meeting expectations, helped the state by addressing many of the overwhelming needs of tsunami-affected communities. These interactions between NGOs, on the one hand, and the LTTE and the state on the other often resulted in the formation of relationships of mutual dependence.⁷⁷ Engaging with NGOs also sometimes boosted the legitimacy to these ambivalent groups, particularly in the case of the LTTE, whose associations with NGOs gave the organisation credibility in the international arena.⁷⁸ This process of international image-building became more intense during the peace process (Goodhand & Klem 2005).

At other times, however, NGOs could threaten the interests of ambivalent groups. This commonly occurred in the case of the LTTE, when NGOs were seen to be undermining their efforts to control local populations and, in the case of the state, when NGOs could be seen as providing resources to the LTTE or undermining their military aims by highlighting human rights abuses, obstructing military operations or inadvertently providing protection to the LTTE. After 2005, the state's attacks on NGOs were motivated by a range of factors, which included the need to banish NGOs from conflict areas in an attempt to limit information about the state's military campaigns, concerns about the misappropriation of NGO resources by the LTTE, and fears that NGOs could discourage the movement of civilian populations from strategic areas. The overall character of state-NGO relations was often rather contradictory. While the government recently hailed the involvement of NGOs in its Eastern development programme, and relied on NGOs to fulfil its humanitarian

⁷⁷ Interestingly, the ability to demonstrate a close and effective working relationship with the LTTE is often used by national NGOs as a means of highlighting their capacity to get things done and strike bargains.

⁷⁸ This dynamic seems to be particularly apparent in the case of organisations whose position in international politics was uncertain or which lacked legitimacy. Lister (2003) argues, for example, that targets of NGO advocacy such as the World Trade Organisation and UN agencies benefitted from their associations with NGOs.

responsibilities in the Wanni, for example, it was increasingly critical of human rights NGOs in the same period.⁷⁹

NGO legitimacy had important instrumental dimensions for these groups. Like nationalist parties, the state used attacks on NGOs to underline their own role as genuine protectors of Sri Lankan sovereignty and traditional values. They also used attacks on NGOs as a means of deflecting criticism of the consequences of military action on civilians. This strategy can be seen from a television interview with Mahinda Rajapakse in 2008 where questions about human rights abuses are answered with an *ad hominem* attack on the motives and objectives of the NGOs that provided the information (Al Jazeera 2008). Another example of this kind of dynamic came from the government's Reconstruction and Development Agency (RADA), which used attacks on NGOs as a means of diverting criticism from its own failings.⁸⁰ Similarly, the LTTE's citing of the wastefulness of funding to NGOs in 2003 fed into their broader argument that they were becoming marginalised from the internationalised peace process (Balasingham 2004).

The establishment of lasting relations between the state and the NGO sector was undermined by the bi-polar and patrimonial nature of Sri Lankan politics, and the politicised nature of the civil service. The National Integration Programme Unit (NIPU) established under President Chandrika Kumaratunga, for example, had built up relations over several years with a range of NGOs after 1995. When the UNF came to power in 2001, however, the NIPU office was re-staffed, new strategies drawn up, and the relations with NGOs established over several years broke down.⁸¹

Clampdowns on NGOs were often preceded by a restriction of freedoms prompted by war. Bastian (1999) notes, for example, how President Premadasa's authoritarian response to the JVP uprising in the South and his dissolution of the Provincial council system limited the space for civil society groups. A backlash similar to the one experienced by NGOs after

⁷⁹ The contradictory character of NGO-state relations observed in Sri Lanka has parallels with other contexts. A recent study of NGOs in Colombo by Brittain (2007), for example notes how at the same time as the Colombian state became increasingly critical of human rights organisations, it also increasingly relied on NGOs to implement its ambitious development strategy 'Plan Colombia'. Jackson (2005) notes how in the DRC the government tried both to co-opt NGOs and, at other times, to suppress them.

⁸⁰ Interview with Embassy representative, 5th October 2006.

⁸¹ Interview with former NIPU staff member, Colombo, 12th October 2006; interview with INGO representative, Colombo, 30th October 2006.

2005 was evident after the ethnic riots of 1983, and during the UNP clampdown on the JVP uprisings in late 1980s.⁸²

Unlike critical groups, ambivalent actors tended to deploy symbolic boundaries to discriminate between 'good' and 'bad' NGOs in line with their own interests and agendas. This boundary patrolling work allowed the state and the LTTE to maintain the capacity to facilitate some aspects of NGO activity, whilst dampening others. State actors were keen to emphasise the positive role played by some development NGOs, whilst being highly critical of human rights organisations. Similarly, the LTTE were happy to allow development or humanitarian organisations to work in areas under their control, but was deeply suspicious of any NGOs that might undermine their capacity to control the civilian population by seeking to promote democratic governance or monitoring human rights.

Convinced groups

Convinced groups such as NGOs and donors took for granted the potential for NGOs to play a positive role in the Sri Lankan context, and were less concerned about any broad underlying threats they posed. As a result, these groups tended to assess NGO legitimacy on the basis of organisations' commitment to the prevailing values of the development community signalled by their use and application of current development discourse (e.g. conflict sensitivity, gender, participation), and their compliance with generally accepted standards of behaviour such as financial transparency. Since, for these actors, the legitimacy of NGOs as a whole was rarely in question, judgements tended to be directed at individual organisations or at particular aspects of their work. Assessments of legitimacy also tended to relate to NGOs' perceived 'comparative advantages' over other groups, particularly in the case of technical specialists. This meant that assessments of organisational reputation (or more short-term judgements based on social comparison) were often more influential than perceptions of organisational legitimacy.

NGOs' legitimacy with donors typically arose from pragmatic assessments of the extent to which NGOs were capable of contributing to their own humanitarian, developmental or peacebuilding objectives. Most donors preferred NGOs that shared their own normative outlook, whilst possessing a degree of local knowledge, a well-trained and professional

⁸² As one NGO representative (interviewed in Colombo on 26th March 2007) noted: 'We were called betrayers of the nation around '83 too. We were all questioned by CID. It's always been there'.

staff, financial transparency and the capacity to report on their work effectively.⁸³ Donors also favoured NGOs that could provide them with access to information about areas that were hard to reach, particularly regions that were under LTTE control or could perform well in difficult operational conditions. For this reason, donors often favoured organisations that had good connections to political leaders (either at the local or national level).

Donors and NGOs were engaged in boundary monitoring work, although of a different kind to the boundary patrolling done by ambivalent groups, which differentiated between 'good' and 'bad' NGOs by examining the extent to which NGOs threatened or facilitated their own political agendas. NGOs and donors were more concerned with monitoring the extent to which NGOs conformed to predominant expectations of NGO behaviour such as transparency and accountability, or by assessing the extent to which they pursued certain political positions consistently. These assessments often cohered around symbolic boundaries between 'good' and 'bad', 'real' and 'fake' NGOs, or 'market-driven service contractors' and 'value-driven NGOs' (Robinson 1997, 60). As will be shown in chapters five and six, NGOs often accrued a number of reputational benefits from these assessments, and used these internal comparisons as a means of underlining the positive characteristics of their own organisations.

When NGOs were faced with a generalised 'crisis of legitimacy' (as occurred during the fieldwork period), their concern for each others' reputations took on an added significance. In these periods, the potential for bad behaviour from one organisation to impact badly on the others was heightened.⁸⁴ While in some contexts, NGOs were able to implement joint strategies to tackle these sector-wide legitimacy problems, for example by establishing umbrella organisations or codes of conduct, in Sri Lanka, NGOs were divided over the best way to respond (see IMPACS 2006).⁸⁵ While some opted to lie low until opposition died down, others favoured a collective approach from several organisations to counter negative stories in the media (IMPACS 2006).

⁸³ Although there were strong commonalities between the kinds of qualities donors sought in their NGO partners, there were also significant differences, which related to variations in donors' own normative and political outlooks. At times suspicions that NGOs were corrupt (i.e. moral or motivational judgements about their behaviour) were subsumed by pragmatic concerns.

⁸⁴ Interview with representative of national NGO, Colombo, 20th September 2006, 4th May 2007.

⁸⁵ In 2006, IMPACS invited a number of NGO representatives to meet to discuss joint responses to negative coverage of NGOs in the Sri Lankan media.

6. Conclusions

The last chapter traced the connections between the crisis of NGO legitimacy observed during the fieldwork period and a broader set of crises in global politics. This chapter has presented the case that NGO legitimacy cannot be understood in isolation from its broader historical and political context. It has described how several key institutional and political features of the Sri Lankan context, including the clientelistic nature of Sri Lankan politics, the increasingly authoritarian modes of governance pursued after independence, and the dominance of Sinhala nationalist political discourse, have shaped the way in which NGO legitimacy is interpreted.

This chapter has examined how conflict in Sri Lanka had pervasive effects on the dynamics of NGO legitimacy, both directly by influencing the nature of NGOs' work and the way in which this work was perceived by domestic actors, and indirectly by entrenching patterns of authoritarian governance in the country. These trends limited the capacity for NGOs to play a significant role in transforming the political system, and restricted the extent to which they were able to shape public perceptions of their work. The clientelistic and ethno-nationalistic modes of governance that emerged in the post-independence period also shaped the dynamics of NGO legitimisation processes by encouraging NGOs to forge links with, and rely on support from, political elites, generating a series of tensions that will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter.

I have also described how NGO legitimacy has been shaped and influenced by a series of international interventions in Sri Lanka. Public opposition to NGOs has been closely connected to wider political critiques of international engagement, which since 1977 involved concerted attempts to dismantle the welfarist state architecture that had grown up after the mid-1950s. As such legitimacy was closely mediated by NGOs' conformity or deviation from prevailing political discourses about development, conflict and the role of the state.

I have explored the development of the contemporary NGO sector in Sri Lanka and described how patterns of foreign funding had created a highly centralised, market-oriented NGO sector. These patterns also influenced the character of NGO peacebuilding practice in Sri Lanka which, since the 1990s, has conformed to a more technical and generic model of engagement. The centralisation of the sector influenced the way in which the

legitimacy of peacebuilding NGOs was perceived after the ceasefire and during the fieldwork period.

These features of the Sri Lankan politics and history have informed the framework for understanding NGO legitimacy developed towards the end of this chapter. This framework rejects the more technical accounts of NGO legitimacy that have dominated the existing literature, and instead has highlighted the complex, multi-faceted character of NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context. The framework is based on the argument, developed over the last two chapters, that in order to understand these processes it is necessary to adopt a disaggregated perspective on NGO legitimacy, exploring in turn the way in which NGO legitimacy was constructed intersubjectively between NGOs and a number of different audiences. Furthermore, it develops a more reflexive and politicised conception of NGO legitimacy, which explores the way in which NGOs' strategies of legitimation were intimately linked with other actors' own efforts to maintain credibility and articulate their political visions. Rather than being a static object measured in accordance with a stationary set of benchmarks, the framework asserts that the boundaries of NGO legitimacy were often liable to fluctuate in relation to the political climate and become instrumentalised by a range of other actors.

My framework will be applied in the following three chapters, which present the key findings of this thesis. The next chapter introduces the two case study organisations (Sarvodaya and FCE) and describes how NGOs generated legitimacy in different ways, emphasising the constraints associated with their respective strategies of legitimation. Chapter five examines the crisis of NGO legitimacy that was underway in Sri Lanka during the fieldwork period. After exploring the structural and proximate causes of the crisis, the chapter examines the range of discursive tactics and operational strategies deployed by NGOs to counteract growing criticism from domestic actors. Chapter six explores the experience of the two case study organisations during the crisis period, providing a detailed account of processes of NGO de-legitimation, and highlighting the centrality of representations of NGO politics in these processes.

‘Establishing bona fides’: Strategies of legitimation

This chapter introduces the two case study organisations, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement and the Foundation for Co-existence (FCE), providing an in-depth account of the varied ways in which two large national NGOs, prominent in the field of peacebuilding during the ceasefire period, generated and maintained legitimacy. While chapters five and six will explore the more immediate responses to the crisis of legitimacy (which I have termed ‘reputational crisis management’), this chapter focuses largely on longer-term processes of legitimation, examining how these are connected to organisations’ aims, relationships and processes of organisational development.

The chapter presents two main arguments. First, it develops the argument presented in the last chapter that NGO legitimacy is context-specific: it is shaped by the particular political and social characteristics of the country in which NGOs are operating. Second, it asserts that within a given context, the way in which NGOs generate and maintain legitimacy is highly varied: different organisations seek different kinds of legitimacy for a variety reasons.

The first case study provides an historical account of the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, Sri Lanka’s most prominent development NGO, founded in 1958, while the second charts the more recent emergence of the FCE, a leading specialist peacebuilding NGO, founded in 2002. The examination of the case studies demonstrate how organisations sought legitimacy for different reasons, with Sarvodaya seeking ‘active legitimacy’ (Suchman 1995, 575) as a means of securing popularity and support amongst a broad constituency, and FCE seeking a more passive form of legitimacy, with the more limited aim of avoiding the criticism of domestic political actors. The case studies also illustrate how NGOs pursued varied kinds of legitimacy with Sarvodaya putting its energies into the generation of cognitive and moral legitimacy and FCE placing greater emphasis on pragmatic forms of legitimacy (cf. Suchman 1995).

As well as demonstrating a number of variations in the types of legitimacy NGOs developed, the case studies reveal several shared characteristics. First, the patrimonial and

centralised character of Sri Lankan politics encouraged NGOs to lean on state actors for support, particularly in times of crisis. Both case studies demonstrate the importance of maintaining close personal relationships with the political elite to facilitate organisational expansion, or to ensure organisational survival. Second, the state's dominance of the key channels of public communication (including the media) made it difficult for national NGOs to engage in public campaigns to generate legitimacy. As illustrated later in the chapter, Sarvodaya did attempt to take its message directly to the public, but this strategy was full of risks and was used as a last resort.

Third, the emergence of violent conflict in Sri Lanka played a key role in shaping both organisations' strategies of legitimation. This argument is examined here mainly in relation to the case of Sarvodaya, but it has relevance for the experience of both case study organisations during the crisis period, which will be the subject of chapter six. Fourth, perceptions and judgements of NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context were framed by the dominant lens of Sinhala nationalism. The dominance of this discourse accentuated tensions arising from NGOs' links with international actors, and led critics to blur moral and political aspects of NGOs' behaviour. Fifth, the case studies had similar organisational structures and cultures and these shared characteristics had important implications for the way in which NGO legitimacy was generated and maintained. One particularly significant feature common to both groups was the extent to which perceptions and actions of the organisations' leaders influenced processes of legitimation.

This chapter develops the argument presented in the background chapters that NGOs' involvement in political action can play an important role in shaping processes of legitimation and de-legitimation. The case of Sarvodaya demonstrates how national conflict has the potential to weaken legitimacy both by encouraging NGOs to engage in politics and by making this engagement more contentious.

The first section of the chapter provides background to the two case study organisations, contrasting their strategies of legitimation and highlighting commonalities. The second section contrasts the strategies of legitimation pursued by the two case study organisations. The chapter then concludes by drawing out some of the broader implications of this analysis for my subsequent examination of NGOs' experience during the crisis period.

The strategies pursued by the case study organisations were shaped by several important features of the Sri Lankan social and political environment, which were discussed in the last chapter. Before moving on to look at the case studies, I shall give a brief overview of how these factors impacted on processes of NGO legitimisation.

As argued in the last chapter, the patrimonial nature of the political system in Sri Lanka made NGO legitimacy heavily reliant upon interpersonal relationships. This operational context favoured NGOs that built strong links to the centre, which could be used as a means of protecting them from attacks from other political groups. These tendencies were exacerbated by the weak regulative framework for NGOs in Sri Lanka. The absence of a strong regulative framework created a vacuum where perceptions of NGOs were instrumentalised and manipulated by 'reputation entrepreneurs' (Bryant 2005).

The organisational structures of Sri Lankan NGOs mirror the patrimonial relationship patterns that characterise Sri Lankan politics. NGOs in Sri Lanka are typically hierarchical in character with leaders dominating both decision-making processes and organisations' identities. Organisations are often referred to as Mr. X's or Mrs. Y's organisation (Orjuela 2005, 162). The leaders of large NGOs often maintained close links with the political elite, both as a means of avoiding disruption to their projects and as a way of protecting them from attacks from critical audiences. NGO leaders' individual relationships with donor representatives could be equally influential (see Lister 2000). These connections tended to have a double-edged character. While NGOs' close links with the domestic political elite or donors could be useful, they could also create the impression that the organisation in question was elitist or politically subservient to the state, damaging legitimacy with other NGOs or politicians from the opposition party. These pragmatic links with the centre could be particularly problematic for organisations such as Sarvodaya that focused on generating moral rather than pragmatic forms of legitimacy.

Leaders often lent a sense of 'dispositional legitimacy' to NGOs in Sri Lanka, whereby individuals came to personify the organisation. While this phenomenon could enhance the moral character of an organisation, and positive accounts of leaders could 'dampen the delegitimising effects of isolated failures, miscues and reversals' (Wartick & Cochran 1985 cited in Suchman 1995, 578), these associations could also prove damaging. As will be seen from the case studies, the prominence of NGO leaders provided a useful channel through which critics could launch moral critiques of NGOs' work.

As mentioned in the last chapter, the contested nature of state legitimacy in Sri Lanka made NGO legitimacy unusually prone to instrumentalisation by other actors. Furthermore, the increasingly authoritarian and centralised character of Sri Lankan politics that emerged in the 1970s and, in particular, the state's growing control over the media, limited the extent to which NGOs could control public impressions of their work. This absence of effective channels to set the record straight, or to promote their work, encouraged NGOs to rely on power-brokers for support and protection, creating tensions for NGOs' identities, and problematising their attempts to foster political change. These dynamics introduced a tension between being politically influential (which might require behind-the-scenes political engagement) and being politically subversive (which relied on the development of political proposals or ideas outside of the 'dirty' world of real politics).

A final feature of the Sri Lankan context was the prominence of Sinhala nationalist political discourse. As described in the last chapter, the dominance of this discourse and form of political mobilisation had two important impacts on NGO legitimisation. First, it created a tension between the cosmopolitan frameworks of legitimacy upon which NGOs' relations with international actors were based and the communitarian frameworks that dominated relations with domestic actors. Second, Sinhala nationalism involved a close connection between politics and traditional Buddhist culture and morality. As was emphasised during the crisis period, organisations that became associated with a cosmopolitan, liberal approach to politics and development were not only perceived as misguided in political or policy terms, but deemed morally suspect. The two case studies illustrate how NGOs navigated the symbolic boundaries and markers associated with these two competing frameworks in different ways. Sarvodaya attempted to generate and maintain legitimacy by drawing on cultural markers that resonated with Sinhala nationalism. FCE, by contrast, largely focused on developing its credentials as an agent of political change understood in liberal, cosmopolitan terms.

1. Case Studies⁸⁶

1.1 Sarvodaya Shramadana Movements

This introduction to the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement presents two phases of the organisation's development. In the first phase (1958-1983), the analysis focuses on

⁸⁶ The case studies presented here draw on material from Walton (2008). The FCE study draws on material from Goodhand & Walton (2007).

Sarvodaya's relations with government, donors and the Buddhist clergy, and explores how these changing relations impacted upon Sarvodaya's legitimacy. The second phase (1983-present day) analyses how the emerging conflict between the GoSL and the LTTE prompted changes in Sarvodaya's political activities, and how these developments impacted upon the organisation's identity and legitimacy.

Phase One 1958 – 1983: 'Establishing bona fides in the minds of the people'

The Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement began its work in 1958, and since the 1960s has a reasonable claim to being Sri Lanka's biggest NGO both in terms of the scale of its activities and the level of public recognition it enjoyed. Beginning as an 'educational experiment' in which Colombo schoolchildren were taken to rural villages to engage in manual labour alongside villagers (*shramadana* or shared labour camps), the organisation quickly established a strong presence in the rural development landscape of Sri Lanka. The movement presented an alternative model of development, which combined Gandhian principles of *grama swaraj* (village self-rule) with Buddhist philosophy. While Gandhi interpreted the Sanskrit word *sarvodaya* as 'welfare of all', Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne (Sarvodaya's founder) used the term to mean 'the awakening of all' (Bond 2004). This philosophy chimed with nationalist discourses of rediscovering national identity by stressing the value of indigenous culture and values as a tool for solving the social and political problems of post-colonial Sri Lanka (Woost 1993, Hennayake 2006). Sarvodaya's philosophy maintained that a *dharmista* society was a peaceful and prosperous one and therefore emphasised that spiritual development was a critical first step in achieving social and economic development and ending conflict. As mentioned in the last chapter, this assessment was based on a somewhat idealised notion of Sri Lanka's pre-colonial past (Gombrich & Obeyesekere 1990). Sarvodaya's model of transformation addressed three complementary areas – consciousness ('transformation of human consciousness through spiritual, moral and cultural awakening'), economics ('transformation of...society through the creation of a[n]...economic system that creates sustainable village economies') and power ('transformation of the political system to establish community self governance or *gram swaraj*, participatory democracy and good governance through political and legal empowerment') (Sarvodaya 2005).

Influence and patronage: relations with the state and domestic political actors

From the early 1960s, Sarvodaya forged political relationships with local and central government, which brought both tensions and opportunities. As early as 1961, the Department of Land Development became interested in Sarvodaya's *shramadana* methods, believing that the approach could be used as a means of utilising the approximately three million rural workers who were unemployed or under-employed (Liyanage 1988). In 1962, Sarvodaya and the Departments of Land, Education and Agriculture jointly formed the 'Freedom from Hunger Campaign', which worked to promote *shramadana* across rural areas and to improve the yields of the national paddy harvest.⁸⁷

This process of establishing the organisation as a nationally recognised body was largely facilitated by Sarvodaya's inspirational founder, Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, who was able to meet and forge close relationships with leading political figures (Liyanage 1988) (see Box 1). These connections would prove extremely important for building the kinds of ties that allowed Sarvodaya to scale up its development activities in the 1960s and 70s. By 1971, the Movement was conducting *shramadana* and village awakening programmes in four hundred villages, operated around four hundred pre-schools and had developed ambitious plans to expand their work into one thousand villages over a period of five years (Bond 2003, 23).

Box 1 – Biography of Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne

Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne began his working life as a school teacher at Nalanda College in Colombo. He founded a Social Service League at the school in 1958 and began taking students to conduct *Shramadana* work at a Rodiya (lower caste) village called Kantoluwa. These Shramadana camps were repeated and in 1960, he founded the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement. As the organisation grew in the 1960s and 1970s, Ariyaratne's work received international attention and he was awarded a series of international awards including the Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership from the Philippines (1969), the King Baudouin Award for International Development from Belgium (1982), the Niwano Peace Prize from Japan (1992), and the Mahatma Gandhi Peace Prize from the Government of India (1996), as well as being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2005.

⁸⁷ See Ramon Magsaysay Award for Community Leadership (1969) and Karalliyadde (2003).

As his international reputation grew, Dr. Ariyaratne increasingly focused on delivering lectures abroad designed to promote Sarvodaya's ideas and vision (and the goal of global awakening or *vishvodaya*). By the 1980s, the day-to-day running of the organisation was increasingly entrusted to the field operations manager, Harsha Kumara Navaratne, who left the organisation in the early 1990s, and later went on to form the Sewalanka Foundation. Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne handed over the leadership of Sarvodaya to his son, Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne in July 1999. Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne maintained mixed relationships with government representatives and institutions. While Sarvodaya came under sustained attack from Premadasa's government in the early 1990s, Ariyaratne later served on the Sri Lankan Government's Human Rights Commission, and in 2007 was awarded the recognised as *Srilankabhimanya* (pride of Sri Lanka), Sri Lanka's highest civilian honour.

While establishing ties with central government was important for getting things done in Sri Lanka's highly centralised and clientalistic political structure, engaging with the political elite also risked damaging Sarvodaya's reputation as a spiritually motivated organisation promoting alternatives to the existing political system. Sarvodaya's expansion and collaboration with local government also meant that the organisation increasingly impinged upon local political interests. Sarvodaya's expansion, and in particular, its pre-school system, was seen by several MPs as a threat to their channels of political patronage, causing a degree of latent hostility in several constituencies where Sarvodaya worked (Liyanage 1988, 175). This hostility first manifested itself in a response from central government in 1974, when Felix Bandaranaike, the powerful Minister of Justice, launched an attack on Sarvodaya. Bandaranaike demanded that Sarvodaya stop working in his Dompe constituency, threatening to denounce the organisation in public. When Ariyaratne refused, Bandaranaike launched an investigation into the organisation, on the basis of spurious claims of corruption. Bandaranaike issued a government circular containing a number of allegations about Sarvodaya and Dr. Ariyaratne, which were published in a popular Sinhala daily newspaper (Liyanage 1988).

In 1977, Sarvodaya began its fastest phase of expansion as the new UNP government began to collaborate with the organisation in its development programmes. Sarvodaya was impressed by the new President J.R. Jayawardene's commitment to restoring a *dharmistha* society, whilst Jayawardene was keen to bolster these claims through partnership with Sarvodaya (Bond 2004, 71). Ariyaratne saw working with the government as a means of

boosting recognition of Sarvodaya's philosophy and strategy. In a speech delivered in 1978, he stated that '[t]he active participation of two Prime Ministers and the first elected Executive President...in important Sarvodaya events has further established the *bona fides* of the Movement in the minds of the people' (Ariyaratne 1981, 76 cited in Bond 2004, 72). While this alliance provided Sarvodaya with the opportunity to expand its work and spread its message, it also risked associating the Movement with the existing political system that Sarvodaya sought to transform radically (Bond 2004, 73). At this stage, Ariyaratne was confident that Sarvodaya's reputation would be enhanced by this closer relationship. As Ariyaratne argued in a pamphlet written in 1982:

If a people's movement, because of its integrity and record of service and its adherence to a code of ethics approved by the people can command the respect of the government, such a movement can undoubtedly influence the government to bring about accelerated social change, non-violently. Our relationship with the present government is determined by this principle (Ariyaratne 1982, 10 cited in Bond 2004, 73).

Ariyaratne's decision to partner with government was dependent upon the belief that Sarvodaya was capable of influencing the state by demonstrating the effectiveness of its alternative model of politics and development. This strategy also assumed that such a partnership would allow Sarvodaya's approach to become a generally accepted model for political action in the Sri Lankan context. The patrimonial nature of Sri Lankan society encouraged NGOs to utilise partnerships with the state as a means of generating popular support or cognitive legitimacy.

This brief analysis of Sarvodaya's relations during the early years of its organisational development has provided a useful account of how NGOs generate legitimacy, underlining some of the tensions and trade-offs inherent in these processes. As Sarvodaya grew in size and influence, it posed more of a threat to existing power-holders, bringing its identity as a largely apolitical and spiritually-motivated social movement under greater scrutiny. Felix Bandaranaike's threat to publicly expose the alleged abuses of Sarvodaya highlights both the centralised and patrimonial character of Sri Lanka's political system and the powerful role performed by the government-controlled media in shaping processes of NGO legitimisation. Sarvodaya's response was also revealing. Ariyaratne took a principled stand and refused to stop work in Bandaranaike's Dompe constituency, maintaining a commitment to the propriety and effectiveness of their approach. By rejecting a more

pragmatic and risk-averse approach of abandoning their work in Dompe, Sarvodaya was able to publicly assert the consistency of its ideological and spiritual motivations, illustrating the organisation's commitment to an 'active' rather than a 'passive' strategy of legitimation and their concern with moral forms of legitimacy (Suchman 1995). As Bryant (2005, 5) has argued, NGOs concerned with generating moral capital often persist in criticising state policy 'even if that meant that it suffered intense political heat in return'.

The Dompe incident also illustrates the way in which NGO legitimacy can be closely bound up with judgements about leaders, and how critiques of NGOs can exploit tensions emerging from their simultaneous claims to be motivated by moral and political concerns. The attack on Ariyaratne focused on his personal character and motivations, highlighting the extent to which organisations' reputation were forged in relation to judgements of leaders and the double-edge quality of 'dispositional legitimacy' provided by a high-profile leader.

The incident's resolution points to the significance of Sarvodaya's political relationships both locally and at the centre. Bandaranaike's attack was not universally supported by MPs with many 'cold-shouldering' Bandaranaike's 'war' against Sarvodaya (Liyanage 1988, 183). Eventually, the Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike stepped in, stating that Sarvodaya was not a subversive movement and that it should be cleared of all allegations. Liyanage (1988, 183) speculates that this intervention was critical to the survival of the organisation: 'If not for her brave step Sarvodaya would have been 'killed' long ago and Ariyaratne would be enjoying a comfortable job in an international agency'. Although Sarvodaya had succeeded in building a degree of '*bona fides*' with the state and the general public in its first twenty years, it was still vulnerable to sporadic attack from critical actors in the political arena.

The case has also highlighted the fact that crises of legitimacy often occur during moments of significant political change, and particularly during moments of struggle between nationalistic and liberal modes of politics. Just as the crisis of NGO legitimacy observed in 2006 and 2007 was linked to an abrupt shift in the political climate, the tensions faced by Sarvodaya after 1977 were connected to the significant constitutional and policy changes that followed the election of the UNP government. During both periods, NGO legitimacy was affected by a sharp shift in the political and moral climate, which forced NGOs to re-negotiate their roles and relationships with the state.

Expansion and professionalisation: relations with donors

Sarvodaya's relations with donors have been a dominant theme of the secondary literature relating to the organisation (Perera 1997, Zadek & Szabo 1994, Smillie 1995). Sarvodaya first received foreign funds in 1972 with a grant of Rs. 250,000 and by 1980 was receiving an annual income of Rs. 30 million (Liyanage 1988). These funds allowed the organisation to increase the number of villages they worked in from 1,000 in 1972 to nearly 2,000 by 1977 (Ratnapala 1978, 483), and played a key part in facilitating Sarvodaya's vision of actualising their vision of *gram swaraj* and generating a critical mass of popular support for their wider moral, social and political vision.⁸⁸ Sarvodaya quickly became an asset for its donor partners, particularly those who were interested in pursuing alternative models of development.⁸⁹ NOVIB showcased Sarvodaya and used the organisation as part of its own efforts to generate funding (Bond 2004, 24).

The tensions for organisational identity presented by scaling up have been a persistent theme in the NGO literature (Atack 1999, Korten 1990). Korten has presented this crisis of identity as an integral problem facing all NGOs:

Dealing with growth is more complex for a VO [voluntary organisation] than for a business organization, in part because of the difficulty faced in managing the values consensus that defines its distinctive nature. That difficulty increases geometrically as the organization grows. Consequently, VOs may be inherently ill-suited to large-scale program operations (Korten 1990, 104, cited in Atack 1999, 860).

Initially, Sarvodaya's donors gave the organisation greater leeway in developing their own strategies and models of development (Bond 2004, Zadek & Szabo 1994). This freedom was gradually eroded, however, and by 1986, its donors formed a consortium to regularise funding and streamline monitoring processes (Perera 1997). The consortium made three principal demands on Sarvodaya: that they separate the 'movement' aspects from the 'organisation' aspects (reducing Sarvodaya's focus on a 'sense of religion' and tendency towards getting involved in politics), that they centralise administration and hire professional staff, and that they find ways of better quantifying their work (Bond 2004, 51). These demands saw a slight adaptation of the organisation's identity, with a move away

⁸⁸ Ratnapala (1978) adds the caveat that the organisations' programmes only existed on a permanent basis in around 300 villages.

⁸⁹ Interview with INGO representative, Colombo, 22nd November 2006.

from the organisation's core values embedded in Buddhism and Gandhianism towards the 'principles of service delivery' (Zadek & Szabo 1994).⁹⁰ Ariyaratne himself admitted that, in its relations with the consortium, Sarvodaya had 'traded inner vitality for financial security' (Ariyaratne cited in Bond, 2004, 54-5). Perera (1997, 877) has argued that the unequal power relations that existed between Sarvodaya and its donor partners lent a degree of inevitability to these developments:

NGOs must recognise that they work with donors and they enter into a power relationship in which they are subordinate. They cannot expect to influence donor behaviour. The temptation for donors not to throw their weight around is almost impossible to resist.

Zadek & Szabo (1994, 26) have asserted that donors failed to recognise the intricate relationship between organisational values and structure, and that, by asking Sarvodaya to become more professionalised, they were destroying something less tangible. Growing professionalisation caused tensions for the organisation's moral and cognitive legitimacy, providing support to claims from Sarvodaya's critics, such as Susantha Goonatilake (2006) that its spiritual image was simply a front to mask its corrupt and self-serving interests. As was the case in the Felix Bandaranaike case mentioned above, these attacks were often articulated through dispositional attacks centred on the organisation's leader (see Goonatilake 2006, chapter 1).

Relations with Buddhist clergy

Re-establishing the clergy's role in education and village life formed an integral part of Sarvodaya's efforts to rebuild traditional *dharmistha* society, and Sarvodaya developed strong links with the Buddhist clergy from the outset. In particular, Sarvodaya sought to promote what they perceived to be the monks' traditional, more socially active role, which had roots in a semi-mythical pre-colonial past (Macy 1985). Sarvodaya's links with the clergy also had pragmatic dimensions: its expansion from a small voluntary organisation was facilitated by its co-operation with the Buddhist clergy (Liyanage 1988). On the one hand, these links helped to cement the organisation's moral and cognitive legitimacy, emphasising its spiritual approach whilst linking its aims 'both with larger belief systems and with the experienced reality of the audience's daily life' (Suchman 1995, 582). These

⁹⁰ As Kantowsky (1980) has argued, the bureaucratisation of Sarvodaya, unusually for a southern NGO, was not only driven by the organisation's engagement with international donors but also by its engagement with the state.

links also helped to produce the *Sarvodaya Sangha Samanelya* (Sarvodaya Monk Front), which provided protection from physical attacks during the first JVP uprising (Hughes 1987). On the other hand, just as building alliances with government institutions generated friction, Sarvodaya's active engagement with the Buddhist clergy fuelled opposition towards the organisation. This resistance came both from more conservative elements of the Sangha (Hughes 1987) and amongst members of the educated elite and members of groups such as the JVP, who saw Sarvodaya's links to the clergy as socially conservative and a sign of the organisation's failure to face the realities of economic exploitation.⁹¹ As will become evident in the next section, Sarvodaya's use of Buddhist cultural markers also proved problematic as the organisation became involved in efforts to address the conflict between the LTTE and the GoSL in the 1980s.

Building popular legitimacy? Relations with communities

It is difficult to ascertain the degree of legitimacy that Sarvodaya enjoyed at the community level without detailed investigation into their activities or a grass-roots survey of popular opinion. The secondary literature provides some clues, however, and authors such as Ratnapala (1978) and Goonatilake (2006) have questioned Sarvodaya's capacity to sustain enduring links with communities. Similarly, a number of donor assessments of the organisation conducted in the 1980s and 1990s found that Sarvodaya's presence and effectiveness as a community development organisation had been overstated.⁹²

Whilst this thesis does not aim to provide a comprehensive assessment of these claims, it is important to emphasise that the notion that Sarvodaya was capable of mobilising popular support or enjoying a degree of popular legitimacy was central to its own narrative of legitimisation. Sarvodaya was spiritual movement that sought 'active legitimacy'. The organisation's approach relied on a capacity to mobilise communities, both as a means of achieving their developmental goals, and to succeed politically. Sarvodaya's approach to development work involved the active participation of community members; the ethos of shared work or *shramadana* is perhaps best captured in the slogan 'we build the road, the road builds us'. As a result, for Sarvodaya to do its work effectively, it needed to generate a degree of legitimacy with the populations it engaged with. Similarly, as will be explored

⁹¹ Interview with senior Sarvodaya staff member, Moratuwa, 24th February 2007.

⁹² Interview with INGO representative, Colombo, 22nd November 2006.

below in greater detail, Sarvodaya's political work relied on demonstrating a critical mass of popular opinion to government.

Although the large attendances at Sarvodaya's peace meditations and public rallies seem to suggest widespread support for the organisation and its political objectives, there may equally be a gap between communities' motivations for supporting Sarvodaya, and the way in which this support is presented by the organisation. As one interviewee remarked, support for Sarvodaya can be seen as a religious rather than a political form of mobilisation.⁹³ In this way, Sarvodaya may be supported because it taps into popular religious sentiments, rather than because it is seen as an effective vehicle for social and political transformation. It is interesting to explore the way in which these public demonstrations of '*bona fides*' are utilised in narratives of legitimisation. As will be explored in chapter six, Sarvodaya staff often claimed that their robust community relations protected them from criticisms meted out to other NGOs.

Phase two: 1983 – present day: growing involvement in conflict, peacebuilding and politics

Conflict and emerging tensions in Sarvodaya's relations with other actors

Sarvodaya's relations with the government were heavily affected by the growing conflict between the state and both Sinhalese youth in the South, and Tamil rebels in the North. As the governing UNP adopted an increasingly violent response to the growing terrorist threat posed by the LTTE in the North after 1983, and the JVP-led uprisings in the South during the late 1980s, Sarvodaya found it more difficult to collaborate with the government.

Ariyaratne's disillusionment with Jayawardene prompted a radicalisation of Sarvodaya's political strategy (Bond 2004, 77).⁹⁴ Ariyaratne's views were expressed through his treatise *The Power Pyramid and the Dharmic Cycle*, which displayed partial solidarity with the revolutionary forces at work in the North and South, arguing that he sympathised with their struggle against what he termed the government's institutionalised violence (Bond 2004).

⁹³ Interview with NGO analyst, Colombo, 15th March 2007.

⁹⁴ This disillusionment was also partly motivated by Ariyaratne's growing realisation that the government's neo-liberal economic reforms were incompatible with Sarvodaya's approach to development (Bond 2004, 50).

When Premadasa stood for President in 1988 on a populist ticket, there was hope that the increasingly hostile relations between government and Sarvodaya could be repaired since he had worked closely with Ariyaratne, and had been a keen supporter of Sarvodaya when he was Prime Minister. Premadasa invited Ariyaratne to join his campaign but when Ariyaratne refused, Premadasa 'interpreted Ariyaratne's refusal as opposition to his campaign and began to view Ariyaratne and his Movement with suspicion' (Bond 2004, 79). Premadasa and Ariyaratne both drew support from the same Sinhalese rural constituencies, and, as a result, Premadasa came to see Ariyaratne as a political rival (Hennayake, 2006, 100).

Premadasa reacted by appointing the Presidential Commission of Inquiry in Respect of Non-governmental Organisations in 1990 which, although officially appointed to investigate the activities of all NGOs in Sri Lanka, was widely perceived as a more singular attack on Sarvodaya (Neff 1992, 30). The investigation into Sarvodaya, although structured around the Presidential Commission, gained much of its momentum from the government controlled press, which regularly reported (and at times deliberately misreported) allegations about Sarvodaya made in the hearings. The press also contributed to the perceived threat of Ariyaratne by marking him out as a potential Presidential candidate (Perera, Marasinghe & Jayasekera 1992, Neff 1991). Sarvodaya responded by taking its message to the public via a stream of rallies and demonstrations. The *denouement* of this rising tension was averted by the assassination of President Premadasa in 1993. The new President Wijetunge ended the commission and allowed Sarvodaya to resume its activities without obstruction.

Premadasa's campaign against Sarvodaya shared several common features with the attack from Felix Banadaranaike described above. Sarvodaya was saved again by connections to the political elite; this time through personal links with President Wijetunge that rescued the organisation from Premadasa's Commission.⁹⁵ Media attacks against Sarvodaya played on the tensions between its increasing financial and political clout, and its spiritual identity, exploiting the perennial tension between the 'sacred' character of NGOs' moral claims and the 'profane' or worldly aspects of their work that were evident in their relations with donors (see Hopgood 2008). As with the previous period, these attacks often focussed on

⁹⁵ According to one interviewee, Sarvodaya's links with donors also provided Ariyaratne with physical protection against the onslaught from President Premadasa during the early 1990s (interview with representative of INGO donor, Colombo, 22nd November 2006).

Dr. Ariyaratne and undermined the organisation's legitimacy by bringing his motivations into question. Bond (2004, 82) describes the attacks during this period:

*The government-controlled media attempted to repudiate Ariyaratne's image as a Buddhist reformer who followed Gandhi and dharma and eschewed material wealth. Front page stories in the government newspapers portrayed Ariyaratne as a false guru who used the Dharma only to enrich himself....A particularly malicious story compared Ariyaratne to another Sri Lankan man who had fraudulently posed as a guru in England...Ariyaratne had used the most sacred tenets of Eastern spirituality to pile up fortunes.*⁹⁶

The political polarisation that accompanied growing conflict in Sri Lanka posed additional risks for Sarvodaya's legitimacy. At the time of the first JVP uprising in 1970s, Sarvodaya first experienced problems, when a political opponent claimed that Sarvodaya was providing support to terrorists (Liyanage 1988, 176). At this time, however, the claim that Ariyaratne was a leader of the 'terrorist' movement and that he should be taken into custody was rejected by other officials who argued that, from their experience, Sarvodaya had in fact protected several villages from the insurgency (Liyanage 1988).

While nationalists accused Sarvodaya and other NGOs of supporting or sympathising with terrorists in the 1980s and 90s⁹⁷, these accusations failed to ring true because of Sarvodaya's strong appeal to Buddhist nationalist values and ideals. In this way, Sarvodaya's pursuit of moral and cognitive forms of legitimacy proved useful in protecting the organisation from these kinds of accusations and labelling. As Suchman (1995, 579) has argued, 'in times of adversity, widespread belief in an organization's good character may dampen the delegitimizing effects of isolated failures, miscues and reversals'. Although Sarvodaya's approach bolstered support from the Sinhala population, it arguably damaged relations with Tamil political groups. Sarvodaya was treated with suspicion by many Tamil political groups, and death threats towards Sarvodaya staff were made by militants towards Sarvodaya staff in Jaffna in 1981 and 2007.⁹⁸

By 1993, donors had cut 85% of the organisation's external funding, leading to a large reduction in district-level staff (Sarvodaya no date). The decision to cut funding was based

⁹⁶ See also, for example, TamilNet (1998): 'His harsher critics say he is a manipulative charlatan keen on amassing political power and wealth via the expansion of his NGO'.

⁹⁷ Interview with NGO analyst, Colombo, 26th March 2007.

⁹⁸ Interview with Sarvodaya staff member, Moratuwa, 24th February 2007.

on assessments of the organisation's work in target villages and growing doubts about Sarvodaya's effectiveness as a development organisation.⁹⁹ Donors' disenchantment with Sarvodaya also stemmed from the organisation's deteriorating relations with the state, which led donors to question the extent to which it could continue to play a central role in influencing social development in Sri Lanka.¹⁰⁰

The cuts in donor funding were partially offset by the establishment of the Sarvodaya Economic Enterprise Development Services (SEEDS) in 1987. The organisation was extremely successful and in 2005/6 had a loan portfolio of around Rs. 3 billion (\$30million), an annual income of approximately Rs. 530 million (approximately \$5 million) (SEEDS 2006), which was greater than Sarvodaya's average annual income from foreign donors.

Sarvodaya's politics and peacebuilding strategy after 1983

After 1983, Sarvodaya's legitimacy became increasingly intertwined with the organisation's engagements with electoral politics (both real and perceived), and its attempts to address national conflict. As well as affecting Sarvodaya's relations with other actors, the changing political situation also had profound changes on the organisation's political identity. While Sarvodaya had prioritised the economic and consciousness strands in the period up to 1983, after this point it began to address the conflict directly and focus on the aspects of its work relating to issues of power.¹⁰¹

Three principal factors motivated Sarvodaya's growing engagement with politics. First, Ariyaratne felt that the growing violence in Sri Lanka necessitated a more urgent and forthright approach (Bond 2004, 87). Second, as Bond (2004) has argued, Ariyaratne was increasingly convinced that the existing political system in Sri Lanka was on the verge of collapse, and that this implosion would provide the opportunity for the realisation of Sarvodaya's spiritual and political goals. Third, Ariyaratne's ever more forthright attempts to harness 'people power' via public rallies and speeches served as a last ditch response to growing opposition from the state. In the face of growing negative allegations against the organisation, Bond (2004, 83) describes how Ariyaratne confronted government allegations head on, through a series of rallies and speeches in villages across the country:

⁹⁹ Interview with representative of INGO funding agency, Colombo, 22nd November 2006.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ Interview with senior Sarvodaya representative, Moratuwa, February 14th 2007.

It was not unusual for him to appear at five or six rallies per day where he delivered fiery attacks on the government and set out Sarvodaya's alternative version of social revolution. Thousands of rural supporters turned out to hear Ariyaratne charge that the government had lost its moral legitimacy to rule and had no grounds to attack the Sarvodaya movement.

These forays into the political arena encouraged the press to speculate about Ariyaratne's potential role as a consensus Presidential candidate, and led the claims from the government that Sarvodaya was exerting an illegitimate influence on politics (Bond 2004, 84, 89). Sarvodaya's direct interventions into party politics during this period demonstrated a much greater readiness to confront the political system in public than in the pre-1983 period. They can be contrasted, for example, with Dr. Ariyaratne's behaviour during the 1977 general elections. Liyanage (1998, 183) has argued that at this time Ariyaratne was in a position to mobilise thousands of his followers against the politicians who were hostile to Sarvodaya, but that he 'strictly adhered to the policy of not engaging in power politics and remained silent, thus allowing the people to give their verdict' (Liyanage 1988, 183).

Ariyaratne utilised various opportunities to promote publicly Sarvodaya's message during this period. The most famous incident was a demonstration in 1992 against the opening of a tourist hotel in Kandalama near Dambulla, which the government had supported (Bond 2004, Hennayake 2005). Interestingly, this incident saw Sarvodaya 'jockeying to be seen as the true supporters of Buddhism' not only with government, but also with the local temple which had joined the protest (Bond 2004, 84-85). In response, the government media carried a story that played on a photograph of some Catholic nuns carrying a cross in front of the famous Dambulla cave temples. Posters were also displayed which read 'Sarvodaya profiteering businessman (*mudalalis*) Ariyaratne and the rogue monk (*hora sangeya*) Sumangala took the cross to Dambulla' (Bond 2004).¹⁰² This incident illustrates the tendency for critiques of NGOs to conflate criticisms of both the moral and the political dimensions of their work.

As an organisation with national coverage and a broad popular appeal, Sarvodaya felt it was well placed to tackle issues relating to the conflict.¹⁰³ Sarvodaya launched a series of

¹⁰² This characterisation was drawing on another prominent strain in anti-NGO discourse: the notion that NGOs were Christian groups bent on conversion.

¹⁰³ Interview with senior Sarvodaya staff member, Moratuwa, February 14th 2007.

peace-related campaigns in the 1980s. In 1983 they organised a conference drawing 2,000 civil and religious leaders, and drew up a *Declaration for National Peace and Harmony*, which outlined Sarvodaya's position on peace and development. In 1987, they launched a *People's Peace Offensive*, a community-based project designed to address the military intervention of the IPKF, by forming specialist peace groups and using 'active intervention by organized groups of peace loving people...confronting violence with non-violence' (Ariyaratne cited by Bond 2004, 35). These early peacebuilding efforts were backed by donors such as NOVIB and Helvetas who saw Sarvodaya as the only organisation with a network sufficient to handle this level of relief work (Bond 2004, 31).

Ariyaratne took a more active role during the peace process of 1994, when he travelled to Jaffna and offered his services as a mediator between the government and the LTTE. In 1997, he visited Jaffna again as a member of the government's Human Rights Commission. Ariyaratne's association with the government during this period caused some familiar tensions for Sarvodaya's reputation, this time damaging the organisation's standing amongst communities and NGOs in Jaffna. Ariyaratne was criticised for his association with the Presidential Board of Investigation, which many argued grossly underestimated the number of people who had 'disappeared' in the North and East in 1998 (TamilNet 1998). Local NGOs also opposed Ariyaratne because of his links to the government, feeling that the state was using Sarvodaya as a means of reducing the influence of local NGOs (TamilNet 1998a).

Sarvodaya's peacebuilding strategy was closely linked to its broader political objectives. Sarvodaya was not simply mobilising supporters as part of a generalised attempt to illustrate popular support for peace; their meditations and rallies were designed to illustrate Sarvodaya's readiness to foster a much wider political transformation in Sri Lanka. During one march, for example, Ariyaratne proclaimed 'Let it be known to those who bear arms that there are about two million members in Sarvodaya who are prepared to brave death anywhere and anytime' (cited in Bond 2004, 34). Sarvodaya aimed to demonstrate popular support not simply for a cessation of hostilities, but for Sarvodaya's spiritual brand of politics. Peace marches aimed to 'create a critical mass of spiritual consciousness and then create conditions to sustain that level' (Ariyaratne 1985 cited in Bond 2004, 31). By generating substantial popular support, Sarvodaya was attempting to 'transfer power to the people', and challenge the structures and parties that produced violence. These two

strands were reiterated in the *People's Peace Initiative* in the mid-1990s – '1. The prerequisite for peace is the building of spiritual infrastructure: inner peace must be realized before outer peace. 2. Peace cannot be imposed from the top down, but must be founded on the people's consent, from the bottom up' (cited in Bond 2004, 39).

Sarvodaya's approach to peacebuilding, therefore, was intimately bound up with its political strategy, which called for the replacement of the existing party political system with a system of consensus politics based on people's wishes (Bond 2004, 40).

These features of Sarvodaya's engagement in politics and peacebuilding had important implications for the organisation's legitimacy, creating a number of tensions, which will be examined in more detail in chapter six. First, as Sarvodaya's attempts to transform the existing political system became more forthright, they increasingly encroached on the interests of powerholders, who in turn sought both to restrict their activities and to discredit them. Second, Sarvodaya's attempts to address the conflict between the GoSL and LTTE were weakened by their reliance on Sinhala Buddhist discourse and symbolism. Third, as will be explored in greater depth in chapter six, despite the fact that Sarvodaya's peacebuilding strategy involved a number of radical political proposals (such as the organisation's commitment to *gram swaraj* or village republics), the spiritual aspects of prompted accusations from other NGOs that its approach was too abstract and amorphous to bring about tangible political change.

1.2 Foundation for Co-Existence (FCE)¹⁰⁴

FCE is a relatively new organisation and lacks the rich history of Sarvodaya. As a result, this case study takes a different form from the last one. The Sarvodaya case study demonstrated how relations between NGOs and various international and domestic actors ebbed and flowed over decades, and how these shifting relations shaped Sarvodaya's legitimacy and political identity. This case study explores the mechanisms with which FCE generated legitimacy over a much shorter period. Many of the most serious blows to FCE's reputation came in the period of intensified political opposition towards NGOs after 2005, a period explored in greater depth in chapter six. The purpose of this section, therefore, will be to provide a brief background to the organisation, to present the key mechanisms, discourses and boundaries that shaped the organisation's legitimation and to highlight some emerging tensions in FCE's identity that shaped its experience after 2005.

¹⁰⁴ This section draws on findings from Goodhand & Walton (2007).

The relative age of the two case study organisations has implications for legitimacy. While FCE still had to cement general acceptance of its validity as a practitioner in the field of peacebuilding and conflict resolution work, Sarvodaya had generated a clear set of expectations about what it stood for and its role, which was well understood internally, and to some extent by the public at large. Although this embeddedness provided a degree of cognitive legitimacy which helped to protect the organisation from critics' attacks, as has been suggested above and will be seen in chapter six, these qualities also limited the extent to which Sarvodaya could respond to the legitimacy crisis.

Background and Early Organisational Development

The Foundation for Co-existence (FCE) was established in 2003 with the aim of 'building coexistence and human security holistically by changing attitudes, advocating for changes in institutions and policy, and resolving and preventing conflict on the ground' (FCE no date). FCE initially aimed to tackle two specific issues: overcoming the exclusion of key stakeholders in the peace process (especially Muslims), and tackling instability and human insecurity in the East. From this relatively tight regional and operational focus, FCE quickly added to its portfolio of projects, initiating policy work aimed at addressing issues such as language rights and facilitating academic analysis of the peace process.¹⁰⁵

The organisation was founded by Dr. Kumar Rupesinghe, an influential Sri Lankan political activist who had dual Sri Lankan-Norwegian citizenship and had worked as the head of International Alert (IA), a prominent international conflict resolution NGO. FCE's rapid emergence as one of the most prominent peacebuilding organisations in Sri Lanka was based on Rupesinghe's close links with both the Norwegian and the Sri Lankan political elite and, in particular, his relationship with Erik Solheim, who was a chief facilitator of the Sri Lankan peace process. The Norwegian government's decision to fund FCE was based primarily on the notion that Dr. Rupesinghe could influence the Sinhalese political arena. As a senior Ministry representative stated in an interview in 2007:

'The personality of Kumar was the starting point [in the decision to fund FCE]. He is a very rare bird in Sri Lanka....true, he has a lot of enemies but they are one of the few thinking

¹⁰⁵ One of the primary outputs of these efforts was the two volume book 'Negotiating Peace in Sri Lanka' (Rupesinghe 2006).

*NGOs with real power...they are thinking like Western NGOs but at the same time trying to influence politics’.*¹⁰⁶

FCE’s core programme, the human security programme, focused on developing a system in the East that could identify and monitor conflicts at the local level, which fed into FCE’s own early warning mechanism. Early warning interventions took the form of track two negotiations, direct mediation between communities (or between communities and government), and community capacity building interventions. FCE’s role in this work was based on three capacities: the organisation’s dense network of contacts on the ground in the East, an information centre in Colombo, which was capable of processing and presenting information gathered from the field, and its leader, Dr. Kumar Rupesinghe’s own personal links with key political figures both in Sri Lanka and internationally (see Box 2). These capacities allowed FCE both to provide key actors (such as politicians and INGO, donor and diplomatic representatives) with instant information about local-level security issues in the East, and to enable this information to feed quickly into the decision-making processes of these actors.¹⁰⁷



¹⁰⁶ Telephone interview with senior Norwegian Foreign Ministry representative, 14th June 2007.

¹⁰⁷ This information was delivered via daily situation reports and a text messaging service.

Figure 5: Donor and INGO representatives attend an FCE Monthly Human Security Briefing in Colombo (Photo: FCE)

FCE's comparative advantage over other organisations engaged in human security monitoring and mediation work was the speed of their information generation (on a daily rather than weekly or monthly basis), and their regional expertise and focus on the East (Goodhand & Walton 2007). FCE was also one of the few organisations in Sri Lanka with an early response function.

Box 2 – Biography of Dr. Kumar Rupesinghe

Dr. Kumar Rupesinghe was the leader of the Janavegaya Movement, a social movement which operated in Sri Lanka between 1973 and 1977. Operating within the SLFP, Janavegaya established two weekly newspapers (one in Sinhala and one in Tamil) and aimed to build up a political base among radical youth across Sri Lanka (Balakrishnan 1975). This movement was influential, enjoying close links with the then Prime Minister Sirimavo Bandaranaike (Dr. Rupesinghe was married to the Prime Minister's daughter, Sunethra Bandaranaike), and seen by many as capable of influencing the socio-economic policy of the government (Balakrishnan 1975).

The movement broke down with the landslide victory of the rival UNP at the Parliamentary election of 1977. Dr. Rupesinghe took up a post as a lecturer in the University of Peradeniya before moving to Norway in 1982 to begin work as Deputy Director for the Programme on Ethnic Conflict and Conflict Resolution, International Peace Research Institute, Oslo (PRIO). He served as Co-ordinator to the Programme on Governance and Conflict Resolution at the United Nations University, Tokyo, where he edited two volumes and commissioned several monographs on identity conflict. He was also Chair of the Commission on Internal Conflicts of the International Peace Research Association (IPRA), where he published four volumes on 'Early Warning and Conflict Resolution'. He also chaired HURIDOCS (Human Rights Documentation Systems Exchange International) and the programme on Culture and Ethnicity of the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan.

Dr. Rupesinghe joined the board of International Alert (IA), a pioneering conflict resolution NGO based in London, during this period, and in 1992 was appointed Secretary General of IA. Under his leadership, funding increased six-fold and the organisation expanded rapidly into new operational areas including the former Soviet Union and Southern and Western

Africa. IA also pursued innovative approaches to conflict resolution, which included direct engagements with political actors in Sierra Leone. IA's work at this time was controversial. An evaluation of the organisation, published by the Christian Michelsen Institute in 1997, praised IA for raising the profile of conflict resolution issues and for contributing to the development of local peace constituencies, but criticised it for lacking a 'clear and transparent strategy'. It advised that IA should focus on building peace constituencies and move away from its direct mediation role (Sorbo et al 1997). The expansionary approach pursued by Rupesinghe at IA, which saw the organisation grow but prompted a loss of coherence, was to some extent repeated in the case of FCE.

After leaving IA in 1998, Dr. Rupesinghe took on a variety of positions including serving as a Commissioner at the State of the World Forum and co-founding the Forum on Early Warning and Early Response (FEWER), an international NGO formed in response to the Rwandan genocide, which aimed to promote early warning mechanisms. He returned to Sri Lanka permanently in 2001. In 2002, he founded both FCE and the National Anti War Front (NAWF), a network which aimed to create a broad-based people's movement for peace and reconciliation, with support from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Because of his close personal links to the political elite in Sri Lanka and to the Norwegian government, Dr. Rupesinghe was a controversial and divisive figure within the Sri Lankan NGO sector as well as in the broader political arena in Sri Lanka.

Of all the peacebuilding organisations working in Sri Lanka, FCE went to the greatest lengths to operationalise a comprehensive approach to conflict transformation, which attempted to tackle conflict through a simultaneous focus on the top leadership (track one), middle-range leadership (track two), and grassroots leadership (track three) (Rupesinghe 2004).¹⁰⁸ This approach combines two key peacebuilding strategies identified by Mary Anderson in the Reflecting on Peace Practice Programme: firstly the 'more people' approach which assumed that you needed to engage a large number of people to build peace, and secondly the 'important people' approach, which stresses the need to get key political actors together to build peace. In its early years, FCE was also engaged in a broader range of peacebuilding related activities than any other specialist peacebuilding organisation. As well as monitoring human security, developing an early warning system

¹⁰⁸ This approach draws heavily on the work of John Paul Lederach and his peacebuilding triangle (see Rupesinghe 2004).

and playing a rapid response role, FCE conducted research, attempted to build the capacity of community organisations, and undertook peace education programmes at the grass-roots level.

By 2005, FCE had rapidly established itself as one of the leading peacebuilding specialists in Sri Lanka, receiving over \$1 million from donors in the 2004/5 financial year (FCE 2005). The majority of this funding came from governmental donors including the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the UK Embassy. FCE's involvement in the tsunami response led to a rapid expansion of the organisation in terms of staff numbers, geographical focus and the range of activities it was engaged in. In addition to its immediate relief work in the first few months after the tsunami, FCE began projects focusing on psychosocial health, water and sanitation, permanent housing and temple reconstruction. In 2006, four new offices were opened in Mannar, Puttalam, Nuwara Eliya, and the Colombo slums, which were primarily focused on development work. Funding for tsunami reconstruction work came to constitute a large part of FCE's income, which carried on for several years after the tsunami. In 2007, over 50% of FCE's funds were devoted to tsunami-related programmes.¹⁰⁹ While this diversification can be seen as opportunistic, it was a rational response to the changing funding environment. After 2005, donors in Sri Lanka had shown a gradual waning of enthusiasm for peace-related initiatives, and many peacebuilding NGOs responded by diversifying their programmes and expanding their scope, both sectorally and geographically, in an attempt to ensure organisational survival.

Tensions in FCE's strategy of legitimation

While Sarvodaya's legitimacy was based upon the extent to which its work resonated with widely-held norms and ideals, FCE's legitimation was principally founded on meeting donor demands and expectations. The organisation's legitimacy was largely built on the impressions of *convinced* groups such as donors and other NGOs. In contrast to Sarvodaya's broad operational mandate, FCE was a niche organisation specialising in peacebuilding work. Its objectives related specifically to the peace process, making it difficult to justify actions that moved beyond this mandate. FCE's legitimacy was dependent upon a sense of comparative advantage over other NGOs engaged in peacebuilding work. FCE's perceived comparative advantage was based on three aspects of the organisation: first, Dr. Rupesinghe's close relationships with key political figures,

¹⁰⁹ This figure comes from data gathered at the NGO Secretariat.

second, its technical expertise in the field of conflict resolution and third, its experience of working in the East. The extent to which FCE maintained this comparative advantage was closely monitored by donors and other peacebuilding NGOs.

While FCE drew strength from its comparative advantage in certain aspects of peacebuilding work, its tight operational focus proved reputationally problematic. As will be explored in greater depth in chapter six, FCE's role as a peace specialist was undermined as it expanded and diversified its operations in the aftermath of the tsunami. These changes were scrutinised by other NGOs, who questioned the motivations for FCE's expansion and diversification, and were concerned that its actions would reflect badly on their own work.

Dr. Kumar Rupesinghe's close personal connections with key figures, both in the domestic arena (including President Rajapakse), and with key international actors such as Erik Solheim, constituted a central feature of FCE's organisational rationale and played an important role in determining its comparative advantage over other peacebuilding organisations.¹¹⁰ Access to this unique set of networks, together with Dr. Rupesinghe's high profile as one of the few vocal Sinhalese peace activists in Sri Lanka, were important features of FCE's perceived comparative advantage.¹¹¹ Dr. Rupesinghe was an 'interface expert' *par excellence*, capable of speaking both in Sinhalese vernacular language, and in the highly technocratic discourse of international peacebuilding. These features were also central to FCE's success in attracting funding: the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs' decision to fund FCE was based partly on the close personal relationship between Dr. Rupesinghe and Erik Solheim. FCE has maintained important relationships with government personnel at lower levels; several key field staff and security officers were former policemen or ex-military.

While maintaining close relationships with powerful figures helped to raise resources and provided a degree of protection from political opponents, as described in the case of

¹¹⁰ Interview with President's representative, Colombo, 6th May 2007.

¹¹¹ Unlike other peacebuilding NGOs such as INPACT, which focused on facilitating discussion between key political figures, FCE's engagement with political actors focused on outcomes. FCE's style of engagement was based primarily on personal contacts and was informal (based on one-on-one meetings), unlike organizations such as CPA or ICES, which tend to lobby and present their case through more formal channels.

Sarvodaya, this approach also carried reputational risks. First, the lack of transparency associated with this more informal approach had greater potential to alienate other stakeholders or raise suspicions about FCE's political motivations. Second, being too closely associated with one set of political actors risked damaging links with another set, and had the potential to backfire in the event of a change in government. Although FCE's dual international/domestic links were also central to the organisation's work, they also generated tensions for its organisational identity. FCE's unusually close relationships with international donors sometimes made it unclear whether FCE should be considered as an international or national NGO. In particular, the CEO's salary (which was set at an INGO level) was controversial and created reputational problems for the organisation.¹¹²

A family of organisations

FCE was closely linked to a number of other organisations, networks and campaigns initiated by Dr. Rupesinghe during the ceasefire period. FCE's national profile grew throughout this time as a consequence of Dr. Rupesinghe's leadership of the increasingly active and controversial National Anti War Front (NAWF) (see Box 2). The NAWF was formed in 2002 'as a network to fulfill a need to create and consolidate a broad based and inclusive peoples' movement for peace and reconciliation'. The Front consisted of a network of national and local NGOs and civil society organisations, but also implemented its own donor-funded projects.

The NAWF's activities became more contentious as the country returned to war after 2005. NAWF conducted several high-profile marches against the war throughout 2006. In August 2006, the NAWF conducted a 'March for Peace' in Colombo, which culminated in a Peace Rally, featuring speeches from Dr. Rupesinghe, politicians, civil society and trade union activists, and religious leaders. The meeting, however, was disrupted by Buddhist monks who opposed the peace rally. Consequently, the event received wide publicity (See TamilNet 2006). In October 2006, another march in Kandy was attacked by protesters.¹¹³ A march in protest of the killing of the Tamil National Alliance (TNA) parliamentarian, Raviraj, in November 2006, provoked more media attention, largely from nationalist elements who claimed that this constituted 'selective grief' on behalf of Kumar Rupesinghe and the

¹¹² See, for instance, Samarasinghe (2007). Details of Rupesinghe's salary were exposed during the proceedings of the Parliamentary Select Committee and these details were subsequently picked up by several newspapers. See, for example, Mahindapala (2008c).

¹¹³ Interview with FCE staff member, Colombo, 24th November 2006.

NAWF, and was evidence of a biased stance against the government. Rupesinghe's public criticism of the war led to attacks on FCE's office in Trincomalee by Sinhalese nationalists and death threats towards its staff.¹¹⁴

As will be explored in chapter six, the establishment of the NAWF was followed by the launch of several other networks and campaigns associated with Dr. Rupesinghe. The fact that judgments about FCE were closely linked to Dr. Rupesinghe meant that its legitimacy was affected by the actions of these more high-profile groups. At times, concern for FCE's reputation may have been sacrificed in favour of broader concerns about the standing of these other entities (Goodhand & Walton 2007). The legitimation or de-legitimation of FCE, therefore, is best understood by adopting a broader view that considers the legitimacy concerns relating to the family of organisations founded by Dr. Rupesinghe as a whole.

2. Contrasting Strategies of Legitimation

The two case study organisations pursued different objectives. Sarvodaya's objectives intertwined moral and political goals, which were based on their belief that development was reliant upon radical spiritual and political transformation. FCE's aims were primarily technical; they focused on monitoring and resolving local-level conflicts, and facilitating dialogue between key political players.

Since the two organisations pursued different objectives, they required legitimacy for different reasons. Sarvodaya sought 'active legitimacy' as a means of building support for its moral vision from the general population, while FCE sought 'passive legitimacy' or a more limited sense of acceptance and non-interference from domestic actors, enabling it to perform the kinds of activities envisaged by its donor partners. The threshold of legitimation for Sarvodaya was higher and more demanding than the standard sought by FCE. Sarvodaya not only required legitimacy to avoid being attacked by powerbrokers and reputation entrepreneurs, it also sought to mobilise broad constituencies both to support and promote its alternative political vision. As a consequence, the organisation didn't simply need to 'make sense', it also needed to 'have value' (Suchman 1995, 575).

The two organisations sought different *kinds* of legitimacy. Sarvodaya tended to seek moral legitimacy that reflected a 'positive normative evaluation' and cognitive legitimacy that

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

stemmed from the organisation's comprehensibility within a given social system or reflected a quality of 'taken-for-grantedness' (see Suchman 1995). These forms of legitimacy contrasted with the predominantly pragmatic legitimacy sought by FCE. Since Sarvodaya believed that social and political change stemmed from internal spiritual transformation, the moral standing of the organisation was central to its legitimacy. As Sarvodaya's aims were less tangible than those of more technical organisations such as FCE, they were less reliant upon generating 'pragmatic' legitimacy by performing specified and measurable functions on behalf of other actors.

The relative age of the two case study organisations had important implications for the kind of legitimacy they generated. Sarvodaya generated a degree of procedural legitimacy by 'embracing socially accepted techniques and procedures' (Suchman 1995, 580). While FCE was still struggling to develop its organisational identity during the fieldwork period, Sarvodaya had reached the status of a widely recognised Sri Lankan institution, with a broad and stable set of societal expectations of what the organisation did and stood for.

The argument that Sarvodaya was widely seen as a venerable Sri Lankan institution and that it was viewed in different terms from other, more liberally-oriented, NGOs is difficult to prove incontrovertibly. This claim is largely based on two sources of evidence. First, Sarvodaya was generally portrayed in the news media in favourable terms and was often cited as an example of how Sinhala Buddhist values and innovations could be utilised in the social service.¹¹⁵ These public interpretations of Sarvodaya reflect the organisation's use of nationalist discourse and the fact that its methods and approaches to development have been utilised by government agencies for many years. Second, this impression was based on the fact that, during the course of my many interviews with a wide range of local and national NGOs, Sarvodaya was largely discussed in positive terms. This argument could be bolstered by a wide-ranging survey of popular opinion in Sri Lanka.

Sarvodaya tended not to be deemed legitimate because it had achieved its stated aims (for example by bringing about an improvement in living conditions) but because of judgements about the way in which it worked; it was legitimate because its actions resonated with

¹¹⁵ See, for example, Hewagama (2002), Samaranayake (2002) and Horowpothane (2007).

popular expectations and ideals about proper societal conduct.¹¹⁶ FCE based its legitimacy on donors' assessments of its capacity to meet mutually-agreed objectives or goals. FCE's legitimacy was also based on its perceived comparative advantages over other NGOs engaged in peacebuilding work.

Sarvodaya generated cognitive legitimacy by framing its activities in terms of established belief systems. The normative and causal claims that structured its work drew on Gandhian and Buddhist philosophy and meshed seamlessly with the political climate of independence (Woost 1997, Hennayake 2006). Sarvodaya's political and ideational relevance enabled its techniques and methods of social mobilisation to become widely accepted in the Sri Lankan context, and encouraged the state to imitate their approach to development. As Suchman (1995) has argued, cognitive legitimacy of this kind takes a long time to accumulate and is difficult to achieve, but is also the most robust form of legitimacy.

The pursuit of moral legitimacy or 'moral capital' generates tensions for organisational identity (Bryant 2005).¹¹⁷ As Bryant (2005, 3) has argued, obtaining moral capital introduced 'a set of double-edged expectations of "correct" conduct'. This introduces tensions when organisations try to expand or become more influential since, as Bryant (2005, 6) has explained, 'moral capital is as much about vulnerability as it is about opportunity...being seen to be too blatant in the effort to "curry favour" might...prove counterproductive'.

The organisations' divergent legitimisation strategies involved different mechanisms for establishing legitimacy. Sarvodaya's attempts to generate popular change and its emphasis on 'people power' involved forays into the public arena. High-profile public mediations and rallies formed an important part of Sarvodaya's work, and the organisation sought media coverage to highlight these events.¹¹⁸ FCE's legitimacy was less reliant on public accounts of their work. Since its strategy was largely based on generating pragmatic legitimacy, it focused on maintaining good relationships with a number of key partners and allies. FCE's

¹¹⁶ Suchman (1995, 580) cites a useful example to help explain this distinction. A hospital is unlikely to lose legitimacy because people die, but is likely to lose legitimacy if it performs involuntary exorcisms.

¹¹⁷ Bryant (2005) argues that gaining moral capital involved developing a morally informed outlook whilst also contributing to empowerment by being connected to social realities. Sarvodaya's approach satisfies both conditions laid down by Bryant: they present their moral vision as both indispensable to society and see their work as part of a socially and politically engaged process.

¹¹⁸ Interview with senior Sarvodaya staff member 20th September 2006.

broad operational mandate produced an ambivalent public profile. Its 'back-channel' negotiation work seemed to warrant a low-profile, while its peace education and policy work provided greater justification for raising the profile of the organisation. As described above, these tensions were exacerbated by FCE's leader's concurrent role as the head of several other campaigning organisations such as the National Anti-War Front (NAWF).

The strategies of legitimation described here were not inflexible. At various points in their development, and particularly during moments of crisis, these core strategies were modified. As described above, as Sarvodaya became more reliant on funding from foreign donors it increasingly had to consider pragmatic forms of legitimacy, which caused tensions with other forms of legitimacy. Similarly, as FCE came under criticism from nationalists, it increasingly focused on winning positive public accounts of its work, and generating cognitive or normative forms of legitimacy. As will be described in chapter six, FCE attempted to make this shift by altering the discourses employed to describe its work, and forging partnerships with religious institutions.

3. Conclusions

This chapter has argued that as well as being highly context-specific, the way in which NGOs generated and maintained legitimacy was also highly specific to individual organisations. I have described how the two case study organisations generated different kinds of legitimacy in different ways, for different reasons. While FCE attempted to generate a more passive and minimalistic form of legitimacy, principally as a means of avoiding disruption of its technical aims, Sarvodaya generated legitimacy as part of its broader, more comprehensive and more radical political strategy. These divergent aims involved different mechanisms of legitimation and were reliant upon diverse sets of relationships.

The introduction to the case studies presented here has supported the central argument of the last chapter that NGO legitimacy is context-specific and that NGOs' legitimacy is shaped by the political and social characteristics of the particular country in which they operate. The case studies displayed several common features. First, the dominance of the state and its control of the media meant that both organisations found it difficult to shape other actors' impressions of them at the national level. As a result, with the exception of Sarvodaya's last ditch attempt to salvage its credibility at the time of the Presidential Commission under Premadasa, both organisations focused on generating legitimacy by

managing relationships with key audiences. Both organisations forged links with the political elite, and, in both cases, this engagement posed opportunities and risks. In the case of Sarvodaya, links with key politicians were critical for facilitating expansion, whilst in the case of FCE they were primarily valued as a means of exerting political influence.¹¹⁹ The account of Sarvodaya's organisational development illustrated how connections to the political elite were vital in protecting Sarvodaya from reputational sabotage. Chapter six will highlight similar features in the more recent experience of FCE. In both cases, NGOs' relations with political actors had negative impacts on the organisations' legitimacy.

Second, the dominant discourses of the Sri Lankan political arena influenced processes of legitimisation and de-legitimisation for both organisations. Sarvodaya's use of Sinhala nationalist symbolism and ideas served as a means of mobilising supporters whilst also insulating the organisation from political criticism. Sarvodaya's use of Gandhian and Buddhist ideas, however, made its goals difficult for donors to understand and prompted criticisms about its political methods from other NGOs, introducing tensions in its organisational identity, which will be examined in chapter six. FCE framed its work in liberal cosmopolitan terms that ran counter to the political aspirations of nationalists. As will be explored in chapter six, after the resurgence of nationalist groups this failure to contextualise its work fed into a process of organisational de-legitimisation. The dominance of Sinhala nationalist discourse encouraged NGOs' audiences to blur moral and political judgements about NGOs. In both case studies, high profile leaders provided opportunities for critics to frame morally-informed attacks.

The background accounts of the two case studies highlighted a number of important features of NGO legitimisation processes, which will inform the analysis of the crisis period presented in the next two chapters. The Sarvodaya case highlighted the difficulties posed for NGO legitimacy by violent conflict. Problems arose because conflict altered the aims and strategies of dominant political actors, shifting the boundaries of legitimate non-governmental public action. The emergence of conflicts between the state and both the

¹¹⁹ Donors' motivations for working with FCE were slightly contradictory. On the one hand, they valued FCE for its capacity to perform a depoliticised, technocratic form of peacebuilding epitomised by its human security monitoring work. On the other hand, FCE was seen as useful, particularly by the Norwegians, on the basis of its capacity to influence Sri Lankan politics through Dr. Rupesinghe's personal relationships with the political elite. These two approaches were based on conflicting understandings of politics and different theories of political change.

JVP and the LTTE created new tensions in Sarvodaya's existing strategy of legitimisation. This not only made it difficult for the organisation to work with the government, prompting a change in its political strategy, it also increased incentives for other actors to criticise the organisations. Similar problems emerged for FCE as the country returned to war in 2005/6, which will be explored in chapter six.

This chapter has highlighted the complex impact that NGOs' involvement in peacebuilding had on organisational legitimacy. The two case studies engaged in peacebuilding in different ways. FCE's political action involved strategic interventions that bridged the domestic and international political arenas and drew on personal connections with elites. Sarvodaya's efforts to contribute to peacebuilding, by contrast, formed part of a much broader political strategy reliant upon mass mobilisation.

The historical account of Sarvodaya has illustrated the path-dependent nature of NGO legitimisation: the way in which NGOs have behaved and presented themselves in the past affects their ability to generate legitimacy in the future. As will be examined in greater detail in chapters five and six, the identities that NGOs create during the early stages of their development strongly colour the way in which their activities are perceived in subsequent years. Starting from a broad operational mandate provided Sarvodaya with greater flexibility to shift operational emphasis in line with changing political conditions. FCE's narrower operational mandate proved more difficult to adapt without damaging legitimacy.

This chapter has provided a detailed backdrop for the next two chapters, which will examine processes of legitimisation and NGO legitimisation in the midst of a general crisis in NGO legitimacy. Chapter five describes how NGOs' engagement in peacebuilding during the ceasefire period shaped processes of NGO legitimisation. It examines the political conditions of the generalised backlash against NGOs that emerged after the return to war and explores how NGOs were able to deploy a range of discursive tactics and programmatic strategies to counteract the negative impacts of this environment. Chapter six provides an in depth analysis of the experience of the two case study organisations during the ceasefire period and the subsequent crisis. It highlights the varied ways in which these organisations' engagement in peacebuilding work during the ceasefire impacted upon their organisational identities and legitimacy, and provides a detailed account of how they responded to these shifting political conditions.

‘Peacebuilding without using the word “peace”’:

Negotiating a crisis of legitimacy

This chapter explores the crisis of NGO legitimacy I observed in 2006 and 2007 from three different perspectives. First, it examines how the crisis was driven by underlying changes in global governance, assessing the complex ways in which NGOs’ changing engagement in peacebuilding work during the ceasefire period increased their vulnerability to criticism and contributed to the condemnation. Second, it explores the proximate causes of the crisis, tracing the extent to which the changes of government in 2004 and 2005 drove widespread denunciation of NGOs. Third, the chapter analyses some of the ways in which peacebuilding NGOs were able to deploy a range of discursive tactics and programmatic strategies to counteract the negative impacts that this criticism had on their legitimacy. These findings are drawn largely from material gathered from the preliminary case studies.

I will begin by examining how changing practices and patterns of engagement involved in peacebuilding work in Sri Lanka since the 1990s created tensions in NGOs’ organisational identities. It describes how the new arrangements and objectives involved in these liberal peacebuilding projects conflicted with certain aspects of nationalists’ political agendas, including their opposition to international engagement and their commitment to a state dedicated to protecting the traditional values and interests of marginalised Sinhalese communities.

The chapter then moves on to examine the proximate causes of the crisis of legitimacy. Nationalist political parties’ long-standing hostility towards NGOs was given space to thrive after the victory of the UPFA government in the parliamentary elections of 2004, and Mahinda Rajapakse’s win in the 2005 Presidential elections. These political shifts, coupled with a gradual return to war, altered the boundaries of acceptable political action for NGOs. Whilst under the UNF government, NGOs had been permitted to support a state-sponsored peace process, nationalist mobilisation in opposition to the peace process surged with the election of the UPFA government, which displayed a renewed commitment to a military solution and was resistant to international involvement and international

humanitarian engagement in the peace process (Rampton & Welikala, 2009). These political changes exacerbated the existing tensions within the NGO sector, leading to a crisis of legitimacy.

Next, I explore in detail the process of 'reputational crisis management'. In an environment where the legitimacy of the NGO sector as a whole was considerably challenged, NGOs pursued a range of strategies and tactics to deflect criticism and maintain relevance. These involved *discursive* tactics, designed both to sensitise peacebuilding programmes to the increasingly prominent concerns of nationalist critics and the state, and to boost legitimacy by critiquing the work of other NGOs, playing down their association with the NGO sector or the label 'NGO'. They also included *programmatically* strategies, which shifted the location and scope of NGOs' activities in an attempt to deflect criticism and maintain relevance in response to changing donor priorities. Here, strategies refer to a conscious and systematic plan of action, usually implemented after a period of reflection on the associated risks and opportunities. Tactics, on the other hand, refer to more ad-hoc, (and often less conscious) decisions designed to adapt to a shifting operating context. Strategies tend to be adopted after wide-scale consultation within the organisation through meetings with staff or after approval of the board, whilst tactics would be pursued in a less formal way. As described in the last chapter however, in Sri Lanka strategic and tactical decision-making tended to be made by NGO leaders without much wider consultation with other staff members.

The analysis presented in this chapter has implications for understanding of NGO legitimacy and NGO peacebuilding. First, it challenges the mainstream view of NGO legitimacy as stable, uni-dimensional and capacity-based by emphasising the contested, highly politicised and politically symbolic nature of NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context. NGO legitimacy was weakened not simply as a result of observable changes in NGO behaviour, but because political discourse and power configurations shifted, leaving many cosmopolitan pro-peace NGOs standing outside the newly dominant nationalist agenda. For many actors in the Sri Lankan context, NGOs were opposed not because of what they did, but because of what they represented. As a result, the tactical manoeuvres and strategies deployed by NGOs were designed primarily to limit the damage caused by criticism, rather than to tackle these critics' negative perceptions directly.

Second, this analysis highlights the way in which peacebuilding agendas of international actors were reframed and adapted by national NGOs as a means of desensitising their activities to avoid rebuke from domestic critics. It emphasises that Sri Lankan NGOs were differently positioned in relation to international peacebuilding donors: smaller and niche NGOs were more constrained in their ability to adapt their programmes than national and multi-mandate organisations.

1. NGO peacebuilding during the ceasefire period¹²⁰

This section gives a brief overview of the kinds of activities conducted by NGOs and other civil society actors during the ceasefire and divides this work into four categories. The task of classifying peace work is difficult because projects often entail multiple goals that defy simple categorisation.¹²¹ The aim of these categories is to provide a broad framework for understanding the nature of civil society engagement during the ceasefire period rather than a sharply defined typology. I have summarised these activities in Table 2 and have provided a short description of each in the text below. I then go on to explain how these projects changed during the course of the ceasefire.

While NGO peacebuilding intensified considerably during the ceasefire period, the approaches deployed all drew on activities pursued by NGOs in previous periods. In the case of objectives two and three, the tendency to simply repackage existing developmental and advocacy activities to match new peacebuilding goals was particularly evident. It is important to stress that although this brief sketch is organised in terms of programmes' objectives, I do not make any claims about the extent to which these objectives were achieved or about the validity of the assumptions on which they were based. It should also be noted that NGOs bought into these objectives to varying degrees. Many projects that aimed to build a peaceful and prosperous society, for example, were conducted by development NGOs that had little experience of peacebuilding work. In these instances, it was generally the funding agencies that provided the intervention with its explicit peacebuilding rationale.

¹²⁰ This section draws on Walton with Saravanamuttu (2009).

¹²¹ By conducting a workshop on the peace process, for example, a civil society organisation can at once aim to build links between people from different ethnic communities (by involving Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim participants), encourage popular support for the peace process (by raising public awareness of the issues related to the process) and attempt to foster improved forms of governance (by feeding the dialogue back to decision-makers).

Table 2: NGO peace activities after 2002

Objective	Assumptions/ Civil society capacities	Sub-objectives	Main activities
1. Complementing Track One negotiations	Conflict primarily resolved through elite negotiations, but the success of this process bolstered by broader engagement/ NGOs possess useful technical skills, provide an arena for facilitation, build consensus for negotiations by bringing together and representing concerns of excluded actors. NGOs can serve as transmission agents between elites.	Bringing marginalised groups into the peace process	Assisted in the establishment of Track 1.5-2 initiatives: e.g. Peace Secretariat for Muslims, One-Text Initiative
		Track Two work	Facilitating dialogue between politicians at national and regional level
2. Creating a peaceful and prosperous society	Conflict is a product of societal divisions and underdevelopment. Conflict writ large can be managed via strategic interventions/ NGOs capable of managing and resolving local- level conflicts, possess communicative skills and linkages capable of reconciling conflicting societal groups. NGOs can implement development programmes, help to build 'peace dividend'.	Managing conflicts and stabilisation	Mapping conflicts, early warning systems, monitoring work
		Peace education	Workshops, training programmes, dialogues, media training
		Facilitating links between ethnic groups	Exchange programmes, 'peace camps' esp. with youth
		Relief and reconstruction	Development projects in conflict-affected regions, development projects with 'peacebuilding components'

3. Building a democratic polity	Conflict an outcome of ‘bad governance’/ NGOs possess skills in participation, conflict resolution, human rights, which can be transferred to state institutions, other civil society groups and communities to achieve ‘good governance’.	Governance reform	Capacity building and training of state institutions, building links between communities and state
		Policy work and advocacy	Research, lobbying, advocacy campaigns
		Human rights work	Building public awareness – increasing demand for human rights, training, case work, documenting abuses, disseminating research
4. Fostering popular support for peace	Popular support for peace can transform conflict by encouraging politicians to adopt pro-peace positions, ensure elites’ commitment to peace/ NGOs capable of mobilising large constituencies.	Advocacy, campaigns	Issue-based lobbying/ awareness raising, media work, collating and presenting information about peace and conflict to the public, conducting surveys
		Demonstrations	Peace meditations, rallies

Complementing Track One negotiations

The bipolar model of conflict resolution embodied in the peace process led many funders to explore mechanisms to broaden political engagement. NGOs such as the Berghof Foundation and the Initiative for Political and Conflict Transformation (INPACT) provided informal spaces for politicians to initiate discussion on the conflict. NGOs were involved in a number of mechanisms designed to feed the views and concerns of marginalised groups into the peace process and forge broader political consensus. Examples of this kind of work included the One Text Initiative and the establishment of bodies such as the Peace Secretariat for Muslims.¹²²

Creating a peaceful and prosperous society

Several donors felt that conflict could be managed by strategically implementing a range of projects with civil society actors in conflict-affected regions. The Office of Transitional Initiatives (OTI), for example, focused on building networks of NGOs, which they hoped would increase communities' capacity to mitigate conflicts (USAID 2007). One of the most fully mobilised systems for containing conflict was implemented by FCE, whose human security programme in the East gathered information about, and responded to, incidents of violent conflict at the local level. Many governmental and non-governmental donors committed a considerable amount of funding to peace education. These interventions were normally conducted via workshops or training programmes, which were designed to sensitise individuals to the key political issues of the peace process (such as federalism or devolution), and to impart conflict resolution or facilitative skills. NGOs were also involved in work designed to forge links across territorial and societal boundaries. A common strategy was to conduct exchange programmes or 'peace camps' where representatives from one ethnic community were invited to spend time with people from another in an effort to build trust and co-operation. Finally, considerable donor support was committed to humanitarian and development work in conflict-affected regions, which attempted to build peace either by generating trust and co-operation between communities, or by delivering a 'peace dividend' through improving living conditions.

¹²² The One Text Initiative was a forum designed to support peace negotiations by stimulating open discussion between Sri Lanka's main political parties.

Building a democratic polity

The ceasefire period provided greater room for NGOs and donors to implement longer-term measures to address governance issues. NGOs became engaged in this work in two primary ways. First, they shared expertise with government institutions in participatory techniques and conflict resolution skills. This involved attempts to build the capacity of local government institutions, to facilitate links between local government officials and community-based organisations, and to help establish new institutions designed to broaden engagement in the peace process. Second, peacebuilding NGOs worked to facilitate dialogue and generate policy devised to address structural causes of conflict. This work fed into advocacy campaigns designed to lobby power-holders and promote these policies or values to the wider public.

Fostering popular pressure for peace

The final role played by NGOs during the ceasefire period was in building and mobilising popular support for peace. Unlike the other three roles outlined above, this work relied not on civil society's perceived technical skills, but rather on its capacity to represent and mobilise marginalised groups. NGOs pursued this goal in different ways, reflecting their diverse normative and political roots. While some NGOs gave their explicit support to the peace process, the commitment of others was simply to more nebulous goals of non-violence and reconciliation. Many of these civil society initiatives were sponsored by donors. These included peace marches or mass meditations initiated by NGOs such as Sarvodaya, and donor-funded coalitions of NGOs such as the People's Peace Front or the NAWF. Such campaigns were widely criticised on the grounds that they were inauthentic and donor driven. The fact that these marches often provided participants with free transport or lunches was frequently cited as evidence of this (Orjuela 2004: 154-5). Pro-peace groups often failed to unite in broad-based campaigns because of personal rivalries, divisions between urban and rural-based civil society or between civil society groups from different ethnic groups (*ibid.* 164-5). There were a few important examples of popular mobilisation for peace which did not involve much donor support. These mobilisations were typically organised by membership bodies representing interest groups opposed to the war and included organisations such as the Association of Disabled Ex-Service Personnel, the Association for War-Affected Women, and the Parents of Servicemen Missing in Action (see Orjuela 2004).

As this brief summary has illustrated, efforts to mobilise popular support for peace had three broad characteristics. First, they were predominantly donor driven and part of an attempt to build peace via technical interventions (see Goetschel & Hagmann 2009). Donors' engagement with NGOs tended to be based on their perceived technical capacities rather than the notion that they could act as agents of political transformation (cf. Duffield 2007, Li 2007). Second, they were consensual in the sense that NGOs were playing an instrumental role in a broader project, in which the aims of the conflict parties, donors and NGOs were largely conceived as being aligned. Third, peacebuilding work prized NGOs' roles as transmission agents. NGOs were seen as useful both as vehicles for forging links between elites and broader civil society, and as agents for bridging boundaries between opposing domestic elites or between international and local actors. The summary has also demonstrated that donors and NGOs attempted to build peace in different ways, pursuing strategies that were based on different sets of assumptions about the causes and dynamics of violent conflict and how these should be addressed (Goodhand 2006).

2. Liberal peacebuilding and NGO legitimacy

This section presents an account of how the normative, political and institutional landscape of the ceasefire period impacted upon NGO legitimacy. NGOs' growing engagement with donor-backed peacebuilding interventions implied subtle changes in NGOs' political roles and institutional relationships. This section starts by outlining some of the key trends in these engagements, describing how the general patterns associated with the liberal peacebuilding model manifested themselves in the Sri Lankan context, drawing on examples of practices and arrangements encountered during the fieldwork. It then moves on to analyse how these broad changes impacted upon NGOs' organisational identities and contributed to the crisis of legitimacy that occurred as the ceasefire broke down.

While this section focuses on the latent problems generated by these new modes of international and non-governmental intervention during the ceasefire period, it should also be noted that this period also significantly boosted NGO legitimacy in other ways. A reduction in security restrictions and an increase in available funding, for example, allowed many NGOs to pursue their developmental objectives more effectively. The ceasefire also provided a much more conducive normative environment for specialist peacebuilding organisations to promote their efforts to build peace.

New institutional relationships, new political roles

As described in chapter three, the version of liberal peacebuilding played out in Sri Lanka during the ceasefire period implied a significant departure from the peacebuilding practices that had gone before. These shifts tally with Duffield's (2007, 25) broader analysis of the changing nature of NGO work in the context of liberal peacebuilding after the Cold War, which stresses the degree to which NGOs had become bound up in a collaborative statebuilding project, in which they were expected to play an instrumental role alongside donors, the state, the LTTE, the private sector and other civil society actors. In contrast to the experience of NGOs during the Cold War, when they distanced themselves from states and pursued a bottom-up approach to social change, Duffield argues that, in the aftermath of the Cold War, NGOs' 'petty sovereignty'¹²³ (their capacity to make decisions about who received what kinds of assistance) became governmentalised or 'reorchestrated within a thickening web of overlapping aims and mutual interests connecting donor states, recipient governments, UN agencies and militaries' (Duffield 2007, 222-223). In the process, the boundary between NGOs and states became increasingly blurred, with NGOs increasingly seeing their interests as 'overlapping with those of donors and recipient states' (*ibid.*). While these changing patterns of international intervention at one level involved a de-politicisation of NGOs, paradoxically, donors' growing commitment to peacebuilding also led NGOs into a deeply political terrain by encouraging them to engage in the sensitive projects of governance reform and conflict resolution described in chapter two.

Although, as Duffield (2007, 222) argues, this process of governmentalisation was related to a range of institutional and bureaucratic changes including 'the growth of donor funding, the creation of new working practices and more comprehensive contractual arrangements and auditing tools', the shift towards more consensual roles for NGOs was intensified by the political climate of the peace process. As the conflict parties engaged in negotiations, divisions and tensions were often papered over in an attempt to avoid a breakdown in talks and negotiations (Goodhand & Klem 2005). The result was a tenuous and fragile alignment of political objectives, where the political consensus required each of the negotiating parties to make compromises, and where process was privileged over political outcomes. Whilst some space existed for NGOs to challenge the existing mechanisms of the peace

¹²³ This term comes from Judith Butler (2004) cited in Duffield (2007, 52) and refers to the 'endless decision making concerning whom to help and champion and consequently, who can be left behind: *'is it all poor farmers or just the chronically poor?'*

process (for example by presenting their concerns about an absence of human rights provisions), they were generally encouraged by donors and the Sri Lankan state to focus on generating popular support for political negotiations. Those who adopted a critical stance were liable to be branded 'spoilers' by international and local actors that had invested considerable political capital in the peace process. In contrast to the 1994-5 period, when the state formally enlisted civil society actors as a means for building popular support for track one negotiations, the UNF government made few attempts to engage with civil society actors, encouraging them instead to follow the funding priorities of international actors (Orjuela 2008, Walton with Saravanamuttu 2009).

The depoliticisation of donor engagement with NGOs was also driven by changes in the composition of funding in Sri Lanka. After the ceasefire, there was a growth in the proportion of funding that came from governmental rather than non-governmental backers.¹²⁴ Several NGOs that I encountered during the course of my interviews contrasted the cautious approach of governmental donors with the more politically engaged approach of faith-based non-governmental donors, particularly international NGOs such as Helvetas, Bread for the World and NOVIB, which predominated in the 1970s and 80s. These funders were more eager to engage with smaller NGOs, to develop longer-term partnerships, and at certain times encouraged these NGOs to adopt a confrontational stance towards the government.¹²⁵ These agencies also devoted funds to more concerted political campaigns (Perera 1998).¹²⁶ One former MIRJE member outlined the key differences:

*'These types of funders, they all gave core funding and there were no strict rules. They had a take on social issues. They look at what you do and look at your commitment. They were more political...now these organisations are going down.'*¹²⁷

¹²⁴ It is difficult to obtain definitive macro-level evidence of these trends in Sri Lanka. Interviews with a range of donors and NGOs suggest that governmental donors' influence increased steadily in the 1990s and intensified during the ceasefire period. As well as providing more direct assistance to national NGOs, via embassies or field offices, governmental donors also were increasingly important funders of INGOs (Agg 2006, Epstein & Gang 2006).

¹²⁵ Interview with NGO representatives, 10th October, 22nd November 2006, Colombo.

¹²⁶ Interviews with local NGO representatives 10th October, 20th November, 22nd November 2006 and 15th March 2007, Colombo.

¹²⁷ It is likely that this view is slightly romanticised. One leader of a large peacebuilding NGO which received most of its funding from embassies argued that working with these institutions was preferable to working with INGOs in the 1980s and 90s: 'It's nicer to work with an embassy because embassies are much more lenient and flexible. They don't go investigating everything, unlike INGOs who probably have more staff to do that type of work' (interview with leader of peacebuilding NGO, 20th November 2006). It is also important to note that these more politically-engaged donors often

A final factor in the depoliticisation of NGO peacebuilding was changes in the composition of the principal peacebuilding NGOs. As argued in chapter three, some of the organisations that had been more heavily involved in the 1994-5 peace process (such as the more left-leaning SSA) felt betrayed by the Kumaratunga government. Partly because of their previous experience, and partly because of their underlying reservations about the ideological orientation of the UNP government, these organisations distanced themselves from the latest peace process and were displaced by a new wave of less-politically engaged organisations, who were guided by more generic, donor-driven approaches to peacebuilding.

Collaboration between NGOs, the state and donors had first emerged in the late 1970s and during the first phase of experimentation with liberal peacebuilding in the 1990s. After 1977, the UNP government provided World Bank funding to several Sri Lankan NGOs through the Janasaviya Project (Hudson 1997). Donor funding for peace work had its genesis in the 1994-5 peace process when financial support was provided to the PA government of Chandrika Kumaratunga to establish a National Integration Policy Unit (NIPU). This body was largely staffed by civil society representatives (mostly academics), and between 1994 and 2000 conducted work to assist NGOs (by providing capacity building and small grants), provide training for high ranking officials and the media, and conduct research on peace and conflict.¹²⁸ At around the same time, the PA government initiated the *sudu nellum* or 'White Lotus' Campaign, which sought to build popular support for the government's proposals to resolve the conflict, and received the public backing of a large number of NGOs and civil society organisations.

The modes of engagement between donors, NGOs and the state were significantly different during the last ceasefire period. In contrast to the PA government's active attempts to engage with civil society actors, the UNF government elected in 2001 made little effort to enlist the support of civil society in building popular support for peace, or indeed to undertake this work themselves. Donor support to NGOs during the ceasefire

worked with more left-leaning NGOs. As such, these trends in donor aid were not simply a reflection of changes in the composition of aid to Sri Lankan NGOs, but a more complex outcome of internal and external shifts.

¹²⁸ Interview with former NIPU staff member, 12th October 2006, Colombo.

period encompassed a broader range of activities than those pursued by donors in the 1994-5 period, which were largely limited to state-led initiatives. The fact that these attempts to transform Sri Lankan society were implemented more or less directly by international donors via NGOs can be attributed both to changes in the broad objectives of international funding agencies, and to the approach of the UNF government at the time of the ceasefire. These factors combined to create a more tenuous platform for non-governmental public action and, as this chapter will demonstrate, provided a less stable context for NGO legitimacy.

These patterns of engagement saw NGOs working in collaboration with a broadening range of international and domestic institutions. During the ceasefire, many national NGOs became involved in donor-funded projects designed to enhance the capacity of diverse sets of institutions, from the Sri Lankan state (for example by building the capacity of various ministries or local government institutions in conflict resolution), to the media (for example by providing training in reporting conflict). One particularly striking example of this type of arrangement comes from the USAID funded 'People's Forum Project'. This project, which began in 2003, was designed to reform governance from the 'bottom-up' by using four national NGOs to form community-based organisations across the country with the aim of increasing interaction between local populations and local government officials. The ultimate goal of the project was to build links between these different local-level groups with a view to working at the provincial and national levels. NGOs were expected to play an instrumental role in a complex network of organisations and institutions that included NGOs, community groups, local government, donors, and eventually provincial and national government.

Changing patterns of engagement between donors, NGOs and domestic political actors had implications for NGO legitimacy. The next two sections will explore these implications by examining the changing nature of NGO legitimacy with *convinced* groups (NGOs and donors), and then by assessing NGOs' legitimacy with *ambivalent* and *critical* audiences.

Internal tensions: NGO legitimacy and 'convinced' groups

Changing relations with donors

As donors' commitment to peacebuilding increased after 2002, they began to seek different qualities in their partners. These changes shifted the rules of the representational game between NGOs and donors, leading NGOs to overlay existing capacities with new ones, and encouraging organisations to adapt their existing identities. The donors that came to dominate the NGO peacebuilding scene during the ceasefire valued NGOs less for their role as political agents (as some of the prominent Christian non-governmental funders had done previously), and more on the basis that they could play an auxiliary role in broader efforts to foster social and political change.¹²⁹ Such changes were well illustrated by shifts in NGO monitoring work during the ceasefire period. This work was much more politically ambivalent than human rights monitoring work conducted in Sri Lanka during the 1970s and 80s, which generally aimed to exert pressure on the state via trans-national institutions and networks.

The new approach towards NGOs can be seen in the UK-funded NGO human security monitoring programme (implemented by FCE), which aimed to 'help decision-makers in government, international organisations and NGOs better anticipate, prevent, mitigate and respond to conflict situations' (FCO 2007). The stated goal of this programme is notable not only because of the range of processes to which it purports to contribute (conflict anticipation, prevention, mitigation and response), but also because of the range of actors it aims to serve. FCE was valued by these donors not for its political agency but rather for its technical capacities in information gathering and its privileged access to key actors at the local, national and international level.

In the human security monitoring programme, FCE helped to mitigate conflict by feeding information to key actors and facilitating contact between different actors. An ancillary aim of this and other monitoring programmes was to provide an information service for donors. These programmes conformed to the growing tendency for the political aims and objectives of NGOs to be seen as aligned with, rather than standing in opposition to, the

¹²⁹ As an example of this more politically engaged approach, in the late 1980s, donor organisations such as Novib and Helvetas had encouraged Sarvodaya to adopt a more prominent political role (interview with INGO representative, Colombo, 22nd November 2006).

state.¹³⁰ As a result, rather than being used as a tool by donors to exert pressure on the state (as intended by the largely non-governmental church-based donors that dominated the field in the 1980s and 90s), NGOs were increasingly seen as instruments to support donors' own attempts to shape government policy. This example illustrates a shift from a situation in which NGOs pursued a political agenda that unsettled the agenda of states, towards one in which the agendas of donor government, beneficiary government and NGOs are understood as being goal congruent. Rather than assuming that a critical mass of outside mobilisation was required to achieve a change in government policy, in this new environment, donors tended to presume that government could be changed from within, by providing technical inputs to strengthen the capacities of certain departments (such as the Ministry of Constitutional Affairs) or by providing resources to revive local government institutions that were deemed worthy of support (such as mediation boards).¹³¹

Since NGOs were increasingly asked to work within strategic complexes of international and domestic state and non-state actors, their capacity to work closely with these diverse actors was increasingly prized by donors. This capability was particularly valued in monitoring work, which relied on maintaining good connections with a range of stakeholders. Some NGOs, such as FCE, INPACT and the Berghof Foundation, placed particular emphasis on their capacity to network with conflict actors (including paramilitary groups and non-state actors), and these linkages formed a critical part of these organisations' rationale and mission.

During the early years of the ceasefire, peacebuilding became less about enacting concrete political change, and more about possessing the skills or knowledge to facilitate minor technical alterations to Sri Lankan governance or society. These trends were reinforced by many donors' low capacity and lack of long-term experience of working in Sri Lanka. As one donor representative argued: 'a lot of donors [were] quite clueless' and as a result had to 'rely on NGOs for information'.¹³² In this context, NGOs were seen as purveyors of local knowledge and information, and donors selected partners not on the basis of their political

¹³⁰ This does not mean that the NGO sector did not contain voices that were consistently critical of the peace process. In fact, from an early stage in negotiations, organisations such as CPA and the University Teachers for Human Rights (Jaffna) (UTHR (J)) were critical both of the design and the implementation of the peace process.

¹³¹ Interview with donor representative, Colombo, 6th December 2006.

¹³² Interview with donor representative, Colombo 16th November 2006.

commitment but rather on the grounds that they were capable of demonstrating the capacity to perform particular tasks or functions effectively.¹³³ The field of peacebuilding was presented as a specialised area of knowledge in its own right in which NGOs had to demonstrate experience and competency. This perspective was reflected in the emerging institutional arrangements between NGOs and donors, where donors preferred to work with established peacebuilding NGOs who had received funding in the past. This emphasis on technical capacity encouraged NGOs to focus on building organisational identities based on skill-based capacity-building roles rather than displaying their political credentials. Representing organisational capacities has always played an important role in determining funding, but the more bureaucratic relations between NGOs and donors that emerged during this period encouraged NGOs to package aspects of their organisational experience and identities in a quantifiable way. This trend can be seen, for example, in the growing tendency for national NGOs to communicate the exact proportions of staff from each ethnic group (sometimes at the behest of donors in funding applications). As donors became more interested in engaging with the 'unlike minded', some national NGOs began to signal their capacity to facilitate engagement with these groups: one organisation, for example, demonstrated their capacity to take on this kind of work by recruiting young, socially active Buddhist monks onto their peacebuilding staff.¹³⁴

NGO peacebuilding capacities became increasingly commodified and were more actively sold to donors. While these changes in NGO practice can be observed in most aspects of their work and are driven by the contractualisation of NGO work (see Cooley & Ron 2002), they were particularly notable features of the peacebuilding field in Sri Lanka. These tendencies are particularly apparent in the work of NGOs engaged in conflict monitoring. In the case of FCE, conflict monitoring increasingly became a platform from which they could demonstrate and promote their local knowledge to donors. As well as accruing reputational benefits, this information was also sold through a subscription situation-report service provided to a range of international actors.

¹³³ The instrumental nature of these relations was underlined by the fact that donors increasingly looked to the private sector, trades unions and other civil society actors (such as religious groups) to replace their NGO partners as the ceasefire broke down and they became more disillusioned with NGOs.

¹³⁴ Several national NGOs interviewed during the fieldwork period had recruited Buddhist clergy onto their peacebuilding programmes to work on inter-religious peacebuilding projects.

As the case studies in the next chapter will illustrate, NGOs exercised a considerable degree of choice in the extent to which they became bound up in these representational exchanges with donors. While FCE's organisational identity was heavily packaged for a donor audience, Sarvodaya's engagement with these modes of representation was more tentative. These two approaches produced different kinds of problems for the organisations' identities. To some extent, this variation was also due to the variegated nature of the donor community. As mentioned above, donors developed a range of different strategies for building peace and based their interventions on varied assumptions about the potential role that NGOs could play.

'The rise of the peace professionals': relations with other NGOs

NGOs' engagement in liberal peacebuilding exacerbated existing tensions within the NGO sector. Many of the issues have been sketched in the existing literature on Sri Lankan NGOs. Liyanage (2007), for example, charts the 'rise of the peace professionals' and contrasts a voluntaristic, left-leaning, politically active collection of organisations (characterised by the likes of MIRJE and CRM), with the contemporary English-speaking, elitist, technocratic, politically ambivalent group that dominated the NGO sector after the ceasefire. The key factor driving this transformation, for Liyanage, was a growth in donor funding of NGOs, which generated a workforce governed by contracts rather than individual political commitment. He argues that the presence of large amounts of funding encouraged a less well-meaning group of rent-seekers to emerge, which in turn damaged the prospects for the NGO sector to contribute effectively to peace.¹³⁵ Orjuela's work (2003, 2005) echoes many of these points, arguing that the earlier peace movement had been tamed by a 'monetisation' of peace work; a process that created dependency on donors and caused NGOs' work to be driven by the priorities of funding agencies rather than by the demands of the local populations that they purported to assist. The architecture of the peace process created a political climate where more critical versions of peace were suppressed, exacerbating tensions between human rights activists and advocates of conflict resolution or conflict management approaches (see Keenan 2007).

¹³⁵ This case resonates with Cooley & Ron's (2002) argument that the use of contracts in the NGO sector has increasingly led organisations to respond to material incentives, diluting their own political objectives. Similar dynamics emerged as a result of the tsunami, which will be explored in greater depth in the case study of FCE presented in chapter six.

Critiques of NGOs tended to blur a range of concerns, including moral judgements about NGO personnel, a sense of unease about NGOs' relations with international donors, and issues surrounding their engagement in politics. These anxieties built on the familiar fault-lines within the NGO sector raised in chapter three, for example, between voluntaristic, altruistic small-scale non-governmental groups and scaled-up, professional organisations, or between politically engaged and apolitical organisations. These tensions repeatedly surfaced during the course of my interviews. Many established organisations criticised the overly-professionalised approach of the increasingly well-funded coterie of Colombo-based peacebuilding specialists. Many smaller NGOs interviewed during the course of my fieldwork highlighted the shortcomings in the work of peacebuilding specialists during the ceasefire.¹³⁶ In particular, these critiques highlighted the failure of these organisations to reach beyond the 'charmed circle' of vulnerable communities and 'already convinced' groups targeted by NGOs.¹³⁷ As will be explored in greater depth below, criticising other NGOs played a central role in NGOs' attempts to manage their reputations and protect the legitimacy of the sector in the context of a more general breakdown in legitimacy. During the crisis period, NGOs increasingly sought to differentiate themselves from the generalised perception of NGOs as elitist, well-funded and out of touch with ground realities.

Another fundamental tension in NGOs' organisational identities exploited in critical accounts concerned the nature of their political action. NGOs with different organisational identities and political aims interpreted the boundaries of 'proper political conduct' differently. Human rights organisations, for example, frequently criticised 'peacebuilding' NGOs for lacking a political edge. Sarvodaya presented its work as a radical attempt to foster a 'new kind of politics', but was deemed apolitical or politically irrelevant by many NGOs and donors.

Legitimacy with 'critical' and 'ambivalent' groups

This section briefly describes how NGOs' engagement in liberal peacebuilding affected the way in which these organisations were perceived and portrayed by critical and ambivalent

¹³⁶ Interview with small peacebuilding NGO representative, Colombo, 26th September, 12th October 2006. Interview with large national NGO representative 4th May 2007.

¹³⁷ Interview with peacebuilding NGO representative, Colombo, 12th October 2006. Interview with large national NGO representative, Colombo, 4th May 2007.

actors. Most of these criticisms remained latent during the early years of the ceasefire, but were gradually activated after the election of the UPFA government in 2004, and then more quickly after the election of Mahinda Rajapakse in late 2005, as political strategies that aimed to protect traditional boundaries of political action began to dominate the political landscape. NGO legitimacy was affected by two characteristics of the liberal peacebuilding approach: the close links that these interventions encouraged between NGOs, international actors and the UNF regime, and the concerns over boundary transgression that resulted from these relationships.

Associations with international actors

The discourse and mechanisms of engagement favoured by liberal peacebuilders tended to blur the agendas of local NGOs with what quickly became cast as an elite, externally imposed programme of state and societal reform. The UNF failed to build any widespread popular support for its peace strategy because it was widely perceived as driven by business interest groups, and deemed threatening to the interests of poor Sinhalese voters. As Venugopal (2008, 29) has argued, the 'peace agenda effectively came into being as part of the articulation and realisation of the material interests of Sri Lanka's corporate sector'. The peace process was discredited because it appeared to be driven by a cosmopolitan alliance of elite actors from the political, business and NGO sector.

The tendency for donor funding to be channelled through cosmopolitan, Colombo-based organisations drove an increasingly potent caricature of pro-peace civil society as elitist, rent-seeking, and out of touch with ground realities. The growth in funding for pro-peace NGOs fuelled concerns about the illegitimate influence international actors were exerting on Sri Lankan political affairs. Such growing links between NGOs and governmental donors fed directly into nationalists' twin accounts that stressed both NGOs' role as Trojan horses for the malicious agendas of foreign governments, and their rent-seeking tendencies (see, for example, Mahindapala 2007). Criticisms that focused on NGOs' destabilising political influence were conflated with claims that they were essentially rent-seeking vehicles set up to capture foreign funding (PSCNGO 2008, 14-15).

While these tensions built on the highly centralised and elitist structural characteristics of the NGO sector in Sri Lanka (Orjuela 2009), they also stemmed more generally from the political circumstances associated with the most recent peace process. These phenomena have been noted in other contexts. The Palestinian NGO sector, for example, underwent a

similar loss of popular legitimacy after the Oslo Peace Accords as foreign funding rapidly increased and NGOs became associated with the concrete political positions of foreign actors, particularly the United States (see Hammami 2000, Jensen 2005, Jad 2007, Wake 2008). NGOs in Palestine were increasingly criticised by other civil society actors and political groups for losing touch with their popular roots or being motivated by self-interest (Hammami 2000, Jad 2007, Wake 2008). Similar patterns have been identified in Nepal, where the NGO sector also experienced a 'crisis of credibility' in the context of a peace process underwritten by international donors (see Heaton Shrestha 2008).

Associations between NGOs and the peace process were strengthened by NGO peacebuilding programmes designed to build popular support for political negotiations. As described above, during the ceasefire period, NGOs became involved in media campaigns, training workshops and research projects, which aimed to highlight the benefits of a political solution or raise awareness about key terms of the political debate such as federalism. By encouraging them to back publicly the particular aims and conditions of the peace process, these programmes tended to both reify and publicise NGOs' political positions. The fact that it was largely donors who were facilitating NGOs' engagement in the peace process was also significant and can be contrasted with the experience of civil society during the 1994-5 peace process, when the state was much more active in inviting NGOs' growing support for peace. Although the peace process ultimately failed, it arguably provided NGOs with a less contentious basis for political engagement since it removed the space for nationalists to paint NGOs' involvement as externally-driven. By contrast, the alignment of political objectives between the UNF, international actors and NGOs during the peace process was deeply antithetical to the conception of state legitimacy held by Sinhala nationalists, undermining NGOs' legitimacy with these critical groups. As will be explored in greater depth below, the kind of activities pursued by these liberal, cosmopolitan actors were construed as working against the legitimate goals of the state to protect the interests of the Sinhalese majority.

Boundary Transgression

The modes and practices of peacebuilding pursued by donors and NGOs during the ceasefire period damaged NGO legitimacy by encouraging organisations to transgress territorial and institutional boundaries that conflict entrepreneurs and more conservative nationalist political groups were concerned with preserving. Donors' interest in promoting

a peaceful society and polity led NGOs to scale up their work in conflict-affected regions, and to engage in activities such as exchange programmes that attempted to straddle social and political divisions that had been hardened by conflict. As noted above, these peacebuilding programmes also encouraged NGOs to forge links between a range of international, national and local institutions. Programmes often prized NGOs' capacity to bridge the institutional boundary between the state and the LTTE. In many peacebuilding projects, NGOs found themselves working inside ministries and local government offices in efforts to strengthen capacities in conflict resolution, to develop educational resources related to conflict or to provide awareness training on conflict and peace issues.

The cosmopolitan worldview of donors encouraged NGOs to emphasise their capacity to transcend and transgress traditional boundaries of identity. As Goodhand et al (2009) have argued, NGOs were expected to 'engage with other people's mental maps without being co-opted by them'. This manoeuvre was particularly important for organisations such as Sarvodaya or the Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO), whose identities were particularly tied up with the political rationality either of the Sinhalese or the Tamil polity.¹³⁸ In order to attract donor funding and to stress its 'national' rather than communal operational focus, for example, TRO established an office in Colombo in 2004 and expanded its operations in the ethnically-mixed East, and in the Hill Country (Walton 2008). By repositioning itself in this way, the organisation was attempting to demonstrate its independence from the LTTE and frame its identity in liberal, cosmopolitan terms that were intelligible to donors. The increased emphasis on boundary transgression involved in peacebuilding practice during the peace process exacerbated perceptions of NGOs from nationalists who were concerned with protecting existing social and political boundaries. As will be analysed in greater depth below, instances where NGOs had transgressed these boundaries (for example by working in LTTE-controlled areas, or working within government ministries) served as focal points for opposition towards NGOs.

3. NGO legitimacy in crisis

A crisis of legitimacy can be said to occur when there is a rapid breakdown in the 'generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within a social system' (Suchman 1995). A crisis of organisational legitimacy

¹³⁸ The Tamils Rehabilitation Organisation is a humanitarian organisation formed in 1985 which is administered by the political wing of the LTTE. For more details see Walton (2008).

is often triggered by a set of contingent events (such as the loss of funding) but usually represents deeper tensions such as a loss of cultural support (Suchman 1995, 597). These crises also frequently involve a 'retraction cascade' where previously supportive groups withdraw support 'to avoid guilt by association' (Suchman 1995, 597).

While the roots of the crisis of legitimacy experienced by NGOs during the fieldwork period were linked to the changing relationships and practices associated with liberal peacebuilding described in the last section, and to the structural characteristics of Sri Lankan politics and society detailed in chapter three, the most important immediate drivers of the crisis were political. Tensions surfaced as a result of the emergence of a new constellation of parties and interests after the election of the UPFA government in 2004, and the election of Mahinda Rajapakse after November 2005.¹³⁹

Rajapakse's strategy of political mobilisation was very different from that pursued by the UNF government of Ranil Wickramasinghe. Rather than staking his government's legitimacy on its capacity to secure progress in the peace process and international backing, Rajapakse's credibility was founded on his opposition to the over-internationalisation of the previous period and the UNF's attempts to restructure the state and the economy. The legitimacy of the Rajapakse regime was based on the political morality of Sinhala nationalism, which saw the state's role not as an engine of export-led growth that appeared to favour the rich, but rather as the protector of peasant agriculture and services for marginalised rural Sinhalese, and the guardian of Buddhism and Sinhala culture and traditions (Venugopal 2008). The regime's critical stance towards external actors (including NGOs) was partly driven by the SLFP's electoral coalition with parties such as JVP and the JHU, which were particularly concerned with reducing the influence of international actors and liberal NGOs in Sri Lanka. The most intense period of hostility against NGOs came in 2005 and 2006, when the JVP and the JHU were capable of exerting the greatest influence. During this period these parties organised a number of public rallies against NGOs and made a number of hostile public statements, including Wimal Weerawansa's infamous 'we should spit on NGOs' speech (TamilNet 2005a). As Rajapakse's hand was gradually strengthened by a series of military victories in the East, and by the crossover of 18 MPs from the UNP in January 2007, the harassment of NGOs by nationalist parties was reined

¹³⁹ It should be noted that these tensions were not new. As described in chapter three, the clash between the liberal objectives of NGOs and nationalist political agendas was a perennial feature of the Sri Lankan political landscape.

in. Although this more ideologically-driven critique of NGOs had passed its peak in the public arena, hostility towards them continued as the war intensified in the North, spurred by the government's need to quell criticisms from NGOs of its humanitarian and human rights record.

Rajapakse's election marked a significant change in the government's stance towards conflict. Mahinda Rajapakse jettisoned the incipient consensus on conflict resolution between Chandrika Kumaratunga and Ranil Wickramasinghe that had accepted the need for a federal solution, replacing this model with an explicitly unitary model pushed through using measures such as the de-merger of the North and Eastern Provinces, defending the constitutional status quo, and fighting a war against terror as opposed to an ethnic conflict (Walton with Saravanamuttu 2009). These changes signalled a switching in the boundaries of legitimate political action for NGOs. The Rajapakse regime was the first government in the recent history of the conflict to adopt a consistently critical stance, both against international engagement in Sri Lanka and against civil society peacebuilding. The PA government of Chandrika Kumaratunga had actively encouraged institutional collaboration between the state and civil society in the pursuit of peace, and while the previous UNF government had been less actively supportive of this collaboration, it had nonetheless permitted an expanded role for NGOs in this field. After the election of Mahinda Rajapakse, NGOs quickly became increasingly scrutinised in terms of the extent to which they had threatened Sri Lanka's sovereignty.

These concerns were reflected in the terms of reference for a Parliamentary Select Committee to investigate NGOs, appointed in January 2006, which became an important mechanism for increased pressure on NGOs from the government. The committee had a 'special focus' on the tsunami, but was also a response to concerns that NGOs were engaged in activities that were 'inimical to the sovereignty and integrity of Sri Lanka' and 'detrimental to the national and social well being of the country'. Spearheaded by the JVP, the committee summoned a number of prominent NGOs and the public hearings helped to fuel an increasingly vociferous critique of NGOs in the media.¹⁴⁰ The committee's stance towards NGOs is encapsulated in its interim report published in December 2008, where it is argued that '*...some NGOs had gradually stepped into the sphere of state policy-making*' and that '*most of the NGOs, especially those that were active in conflict resolution and*

¹⁴⁰ Critical newspaper articles often stemmed from interviews with JVP politicians or statements made by them (see, for example, Sunday Times (2007), Sriyananda (2008)).

peace building areas, had embarked on a campaign to change the people's perception of the public sector institutions' (PSCNGO 2008).

While these anti-NGO strains had been a consistent feature of the Sri Lankan media for many years, this period saw an intensification of critical editorial features and news stories based around NGO scandals. These critiques also became more prominent in the mainstream state media. As one interviewee commented:

'[What is happening now] is qualitatively different and I'm seriously concerned about it. It's now much more in the state media – The Sunday Observer and The Daily News – before it was The Island lashing out'.¹⁴¹

The anti-NGO climate was maintained in 2006 by the slide back to war, which provided further incentives for attacks on civil society from both the government and nationalist parties. The government became increasingly concerned about NGOs operating in conflict-affected areas and their potential to highlight government human rights abuses, to obstruct military operations, and to inadvertently provide resources to the LTTE. This not only motivated the government to restrict the activities of NGOs, it also led to a more dangerous environment for humanitarian actors. Between January 2006 to August 2007, 40 humanitarian workers and religious leaders were killed and 20 'disappeared', including 17 local staff of the French NGO *Action Contra la Faim*, who were assassinated in Mutur in August 2006 (HRW 2008, 334).

In this environment, criticism of peacebuilding NGOs became more visible, the space for dissent narrowed, and NGOs became increasingly viewed through a patriotic lens. Civil society and media groups were labelled 'traitors', 'LTTE-sympathisers' or 'terrorists' for voicing pro-peace positions or presenting critical perspectives on the state's actions. The revised Emergency Regulations, imposed in 2006, introduced a range of new, vaguely worded terrorism offences, which limited the space for humanitarian interventions in the North and East and placed greater restrictions on media coverage of the war.

Criticism of NGOs was also heightened by the unprecedented international response to the tsunami. The unruly funding environment that this prompted resulted in numerous examples of malpractice. The tsunami made the NGO sector considerably more powerful and influential to the extent that it was suddenly commanding resources on a scale

¹⁴¹ Interview with representative of European embassy, Colombo, 5th October 2006.

comparable to that of the state. The tsunami response not only transformed the NGO sector in Sri Lanka by making it richer, it also boosted public consciousness of NGOs. The growing influence and heightened relevance of the NGO sector meant that NGOs became a more obvious scapegoat for critical actors to use in their attempts to discredit political interference by international actors, or to underline the corrupting influence of Western culture. As a result, well established nationalist discourses about the harmful impact of NGOs on Sri Lankan life gained greater relevance and public perceptions of NGOs were damaged. The state and nationalist political parties also increasingly used NGOs for their own political ends (for example, the government's banning of the TRO in November 2007 helped to shore up relations with the JVP in anticipation of a crucial parliamentary vote on the budget) (see BBC 2007). The tsunami response also exposed failures of government decision-making and operational weakness, providing further incentives for the government to attack NGOs. Some bureaucratic interests were also served by attacking NGOs. RADA, the government agency responsible for reconstruction, for example, used attacks on NGOs as a way of deflecting criticism of its own failures.¹⁴²

The hostile climate for NGOs that emerged after 2005 was driven by the state-controlled media, which drew on claims of malpractice or sub-standard implementation in the aftermath of the tsunami (see, for example, Jayasuriya (2006)). As mentioned above, media coverage of NGOs was also pre-occupied with a series of misappropriation scandals, where alleged instances of NGO materials being used by the LTTE were uncovered as the government forces advanced into LTTE-controlled areas (see for example Sunday Observer 2008). Instances in which NGOs were deemed to have transgressed into the governmental arena (for example by conducting human rights training for the military, or by assisting in the development of educational materials or curriculum design) were widely reported in the media, and used to draw attention to the sinister motivations of nongovernmental action in Sri Lanka (see, for example, Goonatilake 2006a, Sriyananda 2008). The Interim Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on NGOs (released in late 2008) was particularly critical of the Berghof Foundation, which had signed two MoUs with the Ministry of Constitutional Affairs in 2001 and 2006. The report argued that Berghof had 'manipulated' the Ministry as a means of changing 'the people's attitude to be in synch with their preferred choice of federalism' (PSCNGO 2008, 17). The report also raised

¹⁴² Interview with Embassy representative, Colombo, 5th October 2006.

questions about Berghof's interventions in LTTE-controlled areas and their support for the LTTE in arranging a study tour for its members on federalism (PSCNGO 2008, 17).

Examples of NGO boundary transgression were often used by nationalists to highlight a broader political agenda. This manoeuvre is well demonstrated by the case of the 'Responsibility to Protect' scandal that erupted in early 2008. The scandal related to the ICES, a long-standing Colombo-based research NGO, which had partnered with the Global Centre for the Responsibility to Protect, a New York based INGO, a group that aimed to function as a 'catalyst for moving the *Responsibility to Protect* from principle to practice'. This connection was initially publicised by Rajiva Wijesinghe, the Secretary General of the Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process (SCOPP) in a letter to the New York Times but was subsequently picked up by various nationalist commentators in the state-media (De Silva 2008, Wijesinghe 2008, Seneviratne 2008, Mahindapala 2007a, 2008). The scandal focused not only on the 'anti-national' activities of ICES, but also on an associated set of accusations relating to financial mismanagement at the organisation, and its connection to members of the UNP, including the then Secretary to Ranil Wickramasinghe, Bradman Weerakoon (Mahindapala 2008a). The scandal has since been used by nationalists to undermine the NGO sector as a whole and, more recently, to discredit international engagement in Sri Lanka during the final stages of the conflict (Goonatilake 2008, De Silva 2008).

While the state had provided greater space for nationalist critiques of NGOs during the crisis period, it is difficult to assess precisely the extent to which the state's hostility towards NGOs was motivated by genuine concerns about the NGO sector, or whether the climate of fear was maintained primarily for instrumental reasons. The state's failure to enact any meaningful laws relating to NGOs until approximately four years after the Select Committee on NGOs was appointed, suggests that the government was more concerned with keeping NGOs in check than with seriously limiting their power. Similarly, more recent efforts to regulate NGOs have left considerable scope for interpretation, which again suggests a government more interested in containing NGOs power than in wiping out the sector (see Page 2009).¹⁴³ These patterns of behaviour suggest that, although the NGO sector was in danger of being reshaped and the future of some individual organisations was

¹⁴³ One national NGO leader, quoted in Page (2009) argued that the decision to tax NGOs was a 'desperate money-making measure by the Government' and that '[t]here are vast discrepancies between individual agencies'.

under threat, the continued existence of the NGO sector in Sri Lanka was not really in doubt.

Another issue that is hard to gauge without detailed research is the extent to which these critiques of NGOs were shared by the general public. Public criticism of NGOs in the media was driven both by nationalist politicians and a small handful of vociferous and long-standing critics or 'NGO-bashers' such as Susantha Goonatilake and H.L.D. Mahindapala, drawn from a small nationalist intelligentsia which emerged from the same elite that populated the upper echelons of Sri Lanka's NGO sector. While there is a shortage of data relating to how far these anti-NGO sentiments were shared by the general public, the fact that these views also played a prominent role in nationalist parties' strategies of political mobilisation, as well as their civil society vehicles such as the PNM and the NMAT, suggests that they resonated with popular concerns. More evidence is provided by the popular opinion survey conducted by CPA, mentioned in chapter three (CPA 2008). Although this survey was based on a small sample, it suggests that nationalists' characterisations of NGOs as money-driven and sympathetic to the LTTE were widely accepted amongst Sinhalese communities (*ibid.*). These nationalist groups were frequently capable of organising local-level protests against NGOs, particularly in the deep South and the Kandy region.¹⁴⁴ These groundswells of local-level opposition towards NGOs seemed most potent during times of political and economic uncertainty.

¹⁴⁴ Interview with donor representative, Colombo, 21st March 2007.

Figure 6: A PNM poster in Colombo in 2005. The text reads: ‘A patriotic mass rally will be held on 6th April at 3.00 o’ clock in the afternoon at the Maharagama Youth Theatre to expose the criminal activities of NGOs who are here to destroy our nation and the country’ (TamilNet 2005).



The crisis of NGO legitimacy was also connected to changes in donor priorities that accompanied the breakdown of the ceasefire. These shifts in donors’ preferences were not separate from the negative accounts of NGO action emerging from the domestic arena. Whilst most donors were dismissive of the main thrust of nationalists’ claims about NGOs, they were also cognisant of its effects on NGOs’ perceived effectiveness. Organisations such as Sarvodaya that aimed to mobilise popular support for peace relied on cognitive forms of legitimacy, which were particularly susceptible to damage from high-profile criticism of their work.

These challenges presented a complex dilemma for NGOs’ identities and reputations. Not only did the changing environment prompt organisations to demonstrate new competencies, it also required them to balance their changing role with existing causal

claims encapsulated in mission statements or organisational identities. While organisations needed to be flexible, they also had to be so in such a way that they did not compromise the coherence of their existing organisational objectives and focus. These pressures were particularly acute for many large peacebuilding NGOs that became involved in the tsunami response. By becoming so heavily involved in tsunami response work, organisations risked weakening programmatic coherence, and being perceived by donors and their NGO peers as engaging in rent-seeking behaviour.¹⁴⁵ The next section will explore these tensions and their implications for NGO legitimacy in greater detail.

4. Reputational Crisis Management

This section explores the way in which individual NGOs reacted and responded to the generalised crisis of legitimacy facing the sector in 2006 and 2007. It describes how a number of peacebuilding NGOs deployed a range of tactics which aimed to shore up donors' perceptions of their relevance and programmatic coherence, while at the same time attempting to deflect criticism from nationalist groups. I have termed this process 'reputational crisis management' as it was a particularly intense activity that can be distinguished from the processes of long-term legitimacy generation described in the last chapter or accumulation of 'moral capital' explored by Bryant (2005). I have emphasised NGO reputations in describing this process, because it involved distinguishing, differentiating and encouraging comparison amongst various NGOs. In highlighting this kind of behaviour, I do not intend to downplay the importance of these more long-term legitimacy generation efforts in determining outcomes of legitimacy crises (indeed one of the key findings of the next chapter is that more established organisations have been able to negotiate pressures most successfully). Instead, the purpose is to emphasise that the forms of tactical and strategic behaviour employed during a crisis period are different from those employed during more stable periods. These responses had a number of different dimensions. I have distinguished between tactics that were deployed primarily at the discursive level (through the way in which NGOs talked about themselves and their NGO peers) and programmatic strategies that related more concretely to the kinds and locations of activities NGOs undertook. It is important to stress that these processes were typically closely interlinked. Discursive adjustments often played an important part in facilitating

¹⁴⁵ There was a widespread feeling that peace NGOs moved into tsunami response work because that was where the 'big money' was. Interview with INGO representative, Colombo, 2nd November 2006. These views were also voiced in numerous newspaper articles (see, for example, Wijesinghe 2008).

programmatic change. In some cases, where projects were simply re-packaged or re-framed, what ostensibly appeared to be a programmatic change was often largely a discursive one.

As will be shown below, NGOs' discursive tactics and programmatic strategies were deployed alongside donors' own efforts to re-label and alter their own programmes. At times, NGOs were undermined by donors' efforts to modify their objectives and activities. On other occasions, however, donors and NGOs colluded to maintain the appearance of success.

Discursive tactics

NGOs manipulated and managed discourse in an effort to desensitise their work to the critical climate for peacebuilding that emerged during the crisis period. In modifying peacebuilding discourse, NGOs also sought to maintain a degree of programmatic coherence and a sense of relevance in the eyes of donors and their NGO peers. Neither of these objectives was simple or straightforward. The threat posed by critical groups varied over time and place, and affected some organisations more than others. Donors' approaches changed during the transition back to war, providing an additional reason for NGOs to rethink their approaches. These changes to the discursive environment were not absolute. Different international partners also pursued a range of peacebuilding strategies which fluctuated unpredictably. Although the prominence of nationalist discourse rose substantially and rapidly during this period, this dominant discourse existed alongside counter-discourses with many domestic political actors, including the main opposition UNP party and many civil society actors, remaining more sympathetic to liberal positions (see Frerks & Klem 2005).

As noted in chapter two, peacebuilding is a politically symbolic idea attractive to a range of donors and international organisations, both because conflict was increasingly perceived as a threat to the mandates of various financial, economic and social development institutions, but also because it provided a relatively simple means for a range of organisations to expand their operational profile (Barnett et al 2007). Sri Lankan NGOs were highly dependent upon donor funding and were thus likely to act opportunistically in using the emerging discourse of peacebuilding as a means of diversifying and accessing new sources of funding. As illustrated in the last chapter, NGOs' engagement in

peacebuilding work differed considerably: some organisations (such as Sarvodaya) integrated these ideas into existing ideological or spiritual frameworks of action, whilst others (such as FCE) embraced donors' technical peacebuilding frameworks more wholeheartedly.

NGOs' responses to shifting conditions were constrained by the path-dependent nature of NGO legitimisation strategies. Organisations that began with broad operational mandates found it relatively easy to reconfigure their programmatic focus or to reshape their organisational identity, while organisations with a tight programmatic focus were more constrained. The discursive challenges faced by NGOs during the transition back to war were different for multi-mandate organisations and peacebuilding specialists.

Peacebuilding specialists' organisational identities were bound up with the objective of peace and they tended to have invested more energy in defining the causal and normative frameworks that underpinned their operational strategies. This level of investment made repackaging or reorientation of their activities a more complex and demanding task. Multi-mandates could adjust more easily. For some multi-mandate organisations (such as Sarvodaya), peacebuilding was reinterpreted to fit with an existing holistic programme and as such could be emphasised or de-emphasised in accordance with the prevailing climate. Groups such as Sarvodaya and TRO, which couched their work in Sinhalese and Tamil nationalist discourse respectively, found it particularly difficult to negotiate the shifting social, institutional and political boundaries associated with the transition from peace to war.

Smaller, district-based multi-mandate or development organisations faced a different set of expectations and challenges. Donors did not look to these organisations to develop broad-ranging rationales for their work and, as a result, organisational goals were less well articulated. For these organisations, a move into peacebuilding often involved a simple repackaging exercise in the first instance, with little organisational investment in the goal or strategy involved. These NGOs found it relatively unproblematic to switch back to their *ex ante* positions.

Before moving on to look at these tactics and strategies in detail, it should be noted that this analysis refers to representations made by NGOs in English. This gives only a partial picture of NGOs' discursive world: an analysis of Sinhalese or Tamil discourse would probably uncover a different set of dynamics and tensions. While presenting only a limited

picture, however, NGOs' use of English is arguably the most significant arena for reframing NGOs' work since it involves an accommodation between international and domestic audiences. Vernacular representations, by contrast, are normally only repositioned with domestic actors in mind.

Growing sensitivities

As Sri Lanka edged slowly back to war in 2006, the language of peace immediately grew more contested. 'Peace' became a 'dirty word', particularly among Sinhalese communities in the South.¹⁴⁶ Promoting peace in a situation of war quickly became equated with showing sympathy for the status-quo position embodied in the peace process, where the LTTE were recognised as a legitimate state-like actor. By late 2006, this was a view that came to represent mainstream government thinking. In a reiteration of George W. Bush's famous remark, which launched the 'global war on terror' five years previously, President Rajapakse announced in December 2006: 'You decide whether you should be with a handful of terrorists or with the common man who is in the majority'.¹⁴⁷ Details of NGO peacebuilding activities that were publicised in this environment were closely scrutinised for their potential to subvert the military aims of the government (see, for example, Daily News 2007).

This environment caused immediate problems for peacebuilding organisations that had identified most closely with the political positions and terminology of the peace process. Several Colombo-based policy or peacebuilding specialists actively promoted a federal political solution to the conflict. Terminology linked to federalism became associated with the traitorous view condemned by nationalists. One NGO representative argued in early 2007 that groups such as the Anti-war Front were wrong to talk about federalism since these words were 'allergic to the people'.¹⁴⁸

As well as being indicative of NGOs' political support for a negotiated settlement, key peacebuilding concepts were also signifiers of the values and identity of the organisations that used them. Peacebuilding required a particular expertise and familiarity with highly technical English discourses, which meant that the sector tended to be dominated by large

¹⁴⁶ Interview with representative from peacebuilding specialist, Colombo, 26th September 2006.

¹⁴⁷ Addressing "all political parties, all media, and all people's organisations," he declared: "You must choose between these two sides. No one can represent these two sides at any one time." (Rajapakse 2006).

¹⁴⁸ Interview with NGO representative, Colombo, 14th February 2007.

national NGOs (Orjuela 2003).¹⁴⁹ As a result of these characteristics, and because of the perceived boom in peacebuilding activities in the aftermath of the ceasefire, peacebuilding terminology became linked with opportunistic rent-seeking in anti-NGO discourse.¹⁵⁰ Similarly, peacebuilding language was discredited because of its connection with an elitist, English speaking milieu. Very often this language was not well understood by ordinary people.¹⁵¹

Some smaller organisations avoided using peacebuilding terminology for these reasons:

'Interviewer: Why do you not use the word peace [in the field]?'

NGO manager: Because it is a marketised thing....sometimes people have a bad impression of this now...because of the propaganda of the JVP and the JHU'.¹⁵²

Peacebuilding 'without using the word "peace"'

Opposition to peacebuilding NGOs was closely tied to buzz-words and labels. These labels became a quick and easy way for critics to discredit NGOs by linking their peacebuilding credentials to nationalist discourses that saw peace work as synonymous with providing support to the LTTE or rent-seeking opportunism. Because these labels played an important signifying function, NGOs responded to the deteriorating political environment by repackaging their work.¹⁵³ Since much of the threat posed by nationalist actors focused on sensitivities to language, a number of NGOs explicitly shifted language to avoid conflict with these groups:

'Anti-NGO feeling has become more mainstream....this year [2006] we had to change our strategy to reach the people. Sometimes we didn't use the word "peace". We are trying to work in another way to develop peace without using the word peace'.¹⁵⁴

¹⁴⁹ The tendency for peacebuilding work to become dominated by more professionalised groups has been noted in other contexts (see Paffenholz & Spurr 2006).

¹⁵⁰ This discursive approach was contrasted by several national peacebuilding NGOs with the 'easy language' of the JVP and the JHU (Interview with representative of national NGO, 23rd September 2006).

¹⁵¹ Interview with representative of peacebuilding NGO, Colombo, 29th September 2006.

¹⁵² Interview with representative of small national peacebuilding specialist, Colombo, 23rd September 2006. An NGO representative interviewed on 13th November 2006 in Kandy made a similar point.

¹⁵³ The idea of 'peacebuilding by stealth' was observed by practitioners working in Sri Lanka in the 1990s (see Atmar & Goodhand 2002, 47).

¹⁵⁴ Interview with representative of small peacebuilding NGO, Colombo, 23rd September 2006.

Usually these discursive manoeuvres were relatively straightforward and involved simple rebranding of projects or activities. One national peacebuilding organisation, for example, re-labelled a community peacebuilding project in the South of Sri Lanka:

'We don't mention peace: it's a problem solving forum. It's a non-violent problem-solving forum'.¹⁵⁵

Repositioning was more difficult for niche organisations for whom peacebuilding constituted part of their organisational mandate. Particular challenges faced organisations with 'peace' in their name: *Peace and Community Action*, a small peacebuilding specialist interviewed in March 2007, described how they adjusted to these challenges:

'We only say PCA now. The truck no longer has any markings on it: it's just white'.¹⁵⁶

Donors were also aware of the potential for project labels to offend and were often complicit in this (particularly when they were working with smaller NGOs in smaller grants):

'If they're seen to be doing a project called "peace dialogues for a brighter future" it looks like we're specifically talking about peace, and the people on the other side don't want to be talking about peace at the moment. But if we did a grant called building a library for a brighter future, then there's no problem'.¹⁵⁷

Calculations about repositioning were influenced by organisations' political orientation. For advocacy organisations, repositioning in response to changing political conditions involved being careful to present a more balanced critique of the behaviour of conflict actors:

'One thing where we've taken on board the criticism is that we are too pro-LTTE. So now I make sure that I have hard things to say about the LTTE'.¹⁵⁸

Colombo-based peacebuilding NGOs were more open to charges that they were 'importing Western ideas' and had to find ways of stressing that these ideas emerged out of their experience of the Sri Lankan situation. One means of deflecting this kind of criticism was to make a greater effort to link peacebuilding objectives with locally-relevant issues. A small

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ The date and location of the interview here have been omitted to protect the interviewee's anonymity.

¹⁵⁷ Interview with donor representative, Ampara town, 6th November 2006.

¹⁵⁸ Interview with representative of national peacebuilding NGO, Colombo 20th November 2006.

peacebuilding organisation described how this was done in their awareness-raising programme:

'In Anuradhapura we have a big programme to promote the federal idea... We first tried to address their own issues then compare their issues with the national issues. They realise that the uneven development in the country is not helping them, so people in Anuradhapura might have to go to Colombo to sort things out. They might have to wait months and always have to come to Colombo. So this makes them realise the federal situation is the best way'.¹⁵⁹

Through these manoeuvres then, NGOs were able to downplay their engagement with politically sensitive peacebuilding work, whilst distancing themselves from the associated claims that the organisations involved in these activities were elitist and motivated primarily by financial rather than moral concerns. This repositioning work was facilitated by the broad and often vague objectives of peacebuilding discourse and its tendency to overlap with broader developmental or political aims (Barnett et al 2007).

Maintaining relevance and coherence: discursive tactics and donors

As well as facing pressures to tone down their work in order to avoid rebuke from domestic critics, NGOs were also under pressure to meet the changing demands and expectations of donors. This was a sensitive project that was reliant upon a detailed knowledge of donors' shifting objectives and a mastery of peacebuilding discourse required for repackaging existing projects and activities. As this section will illustrate, large, English-speaking cosmopolitan NGOs had a considerable comparative advantage here over smaller district-based organisations. Donors' expectations of national NGOs were also different to those of smaller non-specialist organisations.

Rebranding activities (smaller NGOs and non-specialists)

During the course of my interviews, NGOs and donor representatives often criticised what they saw as superficial peacebuilding: programmes where existing activities had been dressed up as peacebuilding, or where a 'peacebuilding component' had been tagged on to

¹⁵⁹ Interview with representative of national peacebuilding NGO, 23rd September 2006

a development project.¹⁶⁰ One interviewee noted that NGO work was 'like a seasonal business', where NGOs shift their focus depending on the latest priorities of donors:

'From structural poverty alleviation, we shifted to peace. Some organisations went from environment to development to AIDS and HIV from there to children's rights, women's rights'.¹⁶¹

This pattern of behaviour seemed most characteristic of district-level organisations, or those organisations that possessed a degree of understanding of donors' funding priorities, but lacked the discursive mastery or sophistication to mask a more brazen *volte face* in their organisational mandate. This discursive naivety was noted by donors working with district-level organisations in the East:

'Some organisations KNOW that's the kind of work we want to do so they put the language in suggesting that kind of stuff. That doesn't mean to say they do it [peacebuilding and conflict resolution work] very well'.¹⁶²

Several interviewees criticised donors for fostering this pattern of collusion between other NGOs and donors, which resulted in a shallow interpretation of peacebuilding and 'activity-based' peacebuilding programmes.¹⁶³ One donor representative described how a 'proposal language' had developed, which NGOs wishing to receive funding for peacebuilding work had to learn. He argued that 'there is a code: the Tamil, Sinhala, Muslim formula', referring to the perceived need for peacebuilding projects to involve people from all three major ethnic communities; 'NGOs have to learn these keys to the door'.¹⁶⁴

This code-like interpretation of peacebuilding was partly driven by the fact that many donors were also new to the peacebuilding sector and had not developed comprehensive

¹⁶⁰ Interview with representative of peacebuilding specialist, 26th September 2006; interview with representative of national NGO, 17th November 2006; interview with donor representative, 6th December 2006.

¹⁶¹ Interview with donor representative, Colombo, 22nd November 2006. Harris (2002) and Holt (2005) describe NGOs' engagement in peacebuilding in similar terms. Denskus (2007) has documented similar shortcomings in the use of peacebuilding terminology in Nepal, and Goetschell and Hagmann (2009, 64) in their more broad-ranging analysis, have highlighted a general tendency for contemporary peacebuilding practice to reduce peace 'to an empty shell that has become void of meaning'.

¹⁶² Interview with donor representative, Ampara Town, 6th November 2006.

¹⁶³ Interview with donor representative, Colombo, 20th September 2006, representatives of small peacebuilding NGOs, Colombo, 26th September, 12th October, 7th November 2006.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with donor representative, Colombo, 20th September 2006.

or cohesive strategies themselves. One donor representative argued that donors were often satisfied that a programme would contribute to peacebuilding simply because it involved beneficiaries from different ethnic communities.¹⁶⁵ The fact that there were a range of theories and frameworks informing NGO peacebuilding made it difficult for donors to compare the work of different potential NGO partners.¹⁶⁶

Donors and INGOs were themselves often under pressure to demonstrate their competence in the emerging field of peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity.¹⁶⁷ Engaging with peacebuilding specialists was a relatively quick and easy way of demonstrating that these donors were integrating conflict sensitivity into their programmes. Adding 'peace components' to existing development projects performed the same function.¹⁶⁸

Since local organisations with expertise in peacebuilding were in relatively short supply, donors often tolerated working with organisations whose engagement with peace issues was fairly mechanical, and based on a simple rebranding of existing development activities. In some cases, this repackaging or re-emphasis was worked out through collaboration between donors and NGOs. This was particularly the case in partnerships with smaller, district-based NGOs, for whom the grand causal frameworks that informed their work were seen as less important than the field-based outcomes. One representative from a non-governmental donor organisation described how this process worked with a small national peacebuilding organisation:

'Interviewee: They are basically a drama group. We started to support them and I told them that you have to shift from drama group to an NGO and address peace. They have very good tools [for doing this]: through culture.'

Interviewer: So earlier they weren't really focussing on peace?

Interviewee: No they weren't. It's the donors who pulled them. [In] 2003/4 I told them to focus'.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ Interview with donor representative, Ampara Town, 6th November 2006.

¹⁶⁷ 'Conflict sensitivity' was a term developed by donors and NGOs in the 1990s to describe the capacity to 'understand the context in which [they] operate; understand the interaction between [their] intervention and the context; and act upon the understanding of this interaction, in order to avoid negative impacts and maximise positive impacts' (Barbero et al 2003, 3)

¹⁶⁸ Interview with national NGO representative, Colombo, 17th November 2006.

¹⁶⁹ Interview with donor representative, 22nd November 2006, Colombo.

The organisation itself did not present its move into peacebuilding in the same way. They saw the link between their cultural programmes and peacebuilding as more fundamental and self-evident:

'On the whole, what we are trying to do is create a new generation of people a new family (women, youth and children) with a new perspective on life and on culture...For us creative arts...are our instruments to bring people together. They can act as a bridge between the different cultural groups. You have to respect the person as he or she is'.¹⁷⁰

This case demonstrates the tactical utility of starting with a broad operational and discursive mandate. This organisation's initial goal of 'trying to create a new generation of people' could easily be used to create a coherent story about the organisation's development that explained an expansion into peacebuilding. There was usually no great gap between broadly defined peacebuilding goals and organisations' long-standing social or community development objectives. The case also shows that unequal power relations between donors and NGOs were likely to be well disguised; NGOs are unlikely to admit that their engagement in peacebuilding was externally-driven since this would undermine their claim to autonomy and independence.

For smaller district-level organisations, which tended to be more financially unstable than larger NGOs, forging a deep, coherent approach to peacebuilding and investing a large part of their organisational identity into peacebuilding was a risky strategy. A superficial engagement in peacebuilding, which satisfied certain donors but still left other options open, was more rational. The potential consequences for smaller organisations that specialised in peacebuilding were quite severe; one INGO representative explained that two district-based peacebuilding specialists based in Ampara district ceased functioning after their main INGO partner withdrew funding due to a change in priorities.¹⁷¹

National NGOs and peacebuilding specialists

Donors tended to have higher expectations of large national organisations. These organisations were generally expected to demonstrate outcomes and develop long-term, coherent plans outlining how their visions linked to ground activities. They were also expected to have greater understanding of peacebuilding terminology and theories, to write their own proposals and submit reports in English.

¹⁷⁰ Interview with small NGO representative, Colombo, 10th October 2006.

¹⁷¹ Interview with INGO representative, Colombo 30th October 2006.

Since expectations were higher and their strategies were under greater scrutiny, national NGOs faced greater challenges in developing and maintaining the coherence of their mandates, programmes and projects. Other studies of development discourse have argued that the durability of development programmes and objectives is based more on the discursive coherence of the project than on critical assessments that judge whether stated objectives have been met (Marriage 2006, Mosse 2005, DeMars 2005). Because NGOs and donors shared an interest in demonstrating their capacity to have wide-ranging impacts in their chosen field, and since donors were often dependent upon national NGOs to implement their objectives, a degree of collusion persisted, with both sides reluctant to highlight failures. Donors' tolerance of failure was underpinned by their reliance on national NGOs. Although donors may have been dissatisfied with NGOs' contributions, there were often few alternative organisations with the staff capacity, expertise or monitoring capabilities to carry out ambitious peacebuilding programmes. These patterns were compounded by the well-documented difficulties associated with evaluating peacebuilding projects (Goodhand 2004, 2006).

Since causal claims were rarely subjected to thorough critical analysis, it was rational for NGOs to present a broad-ranging plan of action. As a result, most national NGOs deployed ambitious 'integrated' or 'comprehensive' approaches to peacebuilding. Sarvodaya's operational mandate covered consciousness, economics and politics, while another smaller national peacebuilding organisation, the Centre for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation, addressed peacebuilding through a tripartite 'heart, head and hand approach' which, like Sarvodaya's approach, tackled spiritual, political and developmental aspects of peace. FCE's approach was similarly pitched at different levels: contributing to elite political decision-making, while also working with mid-level and grassroots leaders. As well as demonstrating a degree of expertise and programmatic reach that was attractive to donors, these broad-ranging approaches were also tactically useful since they allowed NGOs to focus on different aspects of peacebuilding at different times.

Differentiation tactics

As Hilhorst (2003, 5) has argued, the term 'NGO' is a 'claim-bearing' label which primarily serves to assert the claim that an organisation is 'doing good for the development of others'. As Hilhorst also notes, however, there are competing versions of the meaning of the 'NGO' label. As well as the positive meaning given above, 'NGO' can also represent

'organisations that are primarily concerned with advancing the material development of their own staff' (*ibid.*). The term 'NGO' had typically prompted an ambivalent reaction from Sri Lankan civil society groups. On the one hand, it served as a useful shorthand to display a set of capacities and competencies that were appealing to foreign funding organisations. On the other hand, it signalled a set of potentially negative connotations to the broader public, which included being professionalised, elite and out of touch with the genuine community concerns.

One of the key outcomes of the crisis of NGO legitimacy was a rapid change in the relative weight the two competing versions of the term 'NGO' wielded in the public arena, with the negative associations of the term NGO quickly beginning to outweigh its positive connotations. This shift encouraged many NGOs to stress their 'un-NGOness'. Many national and local NGOs I encountered in the course of my research were keen to distance themselves with the increasingly negative connotations associated with the term 'NGO'. Comments such as 'we are not an NGO', 'we are not an NGO...we are a people's movement'¹⁷² were common. Others tried to dissociate themselves from 'NGO people': 'we've always tried not to be involved with the NGO people'¹⁷³, 'we try not to recruit NGO people'.¹⁷⁴ NGOs' attempt to off-load the NGO label demonstrates the 'retraction cascade' in action: as the negative connotations associated with the label increased, fewer actors were willing to stand up and defend it. Differentiation tactics can also be seen as part of a broader effort to purify the 'sacred' realm of voluntary action from the 'profane' world of commerce and self-interest (Hopgood 2006, 2008), or to redraw the symbolic boundaries between the NGO sector and the political realm.

Organisations differentiated themselves from negative categorisations in a variety of ways and for a range of reasons. These differentiation tactics involved emphasising the negative impact of a particular subset of NGOs which were presented as working in a way that was contrary and damaging to the aims of 'real' or 'authentic' organisations. Highlighting the problems associated with these 'mutant' or 'fake NGOs' (see Bryant 2002, Hilhorst 2003) not only served to reshape the NGO sector and reassert its positive thrust, it also provided

¹⁷² Interviews with representatives from national NGO, Colombo/ Kandy 20th/ 29th September 2006.

¹⁷³ Interview with representative of small national peacebuilding specialist, Colombo, 23rd September 2006.

¹⁷⁴ Interview with representative of small national peacebuilding specialist, Colombo, 12th October 2007.

a means for organisations to highlight their own strengths. As Markowitz (2001, 43) has argued, this kind of in-fighting is particularly common in contexts where there is 'increasing competition for unreliable and increasingly restricted funds'. These examples also demonstrate the importance of symbolic boundaries in the construction of legitimacy and, in particular, the central role played by boundary making in NGOs' responses to legitimacy crises.

In other settings, NGOs could tackle problems of dangerous 'mutant NGOs' by working together to limit damage to their credibility by re-asserting their own distinct values and procedures through a new umbrella body (see Bryant 2002). Although an umbrella body did exist in the Sri Lankan context in the form of the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA), it tended to function as an independent NGO in its own right, and was largely unable to speak for the sector as a whole. While there was some evidence for this kind of joint response during the crisis period, most NGOs preferred to work alone and some joined in the criticism of certain NGOs as a means of underlining their own legitimate status.¹⁷⁵ This lack of a coordinated response in Sri Lanka was linked to the unusually politicised and competitive nature of the Sri Lankan NGO sector, which motivated NGOs to promote themselves at the expense of their rivals. It was also an outcome of the growing dangers associated with public action in the hostile environment after the election of President Rajapakse, which made most NGOs wary of using public channels of legitimation.

Smaller district-based NGOs were able to critique national NGOs by reiterating many of the key tenets of popular anti-NGO discourse, highlighting larger national NGOs' lack of understanding about local populations and the mercenary nature of their peace work:

'One organisation, I'll call them "x", they take Muslims and Tamils to come for a meeting. They forced me to come. [Their leader] was addressing. His speech was translated from Sinhalese to Tamil. The public were annoyed because there was so much talk talk talk, but they waited because of the Rs. 250 they were getting for attending the meeting. Plus the good lunch packet and tea morning and evening. This fellow has been talking about peace for last 15 years. I ask why can't you say one sentence in Tamil? None of the people can speak Tamil. If you are interested, why can't you talk in Tamil...In Colombo they are

¹⁷⁵ As mentioned in chapter three, IMPACS, a Canadian NGO, for example, facilitated a workshop attempting to counter negative depictions of Sri Lankan NGOs in the media. While several organisations favoured a joint media campaign, many others argued that a no-media policy would be more effective (IMPACS 2006).

spending millions and millions on their head office. We don't want an office in Colombo, we want an office in these areas. A lot of these organisations in Colombo – they have been bought'.¹⁷⁶

These accounts often contrasted other NGOs' limited capacity to represent ordinary people with their own broad-based appeal. In one interview with a large national organisation, the narrow appeal of other NGOs was used to explain violent opposition towards them by political activists. One staff member of a large national NGO explained why his organisation had not faced the same kind of opposition as others:

'We are not facing opposition [like the others]...because our staff are all local. We have Muslim staff from Muslim areas, Sinhalese staff from Sinhalese areas and Tamil staff from Tamil areas'.¹⁷⁷

As these examples demonstrate, the campaign to reassert qualities of representativeness and accountability was one of the key representational goals for NGOs during the fieldwork period. In addition to constituting a response to the growing vociferousness of domestic actors, such campaigns also resonated with donors' growing dissatisfaction with the apparently unrepresentative character of technical approaches pursued by peacebuilding specialists.

Just as peacebuilding activities became more difficult to implement and funding for peace work diminished, competition among peacebuilders increased. Peacebuilding NGOs increasingly sought to distinguish themselves from other organisations on the grounds of expertise and understanding of peacebuilding issues. This competition was particularly evident in the East, where many development organisations had added peacebuilding activities to their portfolio of projects. NGOs interviewed during this period argued that organisations were just engaging in 'activity-based' peacebuilding and were 'accepting a donor driven approach'.¹⁷⁸ This comparison allowed NGOs (particularly peacebuilding specialists) to assert the relative effectiveness of their own, more considered peacebuilding practice:

¹⁷⁶ Interview with local NGO representative, Ampara Town, 10th November 2006.

¹⁷⁷ Interview with representative of large national NGO, Colombo 10th October 2006.

¹⁷⁸ Interview with head of small peacebuilding specialist, Colombo, 26th September 2006.

'There are a lot of people doing peace work that is activity based. Things like a cricket match. Rather than getting people to think about why is it that you adopt the polarised position that you do. Why do they have these feelings about Tamils? - that deconstruction of their views and feelings...Most organisations have done only activities'.¹⁷⁹

A range of aspects of these organisations came under scrutiny. Several smaller organisations criticised Colombo organisations for only engaging through short-term workshop-based approaches, as well as their lack of knowledge of the local situation:

'Most organisations are doing one-day workshops and then going. No follow up. One day workshops will not give any awareness to the people: at least seven days or one month you have to work with the people....We can't create peace in one day or two weeks....we are fighting for two decades – how can we create peace in two days!'¹⁸⁰

'Everyone is doing monitoring. You ask them "where is such and such a road in Kalmunai?" They don't know. They are coming from Colombo....But we know the truth' (ibid).

Some peacebuilding specialists criticised the programmes of other organisations on the grounds that they were culturally insensitive and lacked a common understanding with the people with whom they worked. This was particularly the case when NGOs attempted to engage with unlike minded groups such as the Buddhist clergy:

'I noticed that [organisation x's] projects...aren't promoting religious harmony because the Buddhist monks are taking 100% ownership of the project and they're sometimes blaming the Catholic priests'.¹⁸¹

Established district-based NGOs also distinguished themselves from new organisations that had sprung up or 'mushroomed' in response to the tsunami. These organisations were reminiscent of the 'fly-by-night' mutants identified by Bryant in the Philippines, which were designed simply to capture donor funds intended for 'real' NGOs (Bryant 2002). District-based NGOs' accounts of these organisations focused on under-regulated local and international NGOs with little experience of the Sri Lankan context. They argued that this inexperience led not only to misallocation of resources but also to a number of cultural

¹⁷⁹ Interview with district-based peacebuilding specialist, Kalmunai, 8th November 2006.

¹⁸⁰ Interview with district-based peacebuilding specialist, Kalmunai, 8th November 2006.

¹⁸¹ Interview with national peacebuilding specialist, Colombo 12th October 2006.

problems, with expatriate staff behaving inappropriately.¹⁸² One leader of a regional NGO reflected some of these concerns:

'It's true certain NGOs have done bad things especially after the tsunami...this is very much contradictory to way of operation of local NGOs in the East....They are living a luxurious life...Most INGOs made use of the tsunami in order for their own service....they flourished. This was a good opportunity for them. This had a bad impact on NGO sector – I'm totally critical of the way NGOs behaved'.¹⁸³

Programmatic strategies

Beyond public and private pronouncements about the purpose, scope and meaning of their work, the actual activities in which NGOs were engaged in played an important role in shaping other actors' perceptions of them. During the transitional period between peace and war, NGO projects and activities came under an unprecedented degree of scrutiny. As the environment for NGOs became more hostile, details of NGO peacebuilding activities were regularly reported in the state media. NGO peacebuilding programmes came under greater scrutiny from donors as they looked for new approaches to address the needs and issues emerging out of the renewed conflict. NGOs struggled to maintain relevance as operational needs changed and donors' objectives and expectations were modified. Peacebuilding NGOs that had expanded into the development field in response to the tsunami were presented with an additional challenge. These organisations found it difficult to justify maintaining a long-term involvement in the humanitarian or development field. This section explores the dilemmas raised by this environment and some of the programmatic strategies that NGOs employed to deal with them.

Sensitising operations

Most NGOs involved in peacebuilding work began to adapt their activities in response to the deterioration in the political and security environment. The most pressing issue facing NGOs at this time was a change in security conditions: a decrease in freedom of movement

¹⁸² Concern surrounding this issue culminated in a 'sex scandal' involving local NGO staff and INGOs in 2006 (see Kamalendran (2006). This incident increased hostility toward some NGOs (and particularly their female staff) in these districts and led to difficulties in implementing some projects and recruitment problems, particularly in Muslim areas (interview with INGO representative, Colombo, 26th March 2007).

¹⁸³ Interview with local NGO representative, Akkaraipattu, 23rd October 2006. Another leader of a large national NGO argued that the parliamentary investigation into NGOs was perhaps justified by the high salaries of some individuals working in the peacebuilding sector (interviewed Colombo, 30th March 2007).

made it more difficult to pursue peacebuilding programmes, many of which involved interaction or exchanges between different ethnic groups. It became particularly difficult for Tamil or Muslim people living in the North and East to travel outside of these regions.¹⁸⁴ Potential participants in peacebuilding projects were also reluctant to travel because of fear of arrest.¹⁸⁵ These factors made it difficult for NGOs to carry out many of the peacebuilding activities conducted during the ceasefire and as a result many peacebuilding programmes were scaled back.¹⁸⁶ The other main factor driving these programmatic shifts was growing nationalist opposition in the field. Several peace-related workshops were disrupted in 2006 by the JVP, in the Vavuniya, Kandy and Trincomalee districts.¹⁸⁷ Organisations that were involved both in campaigning on peace and conflict issues and in field-based peacebuilding activities were most vulnerable to this kind of direct opposition. Modifications to peacebuilding activities were often worked out in collaboration with donors. One donor representative, based in Ampara district, explained this process:

'We didn't specifically try to play it down. For example in Akkaraipattu¹⁸⁸ after the election last year on 27th November...someone threw hand grenades into the mosque. What I was wanting to do was bombarding place with peace-related grants to get those people who didn't want the conflict to get together and discuss ways to stop it escalating. We discussed it with local staff and grantees. The worry was that this specific work could lead to recriminations on the grantees or might fracture certain groups in the community. If we were doing an activity and someone threw a hand grenade into the group the consequences could be dire. We didn't specifically try to tone it down but advice suggested that we should'.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Interview with INGO representatives, Ampara Town, 19th October 2006; Kandy, 13th November 2006. Interview with national NGO representative, Kandy, 13th November 2006; Colombo, 7th December 2006.

¹⁸⁵ Interview with INGO representatives, Ampara Town, 19th October 2006; Interview with national NGO representative, Kandy, 13th November 2006.

¹⁸⁶ Interview with INGO representatives, Ampara Town, 19th October 2006. Interview with national NGO representatives, Colombo, 7th December 2006; Colombo, 30th March 2007.

¹⁸⁷ Interview with national NGO representative, Colombo, 20th November 2006.

¹⁸⁸ Akkaraipattu is a medium-sized town on the East coast of Ampara district popular among NGOs and donors for peacebuilding activities because of its mixed Tamil and Muslim population.

¹⁸⁹ Interview with donor representative, Ampara, 6th November 2006.

The ensuing projects were less explicit about addressing conflict issues or tackled them less directly:

'We've done it through musical shows, dramas which get multi-ethnic groups together to sing about peace or whatever. We've done it through art – photography, paintings for peace. We have been explicit in the past, we're not being so explicit at the moment'.¹⁹⁰

Meeting shifting donor priorities

As the peace process broke down after the election of President Rajapakse in 2005, donors began to adjust their peacebuilding strategies in response to changing needs, and adapt their programmes in line with the prevailing political climate. During the early part of the ceasefire period, donors had been keen to support a consciously depoliticised version of peacebuilding pursued by the UNF regime, which emphasised economic aspects of peacebuilding. During this period, donors favoured partnerships with NGOs that could help to build consensus and support the government-led process, while organisations that might potentially raise uncomfortable political issues were marginalised (Walton with Saravanamuttu 2009). After the election of the UPFA government in 2004 and the subsequent unravelling of the peace process, however, donors' became less concerned with the role that NGOs could play in supporting a defunct peace process, and more interested in their potential to play an active role in preventing a further deterioration of the environment for peacebuilding and conflict resolution in Sri Lanka. Donors became more concerned with funding the provision of humanitarian assistance and documenting human rights abuses. To some extent, the recession for human rights organisations and the boon for the specialist peacebuilders heralded by the signing of the ceasefire agreement in 2002 was reversed as both sides of the conflict adopted increasingly belligerent positions and the number of human rights abuses increased.¹⁹¹

The failure of the peace process caused many donors to reflect critically on the peacebuilding activities conducted during the ceasefire period and to look for ways to enhance existing approaches to civil society peacebuilding (Orjuela 2006, 1). Donors increasingly sought to move beyond the old 'activity-based' model that relied on dialogues,

¹⁹⁰ Interview with donor representative, Ampara, 6th November 2006.

¹⁹¹ Interview with donor representative, Colombo, 6th December 2006. There is some evidence that this trend may have reversed by late 2008 when donors were keen to support 'post-conflict' rehabilitation work in the East and were increasingly careful to avoid 'angering' the government 'with an approach seen as too political' (ICG 2009, 9).

exchanges and workshops.¹⁹² A key channel identified by donors was to engage with more representative groups such as trades unions, chambers of commerce and religious organisations that formed part of a 'broader civil society', and in some cases, with the private sector.¹⁹³

As national NGOs often had close links with donors, they were able to keep track of subtle shifts in funding priorities. They were also more attuned to the specific requirements of funding requests and more capable of shifting their programmes to suit donor priorities. National NGOs' enduring advantage over smaller groups is demonstrated well in the following example encountered during the course of my research. The World Bank was keen to fund new 'un-like-minded' organisations as part of their post-conflict programme. They decided to back a new organisation called the Institute for Social Development (ISD), a network organisation for Buddhist clergy. Although the Bank believed this represented a move towards engagement with broader civil society, the new organisation was in fact supported by one of the largest national NGOs in Sri Lanka, and the proposal for the project was written by a senior staff member of this large national organisation.¹⁹⁴ Since larger organisations had a better understanding of the funding priorities of donors, and better capacity to communicate their aims, these NGOs (and their off-shoots) flourished, while smaller organisations were left behind.

The desire for donors to work with a less technical and professionalised organisations posed a greater challenge for large national NGOs, since their organisational identities were highly professionalised and based on their perceived expertise. By forming a new affiliated organisation, national NGOs were able to present a less professionalised image to access funding without undertaking a radical overhaul of their core identity. This capacity for new off-shoots to emerge from large NGOs was common in the Sri Lankan environment.¹⁹⁵ A

¹⁹² Interview with peacebuilding NGO representative, 26th September 2006.

¹⁹³ Interview with donor representative 13th October 2006, Colombo. Interview with NGO representative, 12th October, Colombo. See also Goodhand & Klem (2005). This self-criticism did not fundamentally question the role of donors in fostering peace at a societal level. Instead, it focused on technical solutions to the failures identified in the previous period. This tendency for donor discourse to perpetuate failure and mask tensions between results and rhetoric has been noted elsewhere (Mosse 2005, Marriage 2006).

¹⁹⁴ Interview with NGO representative, Colombo, 13th March 2007.

¹⁹⁵ This trend was often driven by personal rivalries within organisations. Many large national NGOs in Sri Lanka, including National Peace Council and Sewalanka Foundation, were formed by former Sarvodaya staff members.

related phenomenon was organisational compartmentalisation, whereby large national NGOs formed semi-autonomous organisations to manage one aspect of their work. This organisational pattern was most prominent in the case of Sarvodaya, which formed numerous semi-autonomous divisions such as SEEDS and *Deshodaya*. This approach protected Sarvodaya's voluntaristic, apolitical and spiritualistic reputation from the more financially savvy image of SEEDS, or the more political active identity of *Deshodaya*. Compartmentalisation served to protect an organisation's core identity from the potentially damaging reputational effects produced by these sub-divisions. FCE's leader, Dr. Kumar Rupesinghe, also created a series of organisations designed partly to adapt to changing political circumstances. The tactics associated with these organisations will be examined in the next chapter.

5. Conclusions

As Beetham (1991) has argued, legitimacy is best analysed by looking at 'systems in change'. This chapter has explored how a sudden shift in NGO legitimacy was related to rapid changes in the political environment in Sri Lanka. It has also provided a detailed examination of the process of NGO legitimation, providing insights into why NGOs pursue particular programmatic or presentational approaches.

The analysis presented in this chapter described how NGOs' legitimacy and reputations are related to the kind of language and labels that they use to describe themselves and their activities. The use of peacebuilding discourse during the crisis period became a particularly delicate task, whereby the language that NGOs used was judged through the conflicting lenses of donors and critical nationalist audiences. This chapter has shown that NGOs were capable of shoring up legitimacy with various actors by adapting the way in which they framed their peacebuilding activities, although some organisations were more adept at performing these manoeuvres and better placed to carry them out successfully than others. The way in which NGOs talked about other organisations was highlighted as an important vehicle in the struggle to maintain legitimacy, with many NGOs bolstering their own legitimacy by dissociating themselves from their peers or criticising them.

This chapter has described how NGOs were able to respond to the crisis of legitimacy by pursuing a range of discursive tactics and programmatic strategies. While NGOs found themselves fairly powerless to prevent the politically-driven crisis of legitimacy, they were nonetheless capable of mitigating its most serious effects by adapting their work and the

way in which they presented it to outsiders. The extent to which NGOs' efforts to deflect criticism and maintain support were successful was shaped by underlying power relations. Although large professionalised organisations suffered greater criticism from nationalists and their NGO peers, their mastery of peacebuilding discourse and the mutually-dependent nature of their relationships with donors meant that they were better equipped and better positioned to deal with fluctuations in donor priorities. Changes to peacebuilding discourse were designed to reduce the growing dissonance between NGOs' and donors' objectives and outcomes in a climate that was becoming less and less conducive to peacebuilding work. The chapter's findings have echoed Marriage's (2006) work on aid in Africa by identifying a degree of collusion between NGOs and donors in this endeavour to maintain the illusion of effectiveness.

The analysis presented in this chapter has resonated with a broader literature that highlights the shortcomings of international attempts to legitimise peacebuilding in conflict-affected regions. It has argued that there is a link between the deterioration in NGO legitimacy and NGOs' involvement in liberal peacebuilding projects after 2002. The technical nature of peacebuilding programmes, and the institutional arrangements that accompanied them, made NGOs engaged in peacebuilding particularly vulnerable to legitimacy crises. The ways in which these new arrangements impacted upon processes of legitimation and de-legitimation were complex, and conflated details of NGOs' work with perceptions of their financial relationships, their use of discourse and the personal motivations of their leaders.

The rapid deterioration of NGO legitimacy points to deeper frailties in the liberal peacebuilding approach (Walton 2008, Goodhand & Walton 2009). This chapter has shown that an approach to peacebuilding that privileges heavy involvement of international actors is likely to be highly sensitive in a context in which the state's role has historically been conceived in nationalistic terms. The model of liberal peacebuilding pursued in Sri Lanka failed to generate widespread popular support and provoked a nationalist backlash. Liberal NGOs suffered because they were openly supportive of a liberal cosmopolitan outlook on politics, which clashed with the nationalist worldview that dominated post-colonial politics in Sri Lanka.

The analysis of NGO legitimacy presented in this chapter has challenged the view that liberal peacebuilding acts hegemonically, and that NGOs are compelled to follow the

approaches and strategies outlined by their donor partners. Instead, it has argued that NGOs are capable of mediating and adapting the peacebuilding agendas of their funders and are able to respond to shifts in the domestic political climate for peacebuilding.

The next chapter will examine these processes of negotiation in greater detail by analysing the experience of the case study organisations during the same period. As well as describing the case studies' responses to the challenge of negotiating the transition from peace to war, and the fluctuating concerns of international liberal peacebuilders, the chapter will provide a detailed analysis of how decisions relating to discursive or programmatic change were made, examining how NGOs balanced 'hard' interests relating to financial concerns against a set of 'soft' interests relating to organisations' aims and identities.

‘They are not engaging in politics according to our criteria’: Re-negotiating peace and politics

The last chapter explored the crisis of NGO legitimacy and NGOs’ responses to it, drawing largely on examples from the preliminary case study organisations. This chapter examines the crisis in greater depth by reflecting on the experience of the two case study organisations over the same period. The chapter has three primary objectives. First, it aims to complement the analysis of the last chapter by providing a more detailed account of the processes of legitimation and de-legitimation that occurred during the crisis period, emphasising the considerable variation of experience of two national NGOs. Building on the analysis of the two case study organisations presented in chapter four, it illustrates how these two NGOs responded to the crisis in different ways, reflecting their varied engagement in peacebuilding work during the ceasefire period, their divergent organisational histories, and their different strategies of legitimation. By contrasting the two case study organisations, the chapter also stresses the influence of organisational age and embeddedness on processes of legitimation. Despite its greater reliance on donors, FCE’s relative newness permitted more wide-ranging adaptations to its operational strategy in response to crisis. While Sarvodaya was less reliant upon donor funding, it was constrained by its own staff-members’ expectations of its role.

The second aim of the chapter is to understand NGO agency in processes of legitimation and de-legitimation. The chapter examines how NGOs were perceived by key audiences and considers how these perceptions are linked to a range of factors, including NGOs’ financial relationships, their internal governance, the attitudes of staff, leaders’ relationships, and organisational histories. It explores the extent to which organisations’ responses to crisis could influence outsiders’ perceptions, emphasising the fact that these responses often provoked tensions and proved counterproductive.

Third, the chapter emphasises the centrality of representations of political action in processes of de-legitimation and reputational crisis management during this period, providing detailed evidence to support the argument that the clash between liberal

cosmopolitan and nationalist understandings of politics lay at the heart of the crisis of NGO legitimacy in Sri Lanka. NGOs' political roles became more contentious as the ceasefire broke down. For domestic political actors, NGOs' attempts to engage in peacebuilding work were increasingly perceived as 'political' in the sense that they constituted an affront to the resurgent nationalist project, which sought to resolve the conflict through military means. The changing political climate also altered donors and NGOs' ideas about what constituted appropriate political action for NGOs, as many of these actors temporarily shunned the more consensual modes of engagement that had been favoured during the ceasefire period in favour of more confrontational approaches.¹⁹⁶ In both case studies, concerns about the nature of these organisations' political action were closely bound up with broader assessments of their moral credentials based on observations of the personal actions of leaders and their financial relationships. In this sense, legitimacy was related not simply to judgements about NGOs' political practices, it was also closely connected to organisations' perceived rationale for engaging in politics; audiences were concerned not only with *what* NGOs were doing but *how* and *why* they were doing it.

The next section sketches some of the key contrasting features of the case study organisations' engagement in politics. Sections two and three will examine the impact of the crisis on the two case studies and their responses to it. The third section will discuss some of the broader implications of this analysis for the literature on NGO legitimacy and liberal peacebuilding.

1. Contrasting political characteristics

As described in chapter four, the two case study organisations pursued different objectives and goals. Sarvodaya combined moral, spiritual and political objectives, which stemmed from the organisation's belief that development was reliant upon both the spiritual awakening of individuals and radical political transformation in Sri Lanka. FCE's aims were primarily technical, focusing on monitoring local-level conflicts and facilitating dialogue between key political players. Pursuing different goals, the two organisations required different kinds of legitimacy for different reasons. Sarvodaya sought 'active legitimacy' as a means of building support from the general population for its moral vision, while FCE

¹⁹⁶This shift towards a more confrontational approach was not observable in the strategies of all donors. Furthermore, this was a temporary change that emerged during the fieldwork period but later disappeared as the environment for international engagement in Sri Lanka became more restrictive and the government consolidated its position in 2008.

sought 'passive legitimacy', or acceptance and non-interference, from important actors so that it could perform the roles expected of it by its partners.

The organisations' strategies of legitimation were associated with different models and conceptions of politics. The politics of the two organisations can be distinguished in four primary ways (summarised in Table 3). First, the organisations developed different spatial relationships with politics. Sarvodaya's politics were primarily focused at the national level; it was concerned with transforming the Sri Lankan political system, drawing on nationalist political symbols. Another important element of Sarvodaya's spatial relationship with politics was its emphasis on the local arena or village as the preferred realm of political action. While this constituted a radical rejection of the contemporary political system in Sri Lanka, it was also a discourse that drew heavily on Sinhala nationalist models of development, in which the elevation of the village symbolised the defence of the political, religious and cultural interests of marginalised Sinhalese groups. FCE's politics, on the other hand, were more explicitly multi-sited, and involved forging linkages across the 'sovereign frontier' by drawing together interests and influence from the international and the national and local political realms (Duffield 2007, Harrison 2007). Much of this multi-sitedness was based on Dr. Rupesinghe's own dual links with Norway and Sri Lanka.

Second, the two organisations positioned themselves differently in relation to the arena of party politics. While Sarvodaya explicitly set itself as outside of, and apart from, this 'dirty world' of politics¹⁹⁷, FCE drew strength from its leader's role as a 'political insider', capable of straddling the realms of national and international politics. Sarvodaya used this aspect of its political identity to underline its moral credentials. By standing outside of the corrupt and interest-driven world of national politics, Sarvodaya was able to promote its more spiritually-driven political philosophy. In this way, Sarvodaya's political action also served a performative function, providing a means of reinforcing its moral credibility. As mentioned in chapter four, FCE's political role was somewhat contradictory and its work can be viewed as both political and anti-political. While some valued FCE for Dr. Rupesinghe's elite contacts and his capacity to influence key political actors, others worked with the organisation on the basis of its technical peacebuilding capacities. From this more technocratic perspective, FCE's work could be seen as depoliticising and anti-political, in

¹⁹⁷ In 2004, for example, Sarvodaya launched its *Deshodaya* or 'national awakening' programme with the goal of fostering a 'clean politics' (Daily Mirror 2004).

the sense provided used by James Ferguson (1990), in his study of development projects in Lesotho.

Table 3: Case study organisations' politics and key characteristics

	Sarvodaya	FCE
Spatial relationship with politics	Rooted in national political arena, draws on nationalist development discourse	Multi-sited: strength comes from capacity to work across, and provide links between, international, national and local political arenas
Position vis a vis 'party political' arena	Anti-political, 'outside' of politics	Political insider
Primary political strategy	'Exit' – develops alternative political system	'Voice' – contributed to a critique of existing system
Key characteristics; organisational identity; political rationale	Politics infused with spiritual/moral concerns; voluntaristic; political engagement based on representativeness	Technical approach to politics; professionalised identity; political engagement based on technical skills, networks/relationships

Third, the two organisations pursued different political *strategies*. In terms of Hirschman's (1970) 'exit', 'loyalty' and 'voice' framework, Sarvodaya's politics can be seen as conforming to an 'exit' strategy which, rather than conducting advocacy campaigns that critiqued the government, focused on developing and promoting an alternative vision of governance (cf. Feher 2007). FCE's strategy, on the other hand, aimed to contribute directly to reform of existing modes of governance, and more closely resembled a 'voice' approach (*ibid.*). This broad contrast does not necessarily imply that FCE was pursuing a more progressive political strategy than Sarvodaya. While many saw Sarvodaya's rejection of the existing political system as highly depoliticised, in some senses it was presenting a much more radical agenda than FCE.

Fourth, the organisations conducted their work in different ways, which influenced perceptions of why these organisations were engaging in politics. Sarvodaya's political style was tied to spiritually informed normative frameworks, its organisational identity was voluntaristic, and its justification for engaging in politics was deeply rooted in the claim that it was capable of representing the communities with which it worked (Sarvodaya 1999). FCE, by contrast, had a highly professionalised organisational identity. Rather than justifying its engagement in politics on the basis of its representativeness, FCE based its political work on its superior networks and technical skills.

It is important to add a few caveats to this brief sketch. This outline is intended to provide a rough outline of the various contrasting features of the two organisations, and glosses over a great deal of complexity. It is important to stress that the characteristics described here were not stable, and the organisations and their leaders tended to alter their political strategies, their political style and their spatial relationship with politics in order to meet changing political conditions. One of this chapter's key points is that adjusting the way in which they engaged in politics served as an important means by which NGOs could shape processes of legitimisation. As described in chapter four, in the late 1980s and 1990s, Sarvodaya adopted a more forthright political stand against the government in response to growing opposition. As will be illustrated below, FCE's response to a deteriorating climate and growing criticism involved an attempt to alter its spatial relationship with politics, its political strategy, and its political identity. In particular, there was a discernable shift away from a more technical approach to politics, towards a strategy that was reliant upon Dr. Rupesinghe's capacity to engage in 'courtly politics' through his personal links to the Rajapakse regime.

These shifts in emphasis, style and strategy were complicated by the fact that organisations often represented their engagement in politics in different ways to different audiences. This could sometimes involve promoting contradictory messages, or performing a kind of political sleight of hand. Kumar Rupesinghe, for example, at once highlighted his capacity to strike bargains in the 'dirty world' of politics, while at the same time emphasising his roots in a liberal cosmopolitan world of international politics. During the crisis period, FCE continued to promote its technical credentials to donors, whilst drawing on a more morally-informed political discourse of nationalism in an attempt to build more support for the organisation from domestic actors. Similarly, while FCE's political strategy can be seen as closely resembling a 'voice' strategy, at different times and from the perspective of other

audiences, it may also have appeared to resemble a 'loyalty' position, in which the organisation puts its support behind the political status quo.

The following two sections will describe and analyse how the case study organisations attempted to maintain legitimacy during the crisis period. The primary aim of this account is to contrast the key tensions facing these two organisations during this period, to understand how they were able to respond to the crisis, and to examine the role played by representations of NGO political action in shaping processes of legitimation and de-legitimation. This analysis will generate a number of conclusions about how NGO legitimation processes work and the extent to which NGOs are able to influence them.

2. Foundation for Co-Existence: responding to wide-ranging criticism

FCE came under fire from a range of actors during the crisis period. Its status as a peacebuilding specialist made it unpopular with nationalist groups, whilst its rapid expansion during the ceasefire period prompted criticism from donors and NGO peers about its procedures and motivations. FCE was attacked in a series of newspaper articles, and Dr. Rupesinghe was regularly condemned in nationalist newspaper editorials. These criticisms were driven by a number of aspects of FCE's work and organisational identity, which have been briefly introduced in chapter four, but will be discussed in greater depth below.

As was the case with the NGOs discussed in the last chapter, the challenges facing the organisation during this period were complex. FCE was not only adjusting to changes in the political and security environment; it was also reacting to shifts in the priorities and expectations of donors, and to changes in the needs and expectations of its beneficiaries. As a peacebuilding specialist whose reputation had been built upon its comparative advantage and relative technical expertise in the field of conflict management, FCE could not afford to stand still. If FCE maintained its existing operational focus it was likely to experience a reduction in funding and loss of support from its key funding partners.

In this case study, I explore both the complex nature of the criticism facing FCE, and its contested response to the crisis. The case highlights two key characteristics of NGOs' strategic and tactical responses to the 'crisis of legitimacy'. First, these responses often involved trade-offs between different objectives: by depoliticising their work, FCE was able

to reduce opposition from nationalists, but simultaneously diminished credibility with other peacebuilding NGOs. Second, these tactics were not always successful: in the case of FCE, attempts to shore up legitimacy backfired and actually caused further damage to the organisation's credibility.

The case study will be presented in the following way. The first section will examine why FCE received such widespread criticism (ranging from nationalist politicians to its NGO peers) during the fieldwork period. The second section explores FCE's response to the altered economic and political conditions after 2005, and describes how these shifts affected FCE's reputation with other NGOs and donors. Section three examines FCE's response to criticism from nationalist political groups. Section four sketches some key lessons from the case study.

Before moving on, it is worth briefly reiterating that I do not attempt to examine in any detail the impacts of these processes of de-legitimation on FCE's relations with its beneficiaries or the general public. There is some evidence that criticisms of FCE from nationalists impacted on the organisation's work at the district level. In June 2006, for example, a media statement by Dr. Rupesinghe that was critical of the JVP prompted death threats to the FCE office in Batticaloa.¹⁹⁸ Despite incidents of this kind, it seems likely that these attacks on FCE in the national media were not 'picked up by ordinary people', who remained largely unaware of these kinds of reputational issues.¹⁹⁹

2.1 Tensions in organisational identity

FCE's organisational identity provoked an unusual degree of criticism. I will examine the reasons for these tensions in two sections. The first will look at problems arising from FCE's origins, while the second will assess tensions related to the organisation's back-channel work.

Problematic origins

FCE's operational mandate grew directly out of the political context of its inception in November 2002. Its main operational tasks at this time (overcoming the exclusion of key

¹⁹⁸ Interview with FCE staff member, Colombo, 24th November 2006.

¹⁹⁹ Interview with NGO leader, Akkaraipattu, 28th April 2007.

stakeholders in the peace process, especially the Muslims and reducing unrest in the East) emerged out of discussions with its two initial backers, the UK Embassy and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. FCE's objectives reflected these donors' efforts to shore up track-one peacebuilding efforts and to reduce the escalation of localised conflicts that could damage the fragile ceasefire.

The tight connection between FCE's organisational identity and the peace process proved problematic as the ceasefire broke down. As fighting became more intense in the East, NGOs such as FCE, whose work was focused on that region, were increasingly accused by nationalists of attempting to subvert the government's military strategy. FCE's open support for the peace process also drew condemnation in this climate, as NGOs that were seen to be advocating the preservation of the status quo were deemed to be providing support to the LTTE's cause. FCE's support for the peace process was also contested by some convinced groups, such as human rights activists, on the grounds that this 'even-handed' approach was depoliticising and neglected core political issues and welfare concerns of marginalised communities.²⁰⁰ Finally, the breakdown of the ceasefire and peace process made FCE's mandate look increasingly irrelevant from the perspective of international funders.

FCE's emergence during a period of unprecedented donor support for peacebuilding NGOs contributed to its problematic organisational identity. The fact that FCE had rapidly established itself as one of Sri Lanka's most well-funded technical peacebuilding groups in the aftermath of the ceasefire agreement resonated with an increasingly prominent nationalist caricature that saw NGOs as opportunistic. Many of these concerns and suspicions focused on perceptions of Dr. Rupesinghe himself, who had only returned to work in Sri Lanka shortly before the ceasefire. This fact drove claims that his return was motivated by funding opportunities; a view that was widely publicised in the media and was shared by representatives from other NGOs.²⁰¹ These fears were particularly acute in the case of FCE because of the lack of transparency in its funding arrangements and the unusually high level of donor support that the organisation received. Opposition towards Dr. Rupesinghe was also related to the fact that he was seen to have betrayed his leftist

²⁰⁰ Keenan (2007) and Liyanage (2006) provide good examples of this critique.

²⁰¹ These fears were mentioned in a number of interviews with NGO representatives and in newspaper articles (see Sunday Observer 2006).

roots and former political beliefs and to his close personal links with the Norwegian government.

FCE's heavy reliance on the emerging human security discourse was unusual amongst Sri Lankan peacebuilding specialists. Its use of this vocabulary aligned the organisation's aims with the aims of a growing number of donor countries such as the UK, the USA and Norway, who had identified maintaining human security as a priority area during the ceasefire period. As has been widely noted in the literature, however, the discourse of human security was depoliticising (Paris 2001, McCormack 2007) and, by using it, FCE risked distancing itself from some of the more direct and confrontational models of political engagement favoured by other NGOs, such as human rights organisations. Rather than attempting to alter the political positions of the state or other actors, FCE's human security framework adopted a more acquiescent position whereby it was assumed that the aims of government, the LTTE and a range of foreign actors in Sri Lanka were broadly similar.

The tendency for critiques to conflate concerns with FCE's actual political strategies and activities with broader issues such as the organisation's financial relationships and the personal motivations of its leader underlines the complexity of processes of NGO legitimisation and de-legitimisation. NGOs were not simply considered illegitimate on the basis of discrete judgements about the nature of their work, but also on the basis of assessments of *how* and *why* they were conducting this work. FCE drew opposition on the basis of its opaque financial arrangements and close relationships with international actors. These qualities raised concerns about the organisation's reasons for engaging in politics and fuelled suspicions that it was acting as a vehicle for international agents to meddle in Sri Lanka's 'internal affairs'.

Relationships and back-channel work

Tensions in FCE's organisational identity also arose from the fact that its effectiveness as a peacebuilding entity was built on its capacity to maintain close links with key figures from different political arenas. Whilst more established development or peacebuilding organisations tended to stress their capacity to provide donors with a means of intervening in peripheral regions of Sri Lanka, FCE's identity was based on a multi-sited identity that was capable of straddling the local, national and international arenas. The organisation

benefited from Dr. Rupesinghe's international experience and his personal links with key international figures such as the Indian High Commissioner and the chief negotiator of the peace process, Erik Solheim.²⁰² These relations were matched by Dr. Rupesinghe's relationships with key figures in domestic politics from the government, the LTTE, and the Muslim political arena. Donors often justified their work with FCE on the basis of Kumar Rupesinghe's status as one of the few civil society actors who could stand up to, and, to some extent, speak the same language as nationalists. Combined with the organisation's information-gathering networks, Dr. Rupesinghe's personal networks allowed the organisation to perform mediating, facilitative and information-sharing roles. These qualities were integral to the organisation's operational rationale. The connection to the President was highlighted as one of FCE's core strengths, and was presented by Dr. Rupesinghe as such:

'I have a direct line to the President because he feels we are a player. The Sunday leader says "You have to oppose the president". "I say no these are our people". You have to have a dialogue...even with Gotabhaya Rajapakse [the Defence Secretary]. Now abductions have gone down in Jaffna, because we and others continued dialogue. They respect that [direct dialogue]. Others only make a noise in Geneva'.²⁰³

These capacities were sold both as a demonstration of FCE's ability to provide good quality information on the ground situation, and as a tool for mediating between different actors in the track one peace process:

'My role in the future is to have an influence on the peace process. I have to play my role in negotiating a solution to the conflict. I have privileged access at the very highest level which stems back to my work abroad on Human Rights violations. I used to meet Balasingham²⁰⁴ at that time. And here I have access to most of the leaders – particularly to Mahinda [Rajapakse] as a personal friend for 35 years. I have access to people in power and the ability to constructively engage with them.²⁰⁵

²⁰² Interview with donor representative, 26th April 2007.

²⁰³ Interview with Kumar Rupesinghe, Colombo, 25th April 2007.

²⁰⁴ Anton Balasingham was the LTTE's chief strategist and chief negotiator during the peace process.

²⁰⁵ Interview with Kumar Rupesinghe, Colombo, 25th April 2007.

As highlighted by the historical account of Sarvodaya in chapter four, the importance of possessing relationships with elite political actors was not a new phenomenon for NGOs. What was new in this context, however, was the way in which these qualities formed an important part of FCE's operational mandate and their public profile. Donors were encouraged to work with the organisation precisely because it possessed these connections. FCE's primary political role became that of a broker, capable of forging deals in the national political arena.

FCE's role as a back-channel operator, capable of facilitating and mediating behind the scenes shaped the organisation's funding arrangements in a way that proved problematic for its identity.

The organisation's back-channel work was reliant upon a degree of secrecy in its relationships, a quality that contradicted the values of openness, trust and transparency that characterised normal civil society discourse (see Alexander 2006). Most of FCE's funding came from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), which lacked the monitoring capacity of development agencies.²⁰⁶ This lack of oversight contributed to the poor standard of internal governance that accompanied FCE's expansion (Goodhand & Walton 2007). Another problematic feature of FCE's funding arrangements was the large salary provided to Dr. Rupesinghe, which reflected his status as the former head of a prominent international NGO. Since this salary was unusually high for the Sri Lankan NGO sector, and because funding was for political rather than development work, the details were deliberately not made public.

The secretive nature of FCE's 'back-channel' work damaged the perceptions of other leading peacebuilding NGOs. One NGO leader, for example, voiced his concerns about FCE's links with the government:

'[Another NGO leader] and Kumar [Rupesinghe] have meetings with the Rajapakses. They engage continuously. You never really know where you stood with them. He said he

²⁰⁶ Most Norwegian funding for NGOs in Sri Lanka was channelled through the Norwegian Embassy in Colombo. Because of the unusual nature of FCE's work, however, its funds flowed directly from Oslo, creating tensions between FCE and the Embassy (interview with Embassy staff, Colombo, 26th April 2007).

couldn't sign civil society statements. I don't know what he was playing at. People were suspicious of him'.²⁰⁷

Another leader of a large national NGO argued that connections with the President's inner circle compromised FCE and NAWF's position on war, and made it difficult for others to collaborate with them:

'There are some peace NGOs that believe there is a place for war also so we can't work with them. How can you? They won't say it publicly, but to have good rapport with the President's brother ...We can't be partnering with them, organisations which give like that. We have zero tolerance of them'.²⁰⁸

2.2 Opportunities and risks: FCE's response to changing conditions

This section describes a number of modifications in FCE's work between 2005 and 2007. These shifts in FCE's work were a complex response to the changing needs of its beneficiaries (particularly in the immediate aftermath of the tsunami), the deteriorating security environment in the East after 2005, the emergence of a political context that was unfavourable for peacebuilding (which began to deteriorate after 2004, but accelerated after the election of Mahinda Rajapakse), and subsequent shifts in the priorities of its funding partners.

The immediate post-tsunami environment presented NGOs with a range of opportunities. In FCE's case, this climate provided a chance to expand their operational and geographical reach, shoring up their position as one of the leading NGOs in Sri Lanka. Since donors often selected NGO partners on the basis of their capacity and experience, scaling up their operations could help to ensure greater access to funding in the future. These opportunities, however, were double-edged, since they risked diluting FCE's comparative advantage over other peacebuilding specialists and raised suspicions that it was behaving opportunistically.

²⁰⁷ Interview with NGO leader, Colombo, 4th May 2007.

²⁰⁸ Interview with NGO leader, Colombo, 14th February 2007.

In common with other peacebuilding specialists, FCE faced three primary challenges during this period. First, they had to balance the financial incentives of tsunami-related projects with the long-term coherence of their operational mandate. The financial threat facing these organisations became increasingly acute as the ceasefire broke down, and donors' commitment to peacebuilding work diminished. Second, they needed to deploy strategies of accommodation to detoxify peacebuilding work as a means of avoiding rebuke from nationalists. Third, they needed to maintain a degree of coherence and relevance to their existing partners, and to demonstrate their capacity to assist donors in meeting their new objectives in the deteriorating climate for peacebuilding. There were clearly tensions and trade-offs involved in meeting these three objectives simultaneously.

Responding to the tsunami and adapting organisational mission

The tsunami prompted an unprecedented amount of large relief and reconstruction projects in Sri Lanka. The large budgets presented NGOs with financial security (at least in the short-term) at a time when, as a result of the slide back to war, funding for development and peacebuilding activities was becoming scarcer.²⁰⁹ These opportunities were even more important to organisations such as FCE, whose work was concentrated in the East, where security problems were making it increasingly difficult to fulfil its objectives effectively.²¹⁰

Dr. Rupesinghe was a 'skilled fundraiser' capable of negotiating large projects with a range of donors, and FCE was well placed to meet the requirements of donors seeking large NGO partners in the aftermath of the tsunami.²¹¹ FCE was operating in the context of a particularly unruly aid market that emerged after the tsunami (see Telford & Cosgrave 2006), where donors eagerly sought partners capable of implementing projects with large budgets, and where less effort was devoted to examining the long-term strategic consequences of partnership. As a result of this disorderly funding climate, FCE received a surprisingly high level of funding for tsunami-related development and reconstruction projects.

²⁰⁹ Interview with INGO representative, Colombo, 2nd November 2006, national NGO leader, Colombo, 3rd May 2007.

²¹⁰ Three interviews with INGO and national NGO representatives, Ampara, 19th & 23rd October 2006.

²¹¹ Interview with INGO representative, 3rd May 2007.

FCE struggled to justify its rapid expansion. Initially, its heavy involvement in the tsunami response was described as a moral response to assist the tsunami-affected communities with which it was already working.²¹² FCE argued that its sustained involvement in these activities was necessary because this work provided the organisation with a means of maintaining faith with tsunami-affected communities living in areas where its core human security projects were based. Despite these justifications, FCE's engagement in this work caused tensions with donors, since the scale of its expansion during this period surpassed that of other comparable peacebuilding organisations. FCE's use of the 'human security' discourse provided a loose conceptual framework, which could be adapted to suit changing ground conditions. This re-positioning was partly successful in accommodating criticism from donors, who wanted to see FCE return to its stricter peacebuilding mandate, at least in the short-term.

The tactical utility of the discourses of human security and peacebuilding has been mentioned in other contexts: they have been made 'slippery by design' in order to hold together a 'jumbled coalition of "middle power" states, development agencies and NGOs' (Paris 2001, 88, Barnett et al. 2007). FCE started working with a narrow 'freedom from fear' definition, which focused on violent threats to personal security, and increasingly adopted a broader 'freedom from fear and want' definition that focused on a range of issues, including environmental and economic threats to individuals and communities, coming from both military and non-military sources. This shift in understanding was used to justify FCE's broadening operational focus. The malleability of the discourse of 'human security' disguised some of the financial and tactical functions of FCE's diversification and expansion by providing a tool to maintain coherence with FCE's original mandate and strategy.²¹³ In interviews with senior staff, the diversification was justified as a means of shoring up reputations locally in tsunami-affected regions. This claim also served to re-assert the organisation's representativeness. Dr. Rupesinghe explained:

'KR: Helping the Sinhalese refugees in Trinco was critical for our reputation.

²¹² Interview with Kumar Rupesinghe, Colombo, 25th April 2007.

²¹³ FCE made a few formal attempts to build development activities into its official mandate. The eight key objectives in FCE's original memorandum of association were focussed on peace and conflict issues and included: 1.) To research into the causes of conflict in the region, 2.) To promote peace and co-existence in South Asian societies, 3.) To develop programmes to support the peace process in Sri Lanka, 4.) To establish programmes for interactive learning and education for co-existence. The revised Memorandum of Association, submitted in 2007 included a new primary object of the organisation: 'to engage in people and community development programmes'.

Interviewer: Is it possible for a national NGO to do only 'freedom from fear' work now in the districts?

KR: No. Non-violent Peace Force [an international civilian peacekeeping organisation] can do it because it does not draw its strength from the communities like us. Our field officers are insiders'.²¹⁴

While this kind of discursive manoeuvre might prove only partly successful in convincing outsiders of the coherence of FCE's rationale, maintaining discursive consistency may have been useful in its own right, since it helped to generate a strong internal narrative of legitimacy that could bolster staff members' commitment to the organisation.

FCE's expansion and diversification in the aftermath of the tsunami satisfied various tactical and strategic considerations. First, it provided a means of spreading risk at a time when peacebuilding was becoming more difficult to achieve, and potentially more difficult to fund. Second, an increased involvement in development activities also allowed FCE to emphasise its involvement in *community-level* peacebuilding activities. This shift involved an alteration in FCE's spatial relationship with politics: community level work was less sensitive than human security work, which involved engaging politically at the national level.²¹⁵

Third, the expansion had territorial dimensions. As the political environment deteriorated, peacebuilding NGOs' work in conflict-affected regions was increasingly seen by nationalists to represent a bias towards the LTTE. FCE's shift towards a more developmental focus permitted territorial expansion to work into Mannar, Puttalam, the Hill Country, and particularly the Colombo slums. These new settings for FCE's work helped to modify the organisation's identity, deflecting claims that it focused only on Tamil communities, or was supportive of the LTTE.

Negative impacts on relations with donors

Since FCE lacked experience in development, construction and humanitarian work, its large tsunami-related projects were poorly implemented (Goodhand & Walton 2007). Most of FCE's development and reconstruction partners noted delays in implementation (*ibid*).

²¹⁴ Interview with Kumar Rupesinghe, Colombo, 25th April 2007.

²¹⁵ Acting politically was often seen as synonymous with working nationally in the accounts of many NGOs. One organisation, for example, stated: '*We are mostly working with community directly. We don't get into the political agenda, we mostly we focus on the community issues*' (interview with representative of peacebuilding NGO, 26th September 2006).

Although, as FCE claimed, engaging in these projects may have succeeded in shoring up relations with some communities in tsunami-affected regions, there was also evidence that it also damaged the organisation's legitimacy with some groups. In July 2006, for example, an FCE office in Ampara was sieged by irate beneficiaries as a result of a delay in providing assistance promised under a livelihood project (*ibid*, 26). Many FCE staff members recognised the potential for poor implementation to impact badly on the organisation's reputation with communities (*ibid*, 19). FCE's developmental and humanitarian activities were mostly funded by donors that were either new to Sri Lanka or had greatly scaled up their work there after the tsunami, and were therefore less sensitive to the reputational implications for FCE associated with this work.²¹⁶ In this respect, the unruly funding climate of the post-tsunami period also exaggerated these negative consequences. In a more stable funding environment, it is likely that donors would have been more circumspect when selecting partners for such large projects.²¹⁷

Expansion also created problems with staff since the organisation failed to put in place the systems and procedures to keep pace with the rapid growth. This led to high staff turnover both in the head office and in the district offices (*ibid*.). These failures of internal governance were highlighted in a series of negative media reports on the organisation and helped to contribute to the impression amongst other NGOs that FCE was corrupt.²¹⁸

The expansion caused some damage to FCE's reputation with its pre-tsunami donors. This was partly due to the poor standard of implementation, but also a result of the widespread perception that FCE was over-reaching and moving beyond its original mandate. FCE's pre-tsunami donors feared that their original rationale for funding the organisation would be lost with the new broadened mandate. One representative from a major donor explained their serious reservations about FCE's rapid expansion:

²¹⁶ Some donor partners who had experienced considerable delays, said that they would nevertheless continue to work with FCE (Goodhand & Walton 2007).

²¹⁷ Other more established and experienced national development NGOs turned down considerable amounts of funding (in one case 'about \$30million') on the grounds that they would not be able to implement the projects effectively (interview with NGO representative, Colombo, 13th March 2007).

²¹⁸ See Samarasinghe (2007), Sunday Observer (2006). Various NGOs interviewed criticised FCE's lack of transparency, often drawing on media reports that highlighted these issues.

'They can go to all the camps and do other work like peacebuilding but not relief stuff. That is not their mandate. If they come to that, that is the recipe for the downfall of FCE'.²¹⁹

Another NGO leader voiced similar concerns, arguing specifically that by engaging in relief and rehabilitation work, FCE was jeopardising its capacity to conduct advocacy work:

'When Kumar [Rupesinghe] started on relief and rehabilitation work I warned him not to get involved in both [peacebuilding and rehabilitation work]. By doing this he's risking both...To do the latter you have to compromise with everyone. You also have to ask how effective the work is. They have limited skills and capacities in this area'.²²⁰

An expansion and diversification also led to a weakening of FCE's core human security programmes as staff were taken from the programme and assigned to development and reconstruction projects. The nature and frequency of interventions in the human security programme were negatively affected (Goodhand & Walton 2007). Again, this had the potential to damage the organisation's reputation with funders who had backed its original peacebuilding work. FCE received core funding from the Norwegian Foreign ministry, which involved little direct monitoring in the post-tsunami period. These arrangements limited the negative impacts of FCE's diversification and expansion in the short-term, but arguably stored up greater problems for the future by allowing the organisation to continue to expand without the requisite improvements in capacity and development of the organisational structure. FCE's main donors continued to back it during this transitional period, but by 2007 were calling for FCE to refocus its energies on the human security programme (*ibid.*).

Cracks in the coherence of FCE's operational mandate increased suspicions that FCE was acting opportunistically. Its rationale for involvement in relief and development activities shifted from undertaking these activities because of a compulsion to respond to urgent needs, to a logic that justified development projects as an entry point into communities as a means of maintaining credibility in these regions. These inconsistencies were picked up by donors after assessments of the kind undertaken by NORAD, which argued that FCE's operational diversification and expansion was not driven by a strategic rationale, but rather followed a pattern whereby the organisation simply added incrementally to its existing portfolio of activities (Bock 2004, Goodhand & Walton 2007). By 2007, FCE's expressed the

²¹⁹ Interview with INGO funder of FCE, Colombo, 22nd November 2006.

²²⁰ Interview with NGO leader, Colombo, 4th May 2007.

need to scale down development and reconstruction activities, in line with its donor partners, who felt that the organisation should refocus on its core peacebuilding mandate. Their actual position, however, was more ambiguous: FCE also expressed an interest in starting a micro-finance arm, and continuing their psychosocial and livelihoods work (Goodhand & Walton 2007). FCE's stance at this stage illustrates the ongoing difficulties of reconciling the tension between the need to ensure financial sustainability, and maintaining organisational coherence.

A bad reputation with one particular donor did not necessarily translate immediately or automatically into negative financial outcomes for the organisation. Problems experienced with an NGO partner were often not communicated between donors, and a skilled fundraiser such as Dr. Rupesinghe was capable of identifying new funding resources despite generating a negative reputation with donors. One donor remarked:

*'Donors need to be aware of what the others are doing. I've supported FCE on a small project and that was quite disappointing. I refuse to fund that project any more. But they got funding from other sources. I was never contacted by anyone. But this means that certain NGOs, even if you have a bad experience with them, they still manage to find the necessary funds...Kumar's a convincing person.'*²²¹

Since there was only a small supply of large technical NGOs capable of implementing large complex projects, donors sometimes worked with organisations such as FCE out of necessity, despite recognising negative aspects of their work.²²²

Negative impacts on relations with other NGOs

FCE's rapid expansion damaged its reputation with other NGOs, who frequently argued that the organisation was acting opportunistically. This was particularly the case with other peacebuilding specialists or large NGOs, which were more aware of the details of FCE's peacebuilding strategies and their sources of funding than smaller, less specialised organisations. Several leading NGO figures felt that FCE's reputation with its NGO peers has been damaged by its lack of transparency, and the perceived shortcomings in its strategic focus (Goodhand & Walton 2007). These organisations were also concerned that FCE's rapid expansion and the high profile stance of its leader would reflect badly on the NGO sector as a whole. Some peacebuilding NGOs' criticism of FCE's expansion mirrored

²²¹ Interview with donor representative, Colombo, 5th October 2006.

²²² Interview with donor representatives, Colombo, 30th November 2006.

that of donors. They argued that expansion had reduced the organisation's focus on peace work, and reduced the extent to which the organisation's aims were understood by field staff:

'They were trying to do too much. They got off their main focus and the quality went down. District level staff don't have a clear vision of FCE's work and are not monitored by head office enough'.²²³

An INGO representative argued that FCE's expansion has led to a crisis of identity for the organisation:

'As an organisation they do a lot of good things... But is it an organisation? He's facing a lot of problems. His vision isn't shared by staff. Kumar doesn't pay enough attention to his organisation, his staff. It's not an organisation it's a one man initiative'.²²⁴

Another leader of a large national NGO argued that FCE was often confused with NAWF, and that this association would be difficult to shake off:

'Why is FCE being confused with Kumar Rupesinghe and NAWF? This is due to the choices the organisation has taken. It has affected the way FCE is perceived by other actors and is difficult to reverse'.²²⁵

As highlighted in the last chapter, concerns about the large amounts of funding received by peacebuilding specialists during this period were central to other NGOs' strategies of differentiation after the more generalised collapse in NGO legitimacy after 2005. Several interviewees criticised the influence of new NGOs, such as FCE, that had received large amounts of funding in the ceasefire period.²²⁶ One NGO representative from another large national peacebuilding organisation, for example, questioned FCE's lack of transparency:

²²³ Interview with district-based NGO leader, Akkaraipattu, 28th April 2007.

²²⁴ Interview with INGO donor representative, Colombo, 4th May 2007.

²²⁵ Interview with national NGO leader, Colombo, 3rd May 2007.

²²⁶ Interviews with NGO leaders, Colombo, 26th September 2006, 11th October 2006, 14th February 2007.

'I don't know why they can't just say we are getting funding from this and that...If you are spending it for a legitimate purposes I don't know why you can't disclose your funding'.²²⁷

These public attacks on FCE also led other NGOs to question the motivations of the organisation and its leader. There was a clear sense that, by receiving a large salary, Dr. Rupesinghe had undermined the FCE's cause, diminishing the organisation's 'moral authority'. One NGO leader contrasted the practices of FCE with his own organisation:

'There is no reason for people to be envious towards us. The antagonism towards NGOs is also because they are getting money. I get the highest salary here, I get a salary of Rs. 20,000, which is the highest in the office. So we don't travel about in flashy vehicles, we don't own multi-million rupee vehicles. We don't have our meetings in top class hotels, so there's no envy. We have no fear of the Select Committee. That gives us a very big moral authority. That's our strength coming into certain positions'.²²⁸

As argued in the last chapter, criticism of NGOs during this period is difficult to understand without some analysis of the motivations of the critics. The flurry of criticism of FCE from its NGO peers can be partly seen as an expression of group behaviour, and fits the pattern of a 'retraction cascade' mentioned in the last chapter, whereby previously supportive groups withdrew support to avoid potentially negative associations with the ostracised group. Because of its high profile, FCE also became something of a scapegoat, which was used by others to deflect criticism from their own organisation, and to help to restore order to an NGO sector whose wider credibility was at risk (see Girard 1989).

2.3 FCE under attack from nationalists

This section explores how and why FCE came under attack from nationalists, how it responded in an attempt to nullify these attacks, and some of the perverse impacts this response had on its relations with other NGOs. As mentioned in chapter four, the reputational damage inflicted on FCE during the crisis period was not simply a direct outcome of the activities or behaviour of FCE as an organisation, but was often closely tied

²²⁷ A representative from another NGO commented: *'The biggest target of NGOs is FCE...They get very lavishly funded, very generously... [Kumar Rupesinghe] is paid an expat salary...a huge sum of money that can be the budget of any moderate sized NGO. People feel he's not doing it for the salary'* (interview with national NGO leader, Colombo, 10th October 2006).

²²⁸ Interview with national NGO representative, Colombo, 30th March 2007.

to the actions of its leader, Dr. Rupesinghe. Dr. Rupesinghe's position as head of the NAWF made him a prime target of nationalists, who sought to highlight the pernicious and corrupting influence of peacebuilding NGOs in Sri Lanka. FCE's leader was seen by donors as one of the few well-known Sinhalese advocates for peace in Sri Lanka (Goodhand & Walton 2007), and he was keen to play up to this role by maintaining a high media profile. This eagerness to tackle criticism head on, however, often proved damaging. Problems arose, for example, when the organisation's funding arrangements and the Chairman's salary were mentioned in a TV debate on the state of peacebuilding NGOs between Dr Rupesinghe and the JVP politician, Wimal Weerawansa.²²⁹ Dr. Rupesinghe's repeated failure to disclose his full salary was frequently cited in subsequent media criticism (see, for instance, Sunday Observer 2006), and also became a preoccupation for other NGOs, who were suspicious of FCE's motivations and concerned about the impact that this issue would have on the reputation of the NGO sector as a whole.

Nationalists saw Dr. Rupesinghe's high profile as an opportunity to promote a broader critique of NGOs. Aspects of FCE's funding, the high salary of the Chairman, and his close connections with international actors were useful sticks with which to beat the NGO sector as a whole, in the same way as various misappropriation scandals provided a quick and easy means of discrediting the motivations of NGOs. The way in which these aspects were used can be seen from an article entitled 'Kumar- Ranil conspiracy bears fruit' published in *Dinamina* (a Sinhalese daily) on 23rd May, 2008. The report's critique of Dr. Rupesinghe stressed his organisation's reliance on foreign funding and his personal relationships with key international figures ('[he] is the only person in Asia who can contact Jimmy Carter and Desmond Tutu over the telephone'), using these facts to argue that he used his influence to get Sri Lanka removed from the UN Human Rights Council.²³⁰

As mentioned above, FCE's poor internal governance was also highlighted in the press with two high-profile articles in the national media accusing the organisation of violating Sri

²²⁹ His monthly salary was revealed in the Parliamentary Select Committee in 2007, which prompted a further round of news articles (see Mahindapala 2008b, 2008c).

²³⁰ This article was published in Sinhalese but translated in an FCE internal report responding to the article written by Dr. Rupesinghe. Several other articles published in the English media drew on these aspects of FCE's organisational identity in a similar way. See, for example, Samarasinghe (2007a) and Mahindapala (2008a).

Lankan company law and hiring criminals to provide security to the Chairman.²³¹ These claims fed conveniently into criticisms from nationalists and state-sanctioned institutions such as the Parliamentary Select Committee into NGOs that peacebuilding NGOs were being used as vehicles to pursue the agendas of international actors and to undermine Sri Lankan sovereignty.

The high profile nature of these attacks meant that they impacted upon other NGOs' perceptions of FCE, and raised concerns that these negative stories had the potential to impact badly on the sector as a whole. One NGO representative stated: '*Kumar isn't going to do the rest of us any favours because he is not transparent*'.²³² Another argued that:

'Kumar has created the impression that NGOs have a lot of money and he personally has benefited ...and this affects the rest of the NGO community. There's been lots of speculation over this salary. This perception was there before but this has been accentuated'.²³³

Representatives from other NGOs felt that Dr. Rupesinghe was not sufficiently sensitive to how his high profile interventions in the public sphere also impacted upon the reputations and activities of other civil society organisations (Goodhand & Walton 2007, 21).

Reputational damage with these organisations was significant because donors often used informal discussions with other large NGOs to assess an NGO's work, or to make funding decisions.

Responding to criticism from nationalists

As well as deploying a range of operational and territorial shifts described above, FCE responded to the growing criticism from nationalists by attempting to assert its own nationalist credentials. In agreement with its Norwegian funders, FCE embarked upon a project called *Dharmashakti*, which aimed to reconstruct religious buildings that had been destroyed by the tsunami. Although the project involved reconstruction of religious buildings, its explicit aim was to rebuild the reputations of FCE and Norway in southern Sri

²³¹ Samarasinghe 2007, 2007a.

²³² Interview with NGO leader, Colombo, 4th May 2007.

²³³ Interview with NGO leader, Colombo, 2nd May 2007.

Lanka.²³⁴ By emphasising FCE's commitment to the preservation of Sinhala Buddhist institutions, the organisation sought to counter accusations that it was working against the interests of the Sinhalese majority.

Figure 7: Dr. Kumar Rupesinghe and Erik Solheim meet Buddhist Leaders in the Southern Province as part of the Dharmashakti Programme (Photo: FCE).



FCE's response to nationalist criticism was also evident in the work of Dr. Rupesinghe's campaigning coalition, NAWF. In March 2007, NAWF launched a media peace campaign via a series of prominent TV and newspaper advertisements. The campaign's slogan, '*One Country. One People. One Sri Lanka.*', resonated with the policies and slogans of President Rajapakse's 2005 election manifesto, *Mahinda Chintanaya*, which stressed the importance of a political solution on the basis of a unitary state. The leader of a peacebuilding NGO argued that the advertising campaign 'seemed to placate the nationalists', while another interviewee claimed that Dr. Rupesinghe had struck a deal with the government whereby they agreed to stop public criticism from the JVP of him and his organisations in return for less open criticism of government policies.²³⁵ As argued in chapter four, NAWF and FCE

²³⁴ Interview with senior FCE representative, Colombo, 25th April 2007. Interview with Norwegian Embassy representative, Colombo, 26th April 2007. FCE rebuilt mainly Hindu temples and mosques in the East and mostly Buddhist temples in the South.

²³⁵ Interview with NGO leader, Colombo, 4th May 2007. Interview with NGO leader, Colombo, 6th May 2007.

had not developed strong, separate organisational identities, and the behaviour of NAWF impacted on the way FCE was perceived by donors and NGOs.

In 2008, Dr. Rupesinghe founded a new organisation or 'social movement', *Prayathna*, whose objectives included 'developing a code of ethics through our own behaviour and practices and infuse it to [sic] the society' and 'building opportunities and spaces to promote alternative social and cultural practices strength-ending [sic] the foundations for multi-culturalism and co-existence' (Prayathna no date). This marked a considerable retreat from the much more politically substantive aims of the NAWF. The group's objectives were even more opaque in its 'No To Violence' Campaign, launched in 2008, which aimed to 'proactively bring positive change to the nature of our society by reaching out to one person at a time'. The campaign stressed that change was possible only when: *'Every Life is not just Respected but Valued, Our Diversity is Celebrated; There is Ubiquitous Equitable Rule of Law; The Vulnerable are Protected; The Environment is Cared for; Our Country, our Nation truly Progresses on All Fronts'*.

Figure 8: A NAWF advert in the 'One Country, One People, One Sri Lanka' series (Source: NAWF).



As well as hinting at a damaging proximity to the regime, these new departures seemed to represent a broader attempt to replicate the spiritual and relational approaches to peacebuilding pursued by organisations such as Sarvodaya. While these changes made FCE and its sister organisations' work less contentious in the eyes of nationalists, they prompted the criticism from human rights groups and other peacebuilding specialists that Dr. Rupesinghe's organisations were deliberately avoiding 'dealing with political issues', and had 'let the government off the hook'.²³⁶ One NGO leader argued that most

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

peacebuilding organisations had become too accommodative of the Rajapakse regime, and were failing to engage politically:

'NAWF has gone towards the Prayathna Movement then Non-violence movement. The government is happy about this'.²³⁷

2.4 Key Lessons from the FCE case study

Before moving on to look at the second case study, it is useful to highlight a handful of the key lessons emerging from the above analysis. First, the case study has provided a more detailed account of why other actors opposed peacebuilding NGOs. Opposition from nationalist critics towards FCE was based on the organisation's transgression of institutional and territorial boundaries, their transgression of the accepted boundaries of political action during the 'peace' to war transition and the fact that Dr. Rupesinghe himself unsettled and transgressed insider/ outsider boundaries. Criticism was also linked, however, to judgements about the organisation's, or its leader's, motivations for action. FCE was opposed not only because of judgements about its actions and capacity to undermine Sri Lankan sovereignty, but also because of concerns about its rationale for engaging in politics. Its secretive operational style and close links to international actors (and especially the Norwegian government) fuelled speculation that the organisation was serving as an illegitimate conduit for international actors to influence the conflict in Sri Lanka. Criticisms from other NGOs shared the tendency to blur concerns with the organisation's relationships, practices and motivations. Their opposition to FCE's shifting operational focus and political approach was based both on judgements about the ineffectiveness of FCE's approach to peacebuilding, and concerns about its motivations. Peacebuilding NGOs were critical of the political campaigns led by Dr. Rupesinghe after 2006 because they felt that he had been politically blunted through his association with the President. This analysis emphasises the point that understanding NGO legitimacy requires a detailed investigation not only into organisation's activities and actions, but also an understanding of their political relationships and interests.

Second, FCE's de-legitimation was inextricably linked to the various strategies and tactics deployed by other NGOs and political groups. While NGOs had real concerns about the potentially negative fall-out of the bad publicity surrounding FCE, they also used the

²³⁷ Interview with NGO leader, London, 11th November 2008.

process of differentiating themselves from FCE as a means of highlighting their own transparency or prudence. Similarly, while FCE's nationalist critics harboured deep concerns about the activities of FCE and Dr. Rupesinghe's other organisations, they also exploited details of its funding arrangements to discredit the NGO sector more widely.

Third, the case study has assessed the extent to which FCE was able to influence processes of de-legitimation. The damage to FCE's legitimacy grew out of broad changes in the political arena, which placed a great deal of stress on the organisational identities of peacebuilders by bringing their activities and objectives under much sharper scrutiny. These tensions were compounded by the transformative impact of the tsunami on the Sri Lankan aid landscape. In common with other peacebuilding specialists, FCE's organisational rationale and the path-dependent nature of NGO legitimacy meant that it was constrained in the extent to which it was able to respond to changes in the operating environment. Shifting operational focus too rapidly risked a loss of coherence, raising suspicions that the organisation concerned was acting opportunistically or engaged in 'boosterism' (Bryant 2005). As such, the effectiveness of FCE's response was not simply a result of the decisions made by the organisation's leadership, but a complex outcome of the interaction between an organisation's history and its operating environment.

Despite these constraints, the case of FCE demonstrates how NGO decision making could play a central role in determining the outcomes of underlying political change on organisational legitimacy. A series of tactical errors compounded the negative impacts of the changing environment. Although there were inherent and irresolvable trade-offs involved in maintaining legitimacy with these competing groups during this transitional period, FCE's tactical responses provoked considerable negative side-effects, damaging the organisation's reputation with donors and other NGOs. Decisions to diversify and expand too quickly in response to the tsunami, and to conduct high-profile media campaigns with NAWF and *Prayathna*, seriously undermined FCE's reputation with other NGOs. Dr. Rupesinghe's response to public attacks was to tackle them head on: during the fieldwork period he was keen to step up his existing media profile as a means of tackling misconceptions about FCE's work, in spite of the potential risks to the reputation of his organisation.²³⁸ In the hostile climate of this period, many other organisations opted to

²³⁸ Interview with Kumar Rupesinghe, Colombo, 24th March 2007.

maintain a low-profile, and adopting such an approach might have helped to alleviate some of FCE's problems.²³⁹

Another significant strategic error was FCE's failure to carve out an organisational identity that was distinct from the more politically contentious image of its sister organisation, NAWF. This increased the tendency for FCE to be associated with NAWF's more confrontational stance, and reduced its immunity to public criticism from nationalists.²⁴⁰ The fact that Dr. Rupesinghe was involved in running a number of organisations meant that, at times, FCE's reputation was sacrificed for the sake of pursuing the aims of one of his other organisations, such as NAWF. The case of FCE has demonstrated that while the crisis of legitimacy facing NGOs was driven by changes in the wider environment, the impacts of this crisis could easily be compounded by tactical and strategic errors.

Fourth, the case has demonstrated the importance of underlying power relations in understanding processes of legitimation and de-legitimation. Although FCE was singled out for public rebuke by a number of influential political figures and its fellow NGOs, it largely escaped more concrete sanctions either from the state or its donor partners, at least during the period under examination. In the case of the state, as suggested above, this might have been a direct outcome of the close personal relationship between its leader and the President. There is some evidence to suggest that these connections were used to quell media attacks on FCE and criticism of the organisation by nationalists in 2007.²⁴¹

Although FCE's behaviour during the fieldwork period damaged its reputation with a number of donors, the effects of this were mediated by the mutual dependence that characterised FCE's (and many other large national NGOs') relations with donors. As the post-tsunami period highlighted acutely, donors were often as reliant upon large national NGOs as the national NGOs were on donors. While FCE saw a decline in funding as the tsunami response wound down in 2007, it still managed to obtain funding for most of its core programmes (Goodhand & Walton 2007). Although these underlying power relationships ensured that FCE did not suffer closure or a rapid decline in funding in the

²³⁹ Interview with national NGO representative, Colombo, 13th March 2007.

²⁴⁰ Interview with national NGO leader, Colombo, 3rd May 2007.

²⁴¹ Interview with national NGO leader, 11th November 2008. Informal discussions with NGO commentator, March 2009.

short-term, the loss of legitimacy associated with this period had concrete consequences by prompting changes in the organisation's behaviour. The long-term damage to FCE's legitimacy is difficult to predict, but it is likely that the negative impressions generated during this period would impact upon other NGOs and donors' impressions of the organisation on a more permanent basis, affecting donors' funding decisions in the medium to long-term.

Fifth and finally, the case has shown that opposition towards FCE was closely linked to competing understandings of politics, and incompatible frameworks of appropriate political action. The crisis of NGO legitimacy that emerged during this period was driven by a growing gap in the political visions of NGOs' chief audiences between a liberal peacebuilding model, which placed international engagement at the centre of a broad social, economic and political project to build peace, and a nationalist political vision, which sought to reduce the engagement of external actors, particularly those committed to promoting liberal cosmopolitan norms and values. In an effort to manage these competing visions, FCE became engaged in a complex balancing act between matching donors' shifting demands and expectations, and avoiding rebuke from more critical domestic actors. FCE responded by attempting to alter its spatial relationship with politics, distancing itself from the national political arena by toning down its political lobbying work, and focusing more on community-based projects. It also attempted to modify its organisational identity by conducting more projects with Sinhala communities and by embarking upon initiatives such as the *Dharmashakti* project that could be understood in terms of a nationalist political agenda.

3. Sarvodaya: reconciling peacebuilding and politics

In contrast to the case of FCE, Sarvodaya's organisational identity and operational strategy was well-established by the time of the ceasefire in 2002. Sarvodaya's peacebuilding approach was forged in relation to long-standing goals and strategies developed over the decades preceding the ceasefire period. Unlike FCE, Sarvodaya did not experience any sustained attacks from nationalist groups during the crisis period. Its actions did, however, prompt a mixed reaction from donors and other NGOs, with many peacebuilders challenging Sarvodaya's aims and effectiveness. As the case study presented here will illustrate, debates centred on competing interpretations and understandings of the nature

of Sarvodaya's political action. Unlike FCE, Sarvodaya had developed a clear set of expectations about what it stood for, which was well known both to outsiders and its staff. While this well-established vision helped Sarvodaya to maintain a coherent identity, it proved problematic in terms of Sarvodaya's capacity to respond to crisis. The contrast between these two organisations highlights the path-dependent nature of NGO legitimacy: as NGOs become more institutionalised and their identities harden, their scope to adjust their identity and approaches to meet changing conditions is reduced.

Since Sarvodaya's peace work formed part of a broader developmental and political mandate, the deteriorating climate for peace work did not demand a radical repositioning of its organisational identity. For Sarvodaya, the most pressing task during the crisis period was not deflecting criticism from nationalists, but rather countering the perception from donors and some other peacebuilding or human rights NGOs that it was politically irrelevant. As outlined above, Sarvodaya's approach to politics is best described as 'anti-political' in the sense that their critique of government was not targeted at the policies of any particular regime or party, but instead focused on a radical overhaul of the entire political system. This constituted an 'exit' approach to politics in the sense provided by Feher (2007, 17): rather than conducting advocacy campaigns that critiqued the government, Sarvodaya's peace strategy was largely undertaken as a means of promoting their alternative vision of governance.

This case study will be presented in the following way. The first section provides a broad overview of Sarvodaya's peacebuilding work during the ceasefire period, highlighting the continuities between its actions during this time and its previous approach. The second section assesses the organisation's relationship with nationalist political actors. Section three identifies some inherent tensions in Sarvodaya's political approach and examines how these were exacerbated during the crisis period. The fourth section documents perceptions of Sarvodaya from other NGOs and donor organisations, and the fifth section identifies some key lessons from this analysis.

3.1 Sarvodaya's peacebuilding work during the ceasefire period

Chapter four provided some details of Sarvodaya's early work in the field of peacebuilding in the 1980s and 1990s. This section will briefly outline the key strands of Sarvodaya's

peacebuilding strategy in the lead up to and during the ceasefire period between 2002 and 2006.

In 1999, Sarvodaya began to scale up its peacebuilding efforts, reflecting the concerns both of a 'new generation of leaders within the organisation' (including the organisation's new Chief Executive, Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne's son, Dr. Vinya Ariyaratne), and the intensification of the military conflict. Sarvodaya's renewed commitment to peace was articulated in the 'Peace Action Plan' of 1999 (Bond 2004). This plan was notable for the breadth of its objectives, which ranged from the articulation of immediate social and political requirements (including the first public call for a ceasefire from the organisation), to long-term visions for the future of Sri Lanka, including statements such as 'after one hundred years Sri Lanka eliminates poverty', 'after five hundred years the people of Sri Lanka will be able to survive because of their history of working together'. The strategy involved widespread consultation with ordinary people across Sri Lanka as a means of developing a common declaration of common beliefs, values and aspirations. The consultations produced a 'Vision Declaration', which was presented to the All Parties Representative Committee (APRC) in April 2007, and a 'people's constitution', which was designed to feed into the ongoing political debate about constitutional reform.²⁴² At the same time as drawing up the Action Plan, Sarvodaya founded its Peace Secretariat, a small unit mandated with keeping track of the latest political and military developments and informal negotiations between the conflict parties.

Sarvodaya's peace work during the ceasefire period was structured around the organisation's three core operational strands: economics, consciousness and power. First, Sarvodaya endeavoured to address problems of 'consciousness' by conducting a programme of widespread mobilisation for peace. One of the most prominent features of this work was the organisation's peace meditations, which aimed to develop public consciousness of the need for peace. A number of mass meditations were conducted prior to and during the ceasefire period, including a gathering of 170,000 people in Central Colombo in 1999, and an event for which 650,000 gathered in Anuradhapura in March 2002, shortly after the signing of the ceasefire agreement. Sarvodaya argued that these

²⁴² The All-Party Representative Committee (APRC) was appointed by President Rajapakse in June 2006 with the aim of generating a consensus in the South on devolving power to the regions.

meditations were 'political' since they brought 'together a large number of people, demonstrating that there was an endorsement for peace by the masses'.²⁴³

Figure 9: Police Guard Sarvodaya Peace Meditation, Anuradhapura, 2nd October 2006 (Author's own photo).



The second strand of Sarvodaya's peace work, which tackled problems of underdevelopment, was given greater emphasis during the early part of the ceasefire. This programme had always played an important part in Sarvodaya's strategy, but, as a senior staff member noted, the ceasefire 'created a massive space for us to quickly mobilize our infrastructure to do a lot of more development and peace work'.²⁴⁴ This work involved an expansion of the 5Rs (Relief, Rehabilitation, Reconstruction, Reconciliation and Reawakening) Programmes, which aimed to improve living conditions and services in conflict-affected regions. Sarvodaya's micro-credit arm (SEEDS) also rapidly expanded its operations in the North and East during the period. Such social and economic activities were typically connected with attempts to promote reconciliation between communities divided by conflict. Examples of this kind of work included a 'village link up programme',

²⁴³ Interview with senior staff member, Moratuwa, 14th February 2007.

²⁴⁴ Interview with senior staff member, Moratuwa, 14th February 2007.

where a thousand Tamil villages were paired with Sinhala villages, or the *shanti sena* youth peace brigades, which allowed young people from different ethnic communities to work together at peace or amity camps.²⁴⁵

Third, the organisation conducted work designed to address the issues of power it felt underpinned the conflict. Sarvodaya engaged in widespread public consultations designed to collect popular grievances and to develop a genuinely participatory model for track-one peace negotiations. This work was stepped up in 2004, when Sarvodaya launched a new unit called *Deshodaya*, which focused specifically on achieving a 'political awakening' at the national level.²⁴⁶ The *Deshodaya* unit conducted a popular consultation project called the 'People's Peace Tables' just prior to the 2004 parliamentary elections. The unit also engaged in a series of activities targeting the 'track 1.5' level, including involvement in the One Text Initiative, providing training in conflict negotiations and consulting political leaders.²⁴⁷

While the FCE case highlights the novelty of many features of NGO peacebuilding approaches of the ceasefire period, the Sarvodaya case highlights many of the continuities between the approaches pursued by liberal peacebuilders during the ceasefire and the strategies deployed in previous periods. Sarvodaya's comprehensive approach to social change tackled poverty and conflict at several levels. This ambitious agenda dove-tailed with donors' growing commitment to the transformation of 'whole societies' in the post-Cold War period (Duffield 2007). Sarvodaya's vision of social change highlighted connections between economic underdevelopment and conflict, which were also present in the liberal peacebuilding agenda.²⁴⁸ This approach resonated with donors' attempts to build a peace dividend after the ceasefire of 2002 by supporting reconstruction efforts in the North and East. Sarvodaya highlighted the importance of addressing the 'root causes of conflict' in the People's Peace Plan:

²⁴⁵ The *shanti sena* began in the 1978 in response to ethnic rioting both in Colombo and in the North and East (interview with Shanti Sena representative 24th February 2007).

²⁴⁶ Interview with senior Sarvodaya staff member, 14th February 2007: 'We did lot of work in the south, meditations and stuff like that, but we weren't taking the dialogue to the people on the core issues. We didn't do that initially. It was not deliberate, it was just we were responding to the immediate needs'.

²⁴⁷ Interview with senior Sarvodaya representative.

²⁴⁸ Sarvodaya's spiritual approach to peace and conflict issues also mirrored many donors' growing commitment to attitudinal change and therapeutic interventions in response to the war (see Pupavac & Hughes 2005).

'Sarvodaya leads all sides into an economic rejuvenation of Sri Lanka, especially in the Dry Zones. Sarvodaya removes the root causes for the use of violence as a way to solve problems' (Sarvodaya 1999).

While Sarvodaya reframed or repackaged its projects during the ceasefire period, many of the activities remained similar to those based on Sarvodaya's traditional models of social action. One particularly common peacebuilding tool, for example, was the exchange visit, which was designed as a means of resolving conflict by changing attitudes (via increasing awareness about other communities). This approach, however, was a common trope for NGO social work and had formed the early basis for Sarvodaya's work with the lower-caste Rodiya communities, which, as well as improving living conditions amongst the rural poor, was also designed to educate Colombo-dwellers, and foster collaboration and co-operation with other groups.

3.2 Maintaining 'friendship' with nationalists

In contrast to FCE, Sarvodaya did not experience any sustained attacks from nationalists during the fieldwork period.²⁴⁹ As described in chapter four, Sarvodaya's strategy involved an attempt to be perceived as 'having value' in the Sri Lankan societal context. This legitimisation strategy was intertwined with its political aims; because Sarvodaya sought to transform Sri Lankan society and popular consciousness, one individual at a time, it needed to generate trust with the population at large by utilising popular idioms, ideology and values that resonate with the ordinary people. Unlike its more technical NGO counterparts, Sarvodaya's discursive framework reduced opportunities to attack the organisation. Sarvodaya was a largely vernacular organisation, privileging Pali, Sanskrit and Sinhalese terms over English ones.²⁵⁰ Sarvodaya's 'socially engaged' Buddhism was also an effective tool for mobilising Sinhala communities (and particularly women) in activities such as peace meditations.

²⁴⁹ Sarvodaya was not entirely immune to attacks from nationalists. Its peace meditation conducted in October 2006, for example, still led to some small-scale protests. Since the meditation was well organised in close collaboration with the government, there was a large police presence at the rally and these protests were quickly dealt with. 24 people (believed to be JVP activists) were arrested at the rally (interview with NGO leader, Colombo 6th October 2006).

²⁵⁰ One senior staff member contrasted this approach with other peacebuilding organisations such as FCE, which used more technical language: 'Sarvodaya and other peace organisations are very different. Sarvodaya is...addressing in a common language while speaking Sinhala and Tamil' (24th February 2007).

In contrast to newer peacebuilding organisations, Sarvodaya possessed a degree of normative and cognitive legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context. The organisation was frequently portrayed in the Sri Lankan media as a venerable Sri Lankan institution, and was cited as a good example of how Sinhala Buddhist values and innovations could be utilised to challenge the hegemony of 'imported ideas'.²⁵¹ The organisation also received much wider positive coverage in the media than other organisations and was talked about in largely favourable terms by its NGO peers.²⁵² Although it attracted criticism from some quarters, Sarvodaya was one of the few organisations widely perceived as a 'genuine grassroots movement' organisation.²⁵³ Sarvodaya's use of nationalist ideology (for example, in emphasising the importance of Buddhist values and the primacy of the village to Sri Lankan life and development) blunted many of the claims of nationalists' anti-NGO discourse. Although it was pro-peace, nationalists found it difficult to convincingly argue that Sarvodaya was using imported terminology from the West, or that it was pro-LTTE.²⁵⁴ These characteristics ensured that Sarvodaya largely avoided the negative media coverage meted out to other peacebuilding NGOs during the crisis period.²⁵⁵ Sarvodaya's status as a venerable institution contrasts markedly with more externally-oriented NGOs such as FCE, which failed to generate much cognitive or normative legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context.

Sarvodaya's relative invulnerability to attacks from nationalists constituted an important source of self-affirmation within the organisation. Most Sarvodaya staff members with whom I conducted interviews stressed that Sarvodaya was not attacked by nationalists because of the effectiveness of their links with the grass-roots, their vernacular and participatory approach, and their transparency. One senior staff member argued:

²⁵¹ See, for example, Hewagama (2002), Samaranayake (2002) and Horowpothane (2007). It is difficult to assess the extent to which these articles reflected popular opinion.

²⁵² This impression was gleaned from a range of interviews with national and local NGOs over the fieldwork period.

²⁵³ This impression is based on several interviews with smaller NGOs including three interviews with NGO representatives on 29th September 2006 in Kandy, and an NGO representative in Galle on 9th October 2006.

²⁵⁴ These kinds of allegations were made against Sarvodaya during the period of the Presidential Commission in the late 1980s and early 1990s. There was also some limited protest against Sarvodaya's peace mediations. A handful of nationalist political activists, for example, were arrested during the Anuradhapura peace meditation in 2006 (interview with NGO leader, Colombo, 6th October 2009).

²⁵⁵ Sarvodaya was attacked in the media by a few prominent NGO critics (see for example Wickramaratne (2008) and in Susantha Goonatilake's (2006) book on NGOs, but this kind of criticism was unusual.

'The most effective way is to be transparent to the people. This is the best way to deal with criticism from nationalists'.²⁵⁶

The view that Sarvodaya's open and honest approach to its work reduced attacks from nationalists was echoed in an article marking the 60th anniversary of the Sarvodaya Movement by Jehan Perera, a former Sarvodaya staff member, who speculated that 'perhaps it was the Sarvodaya ethos that safeguarded nearly all of us during those terrible years' (Perera 2008).

These stories helped to distinguish Sarvodaya from other peace organisations that were under attack during the crisis period, and are similar to the strategies of differentiation described in the last chapter. One staff member explicitly contrasted Sarvodaya's approach with that of the NAWF:

'The JHU and the JVP are saying all NGOs are thieves and money earners, however, we know they have some confidence with Sarvodaya. We want to make a friendship with them also. We have to have a dialogue with the JVP. Dr Ariyaratne and Vinya don't want to go to the TV channels and say anything because silence is better. ... We're doing everything transparently. The NAWF People's Forum don't have that relationship with the JVP... In... [Sarvodaya's] People's Forum, the JVP leader is explaining the peace programme to the people. I think we changed him. He doesn't know that; he might just be trying to get some votes, but I feel we have managed to change him.'²⁵⁷

The above examples illustrate the fact that internal narratives of NGO legitimation could be used by NGO staff as a means of reasserting their organisation's credibility, while at the same time boosting the staff's own commitment to the organisation.

3.3 Tensions in Sarvodaya's political approach during the ceasefire period

Sarvodaya's cautious political approach was widely criticised and constituted an important source of tension for the organisation's identity. Sarvodaya's tentative engagement in politics was prompted by three key factors. First, this approach stemmed from the particular sensitivities associated with engaging in the 'dirty world' of party politics in the

²⁵⁶ Interview with senior staff member, Moratuwa, 20th September 2006.

²⁵⁷ Interview with senior staff member, Moratuwa, 20th September 2006. Other interviewees made similar points. For example: 'at the same time there was a campaign to discredit NGOs last year because it was so intensive. But we weren't so directly affected. Our activities were not sabotaged' (interview with senior staff member, Moratuwa, 14th February 2007).

Sri Lankan context discussed in chapter three. While the highly centralised character of Sri Lankan politics caused problems for all Sri Lankan NGOs, these tensions were particularly problematic for Sarvodaya because of its turbulent historical relations with the state and its commitment to an 'anti-political' model of engagement, which emphasised its separation from the realm of party politics.

Second, Sarvodaya's caution stemmed from its broad geographical reach, and its claims to represent the interests of a range of communities across Sri Lanka. In the Peace Action Plan of 2006, Sarvodaya argued that it was in 'a unique position to end the war and bring peace to Sri Lanka' since it was 'the largest and best-organized group in Sri Lanka', which implied that it was capable of functioning as 'the advocate of the whole' (Sarvodaya 2006). This claim was underpinned by a 'radical' commitment to the goal of participation.²⁵⁸ The centrality of these claims to representativeness in Sarvodaya's work meant that the organisation's engagement in politics was necessarily tentative, as one senior staff member described:

*'If I am to make a public statement I will . . . have to think of my worker who is in Killinochchi and how that is going to impact him and the worker in the South... That is why we have to be very careful by taking a public stand not like an organisation only doing advocacy and only based in Colombo – there is no risk and you can be very bold and be like the Sunday Leader. We can't because we have the root in the community. We should prepare them before we take a stand. Right now we don't feel we need to take that risk...'*²⁵⁹

Third, Sarvodaya's ethos of non-violence and their commitment to spiritual values acted as a barrier towards the organisation's adoption of more strident political positions:

²⁵⁸ As one senior staff member commented: 'We are doing 100% participation (not 51%, 49%, 59% percent – this is 100 percent). If one person disagrees, it should be discussed' (interview with senior staff member, Moratuwa, 20th September 2006).

²⁵⁹ Interview with senior staff member, Moratuwa, 14th February 2007.

'We are not going to tell [sic]: "We want peace...stop the war". There's no political message. We're always trying to keep the peaceful mind...Meditation, universal peace that's all. That's the difference between Sarvodaya and others'.²⁶⁰

The organisation's Chief Executive made a similar point in an interview in early 2007:

'We are at a stage where we now have to take stock. [The government is pursuing] a military solution at the moment...It's not for us to say stop the war. It's not as simple as that. We have to address the consciousness and we think we have to really have to get the people to reflect on the determinants of war'.

The tentativeness of Sarvodaya's political engagement was underlined by its *Deshodaya* programme. By establishing the *Deshodaya* unit, Sarvodaya was attempting to take a more direct role in shaping political developments in Sri Lanka by attempting to feed the concerns of ordinary people into track one peace negotiations. Despite these bold aims, *Deshodaya's* approach did not represent a radical departure from Sarvodaya's cautious political approach. Since Sarvodaya's political aims formed part of a largely apolitical spiritual and developmental strategy, these aims tended to be more detached from Sri Lankan political realities than the objectives of most peacebuilding specialists, including FCE and the NAWF. Sarvodaya avoided using the terminology of the peace process. *Deshodaya* produced a 'Vision Declaration' document based on a survey of the views of 3,000 communities in all districts of the country. It demanded a radical overhaul of the existing political system:

'Fundamental Change is needed: We strongly feel that to effectively address these problems and make representative democracy more meaningful, a major change has to take place in the governance systems. People must become true participants in political processes. It is not enough to change governments. We have to change society and the system of governance itself. Our vision is to create a society where religious, ethnic and cultural groups respect each other, where people can closely participate in the decision-making processes, where economic and development programs are people-centered and where people uphold environmentally friendly lifestyles' (Sarvodaya 2007, 6).

²⁶⁰ Interview with senior staff member, Moratuwa, 20th September 2006.

These demands stand in contrast to the campaigning manifesto of the NAWF, which although much less radical, included a more concrete set of reform proposals, including calls for a select committee to be appointed to monitor electoral candidates, the restoration of the 17th Amendment, and a higher representation of women in Parliament (Rupesinghe 2007). Although Sarvodaya called for more fundamental reform, by failing to engage with the current political system, it was also less threatening to political actors and less likely to provoke political opposition. The potency of its demands was also diluted by the fact that its political proposals were linked to calls for spiritual transformation at the individual level.

The tensions caused by Sarvodaya's political engagement were expressed by the degree of controversy that the *Deshodaya* programme prompted amongst Sarvodaya staff members. While many outsiders saw *Deshodaya* as essentially apolitical, many Sarvodaya staff members thought that it represented a dangerous step towards engaging in the corrupt world of 'party politics'. After it was first founded in 2001, *Deshodaya* prompted vigorous debate within Sarvodaya. As one senior staff member described, the decision to establish a separate 'political unit' caused disquiet among some staff members:

*But it got very confusing. Some people inside Sarvodaya and outside said you've betrayed the trust you're going to get involved in this dirty political business. Some were saying this is what we've been waiting for...[but others] really didn't understand what it meant.*²⁶¹

3.4 Sarvodaya and the politics of the liberal peace

During the early years of the ceasefire, many donors saw Sarvodaya as a useful vehicle through which to pursue their peacebuilding goals. Both SIDA and USAID, for instance, provided funding for Sarvodaya's peace meditations and felt that these kinds of mobilisation activities could boost support for the peace process.²⁶² Other funders, however, drew on less central aspects of Sarvodaya's peace efforts, and tried to reframe the organisation's capacities to fit their own agendas. The Academy for Educational Development (AED), who funded the People's Forum Project, for example, saw Sarvodaya's links with track one actors as the most impressive aspect of their work:

²⁶¹ Interview with senior Sarvodaya staff member, Moratuwa, 27th March 2007.

²⁶² Interviews with donors in Colombo, 6th September 2006, 6th October.

'Sarvodaya had their own plan for taking these messages to the top level. In one of the last people's forums I went to with Sarvodaya...a minister was there. They had good links with him. They have that kind of access and they broker those kinds of linkages. [It is] a very productive relationship. That minister was from that community. They loved him and he loved them. There was suddenly a track one/ track three linkage. That could be put to good use in the future...I don't get a sense that the other three [partners] have those linkages. For Sarvodaya, the people's forums were a really natural fit'.²⁶³

While this donor found a way of utilising Sarvodaya's capacities in the pursuit of its peacebuilding goals, others found Sarvodaya's approach more difficult to reconcile with their own peacebuilding objectives. Many donors felt that Sarvodaya's mobilisation work could not make a genuine political contribution if it did not address concrete political issues. One analyst argued that without this stance, peace messages were meaningless:

'[Sarvodaya's peace meditations] have no political aim. If you want peace you have to accept Tamil people haven't had their rights. If you don't say that, you're not going to have peace in this country. Stating you're against war – it won't take us anywhere – even Mahinda Rajapakse can use that. Peace is justice. If you don't stand for justice there won't be any peace'.²⁶⁴

A donor in Colombo expressed similar concerns about Sarvodaya's peace programmes:

'They aren't doing anything significant. There is no transformation. They are doing lots of symbolic things but there's not much difference between Sarvodaya villages and other villages. They are doing this village vision declaration thing now but they are not engaging in politics according to our criteria - even though they claim to be pressuring the government'.²⁶⁵

These criticisms of Sarvodaya's peacebuilding were based on different understandings of key terms such as 'politics' and 'peace'. While Sarvodaya's socially transformative

²⁶³ Interview with AED representative, Colombo, 13th October 2006.

²⁶⁴ Interview with NGO analyst, Colombo, 15th March 2007. Similar views were expressed by other representatives of large national NGOs in two interviews with NGO leaders conducted in Colombo on 4th May 2007, and in London in March 2009.

²⁶⁵ Interview with donor representative, 4th May 2007.

approach to peace and their cautious engagement in politics fitted with the kind of role most donors assigned to NGOs during the early years of the ceasefire, as the ceasefire broke down the organisation found it more difficult to find support for its approach. Many of the donors that it approached supported a more confrontational approach and began to move away from long-term efforts to build peace through social transformation. Sarvodaya's approach came under greater scrutiny from donors as the ceasefire began to unravel. A senior Sarvodaya representative described the problems of selling Sarvodaya's approach to donors in early 2007:

'Our approach is often difficult to sell because traditional donors will often think it has to be more political and more confrontational so they like to fund human rights activists. They want us to take a more active political role, challenging the government and all that'.²⁶⁶

After 2006, Sarvodaya took some steps towards a more critical engagement with the government's pursuit of a military strategy. As well as reviving the *Deshodaya* programme, it presented proposals on the issue of devolution to the President through direct discussions, and adopted a more public stance in support of the ceasefire agreement. As the organisation itself admitted, however, this kind of behind-the-scenes lobbying work was difficult to evaluate, and it was hard to ascertain whether or not these discussions were having any influence on power-holders. One senior staff member commented in an interview:

'Our leader has been consulted by the former President, the current President and the opposition leader. We don't know if it's been listened to or whatever but to this date we had those channels opened'.²⁶⁷

Another objective of the *Deshodaya* programme was to encourage community leaders to speak out against the war. This approach again underlined the organisation's caution about engaging in politics; it would act to empower others to protest, but would not voice its own concerns in public:

²⁶⁶ Interview with senior staff member, 14th February 2007.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

*In general, yes you can't talk peace now otherwise you'll be seen as a traitor. But we continue to do that even though the media doesn't give much publicity...We are trying to find people who are more sympathetic. Through Deshodaya we want to find people who can boldly raise their voice and speak out.*²⁶⁸

These steps were not enough to satisfy some NGOs that Sarvodaya was capable of making a contribution in the new environment. One interviewee argued that the real challenge for civil society actors in the context of war was protecting a space for dialogue, and that Sarvodaya was unable to play a role in creating such a space.²⁶⁹

Sarvodaya went to some lengths to make their peacebuilding work more intelligible to donors. A senior Sarvodaya staff member described some of the challenges the organisation faced in getting donors to understand their aims, and how donors wanted to repackage its peace work into their own frameworks in early 2007:

*'We tried the existing funders in Sri Lanka. I think they're interested but I think they don't understand it . . . I see them . . . trying to make this square peg fit into their round hole. They say: "OK, let's call it conflict resolution and then we can fund it." This isn't conflict resolution it's way beyond that. "Let's call it democratic empowerment." Well, yes, that's part of it but it's way beyond that also.'*²⁷⁰

One senior staff member described how, when *Deshodaya* was re-launched in 2006, Dr. Vinya, the Chief Executive, had attempted to quieten controversy and confusion among donors relating to the programme's aims by stating that '*Deshodaya simply means good governance – and what we are supporting is good governance*'.²⁷¹ While this re-branding of the *Deshodaya* programme may have made the programme more intelligible to donors, it was unable to reverse the impression that Sarvodaya was incapable of contributing to efforts to protect human rights in a deteriorating security climate.

²⁶⁸ Interview with senior staff member, Moratuwa, 14th February 2007. Edwards (1999) has argued that this decision about whether to speak out directly or to empower others to do so constitutes one of the central dilemmas facing NGOs.

²⁶⁹ Interview with national NGO leader, London, 11th November 2008.

²⁷⁰ Interview with senior staff member, Moratuwa, 27th March 2007.

²⁷¹ Interview with senior staff member, Moratuwa, 27th March 2007.

Another reason why Sarvodaya failed to win more support from donors was its failure to work alongside other NGOs. Many donors were keen to establish a strong peace constituency in Sri Lanka by encouraging peacebuilding NGOs to work collaboratively. These donors were sometimes critical of Sarvodaya's failure to work in partnership with other peace NGOs in their national campaigns.²⁷² However, Sarvodaya found it difficult to work with NGOs that adopted confrontational political positions because they felt that their peacebuilding work was based on different assumptions about how to achieve peace.²⁷³

Both donors and NGOs accepted that strategies of political action needed to change in response to conditions. While Sarvodaya also recognised the need to adapt, its prominent ethos and ideology, its staff's commitment to these ideals, and its broad geographical coverage and large network limited its flexibility in response to these shifting conditions. In contrast to the experience of newer organisations such as FCE, Sarvodaya's history and well-established operational rationale and identity made any strategic shifts in response to changing political conditions more complex and problematic.

3.5 Key Lessons from the Sarvodaya case study

The analysis of Sarvodaya's experience during the crisis period has generated a number of lessons for understanding processes of legitimation and de-legitimation. First, the case sheds more light on the role of NGO agency in these processes. Sarvodaya's success in avoiding the kind of criticism suffered by FCE was largely a result of the organisation's well-established position in Sri Lankan society and politics. Despite this more favourable starting point, it is also possible to argue that Sarvodaya's more defensive strategy during the crisis period helped it to avoid some of the problems faced by FCE. Sarvodaya took a more cautious approach towards tackling the downturn in NGO legitimacy and kept a lower profile. As was described in the FCE case study, Sarvodaya's strategic and tactical choices were heavily informed by its organisational history, and long-term strategy of legitimation. Sarvodaya's broad geographical reach and organisational identity restricted the extent to which it could switch from an 'exit' to a 'voice' strategy; many of its staff members and followers expected that the organisation would remain 'above' politics, or continue to operate outside the corrupt world of Sri Lankan politics. Sarvodaya's caution was also

²⁷² Interview with INGO donor representative, Colombo, 4th May 2007.

²⁷³ Interview with Chief Executive, February 2007.

driven by bitter experience. As chapter four illustrated, Sarvodaya had suffered in the past from getting too involved with party politics, or from being perceived as challenging the status quo. While the case has demonstrated how leaders' tactical and strategic decisions can have an important influence on legitimacy outcomes, this case has also emphasised the path-dependent nature of NGO legitimacy.

Second, although Sarvodaya suffered a loss of support from some liberal peacebuilders in the new environment, the repercussions for the organisation were not severe. As in the case of FCE, Sarvodaya's experience was shaped by donors' reliance on national NGOs, and the lack of incentives for the state to exact a more severe crack-down on NGOs at this time. Unlike FCE, however, Sarvodaya did experience a real difficulty in generating donor funding for its peacebuilding programme. The impact of this drop in funding, however, was cushioned by two factors. First, Sarvodaya worked in a number of operational areas, and a decline in funding for peace work would not have significantly affected overall levels of funding. Second, Sarvodaya was not entirely dependent on donor funding to the extent of FCE; it was able to generate a considerable proportion of funds from its micro-credit arm, SEEDS, and its sister organisation, Sarvodaya USA.²⁷⁴ These factors underline the point made above that NGO legitimacy must be analysed against the backdrop of the underlying power relationships that configure NGOs' relationships, capacities, and access to resources. The fact that Sarvodaya was the more risk averse of the two case study organisations, in spite of its greater financial freedom, illustrates that organisational autonomy is best analysed not simply in terms of organisations' financial relationships, but also in relation to a broad range of legitimacy concerns, and an assessment of how organisational identities have developed over time (see Bratton 1989, Sadoun 2006).

Third, the experience of Sarvodaya provides evidence of the ways in which NGOs were capable of negotiating or re-interpreting the liberal peace to make it more intelligible to local audiences. International donors were generally happy to allow a degree of reinterpretation during the ceasefire period, and were particularly enthusiastic about Sarvodaya's potential to support reconstruction in the North and East, to contribute to processes of societal reconciliation, and to mobilise popular support for the peace process. The decline in support for Sarvodaya from donors and liberal NGOs during the fieldwork

²⁷⁴ Sarvodaya USA's income was around \$250,000 in 2006 and 2007 (Sarvodaya USA 2007). In 2005, it raised \$3,200,000 in response to the tsunami (Sarvodaya USA 2005).

period, however, illustrates that this permissive attitude was based on a short-term alignment of interests rather than any lasting compromise over the ideals and assumptions underpinning their peacebuilding strategies. Donors were not willing to accept Sarvodaya's radical approach to peacebuilding and were particularly pessimistic about its capacity to contribute to a process of political transformation after the ceasefire broke down. In this environment, their preference switched from organisations that could play a more consensual role in the peacebuilding process towards one that favoured groups that were capable of speaking out against the climate of impunity that emerged as the country returned to war, or adopting positions that were critical of the government.²⁷⁵ As such, the case of Sarvodaya emphasises that peacebuilding programmes were based on highly instrumental partnerships between national NGOs and donors.

Fourth, as with the FCE case study, this account of Sarvodaya's experience during the fieldwork period has underlined the central role played by representations of NGO political action in processes of legitimation and de-legitimation. As in the case of FCE, Sarvodaya made attempts to reconcile tensions by altering their engagement with politics. They shifted their spatial relationship with politics by making efforts to engage with the national political arena and repackaging their peacebuilding work in an attempt to make it more intelligible to donors, but, like FCE, Sarvodaya also failed to come up with a compromise that was entirely convincing to all parties.

4. Conclusions

Processes of legitimation and de-legitimation

This chapter has provided a detailed account of processes of NGO legitimation and de-legitimation. The case studies demonstrated how NGO legitimacy was interpreted, not simply in relation to assessments of organisations' political activities or strategies, but with reference to broader perceptions of their operational style and motivations. In the case of FCE, its capacity to attract large amounts of funding relatively quickly after the ceasefire was signed, the lack of transparency in its funding arrangements, the personal history of its leader and its links with the political elite all helped to create a broader picture about *why*

²⁷⁵ Interview with national NGO representative, 11th November 2008. After the defeat of the LTTE there were a few signs that Sarvodaya might be willing to adopt a more outspoken position. In June 2009, Sarvodaya publicly confirmed UN reports that there were high levels of malnourishment in government refugee camps (BBC 2009a).

the organisation was engaging in politics, which raised suspicions from a variety of audiences.

The case studies also emphasised the heavy instrumentalisation of processes of legitimation and de-legitimation by a range of actors. These processes were not only used as a means for critical actors to articulate their own political agendas, they also provided NGOs with opportunities to clarify and promote their own aims and motivations. As the case of Sarvodaya illustrated, NGOs' interpretations of these processes of legitimation and de-legitimation served as a means of differentiating themselves from less scrupulous NGOs, and reinforcing their own organisational narratives.

NGOs' responses to a crisis of legitimacy

While the last chapter identified some common patterns in NGOs' responses to the crisis of legitimacy, this chapter has illustrated how the crisis affected different NGOs engaged in peacebuilding work in a variety of ways, and demonstrated that their responses to the crisis were equally varied. FCE was singled out for sustained criticism from nationalists and, as a result, its response focused on toning down and depoliticising its peacebuilding work. Its niche status encouraged it to take advantage of the opportunities for expansion and diversification presented by the tsunami. Sarvodaya, by contrast, avoided the intense criticism meted out towards FCE, and steered a more cautious path through the fluctuating demands and expectations of its key audiences.

Although Sarvodaya struggled to meet the shifting concerns of donors, its strategic and tactical decisions were more defensive, and its legitimacy with critical groups remained more stable. FCE's response to the crisis was riskier and more contentious; it provoked greater criticism both from within the NGO sector, and in the broader domestic political arena. This chapter has illustrated that, while the decisions of leaders had concrete outcomes for NGO legitimacy, these decisions were constrained by organisations' historical relations with key actors and their existing organisational identities. Sarvodaya's age and strong organisational identity meant that it found it harder to change its approach without provoking internal discord or damaging established relationships; FCE was able to adapt its focus and approach without provoking the same degree of internal discord. While FCE's public identity was still fairly fluid, Sarvodaya had become a well-known institution in Sri Lanka, and was committed to protecting this status (see Goodhand 2006, 159).

NGO politics

The chapter has highlighted the centrality of representations of NGO political action in processes of legitimation and de-legitimation. Both case study organisations examined here attempted to reconcile the competing demands placed on them by nationalists and liberal peacebuilders, by simultaneously addressing political issues related to power and conflict whilst seeking to distance themselves from the political arena. In the case of Sarvodaya, this manoeuvre was performed by its 'anti-political' rejection of the existing political system, while in FCE's case, its technical, cosmopolitan outlook sought to resolve national and local conflicts whilst transcending everyday political rivalries. In both case studies, however, this contradictory engagement with politics generated tensions that were exacerbated during the crisis period; neither organisation was capable of convincing all sides that they were engaging in a politics in a way that was legitimate and effective. The two NGOs were capable of re-fashioning their political approaches to become more palatable to one or the other side, but these efforts involved trade-offs, or were counterproductive and failed to satisfy everyone.

This analysis points to some of the irreconcilable differences between liberal-cosmopolitan and nationalist conceptions of politics, and highlights a core weakness in the liberal peacebuilding project. Liberal peacebuilders attempted to build legitimate political systems but often ignored the way in which the legitimacy of these institutions was established at the local level. As Barnett (2006, 96) notes, liberalism provided a particular way of thinking about the means to achieving a legitimate state, but in practice 'what constitutes the proper means and what is the good life depends on time, place, and circumstances'.

The highly contested and politicised nature of NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context reflected an underlying tension between two conflicting models of political engagement. While liberal-minded international and domestic actors conferred legitimacy on NGOs on the basis of their technical capacity to support attempts to reform existing systems of governance, nationalists viewed NGOs as legitimate insofar as they were able to contribute to state-led processes of political change without undermining established cultural norms and traditions. In the competitive environment that emerged after 2005, therefore, NGOs' capacity to provide external actors with a means of influencing social and political

processes was double-edged: it boosted legitimacy in the eyes of liberal peacebuilders, whilst de-legitimising them in the eyes of nationalists.

These findings point to some broader conclusions about the potential for NGOs' political action in the Sri Lankan context. The contribution of NGOs to political transformation in Sri Lanka was constrained on the one hand by the highly centralised and volatile nature of Sri Lankan politics, and the capacity for the state to crush NGO activism when it suited or threatened its interests. On the other hand, they were also restricted by their reliance on foreign funding agencies, whose strategies for inducing political change via NGOs were cautious and inconsistent.

While NGOs have demonstrated some capacity to challenge the objectives of their donor partners, the case studies have suggested that this subversion was quite limited. Most fundamentally, this analysis has indicated that their potential to make a significant contribution to processes of peacebuilding was dependent upon a supportive state. When a sympathetic set of domestic actors was in power (such as the UNF government of 2002-4), NGOs were given greater space to pursue peace-related objectives. When nationalists were in the ascendancy after 2004, however, the boundaries of political action switched, and NGOs' capacity to contribute to processes of transformation diminished.

NGO peacebuilding

The chapter has emphasised the considerable variation that existed between NGOs' peacebuilding strategies. The two case studies approached peacebuilding from very different political perspectives and engaged in the project of liberal peacebuilding in varied ways. The account given here has shown that whilst peacebuilding was able to serve as a 'mobilising metaphor', capable of accommodating a range of actors and interests (Mosse 2004), this capacity was contingent upon a supportive domestic political climate. As such, this chapter supports recent literature, which has emphasised the role played by domestic political actors in mediating the outcomes of third-party peacebuilding interventions (Cooper 2007, Goodhand & Walton, 2009). The chapter has also illustrated that the peacebuilding strategies pursued by donors were highly adaptive to the changing political context; the kinds of roles that donors envisaged for NGOs shifted considerably as the ceasefire broke down. This indecision from donors stemmed from the fact that they failed

to develop a clear sense of the kinds of peacebuilding roles that they thought NGOs could play in Sri Lanka (Walton with Saravanamuttu 2009).

The chapter has illustrated how, by providing a conceptual tool for looking at the tensions and inconsistencies involved in peacebuilding practice, the study of NGO legitimacy can provide a useful lens for understanding NGOs' role in negotiating or mediating international peacebuilding interventions. The peacebuilding programmes that emerged in the Sri Lankan context were not simply a direct product of international trends and preferences: the strategies deployed were based on a complex negotiation between these organisations' own experience, skills and decision-making, the shifting demands and expectations of donors, and the fluctuating concerns and expectations of domestic actors.

This detailed look at processes of legitimation and de-legitimation has provided some insight into NGO peacebuilding discourse. The chapter has explored how various normative frameworks utilised by NGOs performed an array of tactical functions. In both case studies, the vague normative and causal frameworks that structured peacebuilding projects helped to shield these organisations from criticism, either by depoliticising their work, or by providing space to shift operational focus without damaging coherence. Similarly, this analysis has underlined the tactical usefulness of maintaining a broad operational mandate and a comprehensive framework of action. It suggests that NGOs preferred to use broad frameworks of action because they served a variety of tactical and strategic functions.

Conclusions and implications: NGO legitimacy, peacebuilding and politics

This thesis has explored NGO legitimisation processes, by examining the experience of a range of national NGOs engaged in peacebuilding work during a transitional period when Sri Lanka's ceasefire was unravelling. Combining a broad survey of donor and NGO activity during this period, an analysis of the shifting domestic political environment and two historically-rooted case studies, the research sought to understand how national NGOs generated and maintained legitimacy, how this legitimacy was eroded, and how NGOs themselves reacted to, and were able to influence processes of de-legitimation.

This research has demonstrated that NGOs' actions and behaviour are closely shaped by their struggles to 'convince others of their appropriateness and trustworthiness' (Hilhorst and Van Leeuwen 2005, 558), and that understanding these struggles provides a crucial insight into their work. By highlighting the highly contested, politicised and politically symbolic character of NGO legitimisation processes in Sri Lanka, the thesis has challenged the normative and generalised accounts of NGO legitimacy that have dominated the mainstream literature. This detailed account of NGO legitimisation processes has elucidated NGOs' tentative, and at times contradictory, engagement in political work, by emphasising the centrality of interpretations and representations of NGOs' attempts to do political work in these processes. By examining the extent to which national NGOs' involvement in peacebuilding work during the ceasefire period impacted upon legitimacy, the research has also highlighted some of the contradictions, dilemmas and limitations inherent in contemporary liberal peacebuilding interventions.

These issues were addressed in several stages, utilising a range of methodological approaches. The first part of the thesis provided a broad survey of the operating context for Sri Lankan NGOs. Chapter two examined the global dimensions of NGOs' operating environment, exploring national NGOs' position within a global development marketplace, NGOs' growing involvement in issues of peace and conflict, and the legitimacy crisis associated with these developments. Chapter three presented an historically-rooted overview of the social and political environment for NGOs in Sri Lanka. The argument

presented here was that NGO legitimacy was best understood in relation to Sri Lankan political discourse and based on an appreciation of the symbolic role NGOs played in Sri Lankan politics. These aspects of NGO legitimacy were examined through an investigation of the history of conflict and international engagement in Sri Lanka, an overview of the historical development of the NGO sector in Sri Lanka, and an account of NGOs' growing involvement in peace and conflict issues. The analysis described how, as a result of their diverse relations in the national and international arenas, national NGOs' tended to straddle two competing political moralities (the Sinhala nationalism of the Sri Lankan state vs. the liberal cosmopolitanism of international actors), and identified this clash as a principal source of tension for their legitimacy. This part of the thesis concluded by presenting a framework for understanding NGO legitimacy in the Sri Lankan context. The framework emphasised the politicised and contested characteristics of legitimacy, identifying three distinct perspectives on NGOs held by critical, ambivalent and convinced audiences.

The focus shifted in chapter four to examine how the two case study organisations generated and maintained legitimacy. It argued that these processes are highly context- and organisation- specific, and emphasised the path-dependent nature of NGO legitimisation processes: the way in which NGOs behaved and presented themselves in the past affects the way in which they can generate legitimacy in the future. Chapter five began a two-part analysis of the crisis period based on findings from the preliminary case studies. It traced the connections between the crisis and underlying changes in global governance, before moving on to examine how NGO legitimacy was shaped by the shifts in the domestic political arena that drove the crisis. The chapter then identified a series of tactics and strategies deployed by NGOs to counteract the negative impact of the widespread condemnation that they faced during this period. This analysis underlined the politicised and instrumentalised nature of processes of NGO legitimisation in Sri Lanka, and the complex ways in which the peacebuilding interventions of international actors were translated and mediated by multiple local actors with competing interests. Chapter six examined the crisis in greater depth by assessing the experience of the two case study organisations over the same period. It described how the two organisations responded to the crisis in different ways, reflecting their varied engagement in peacebuilding work during the ceasefire period and their divergent organisational histories and strategies of legitimisation. This analysis demonstrated the centrality of competing interpretations and representations of NGOs'

political engagement in shaping processes of de-legitimation and reputational crisis management during this period.

1. NGO legitimacy

Understanding NGO legitimacy

The research project sought to understand how NGO legitimation functioned in the Sri Lankan context. My initial attempts to grapple with these processes highlighted a number of shortcomings in the existing literature. The mainstream literature tended to assume that, by developing a series of standardised capacities, NGOs could place themselves on the path to legitimation. These included measures of NGO performance (Eade 1997, Fowler 1997, Pearce 1997), transparency (Edwards & Hulme 1995, Atack 1998) and representativeness or accountability to the communities being served (Edwards 1999, Hudson 2000, Slim 2002, Ebrahim 2003). A key feature of these mainstream approaches was that legitimacy was seen as primarily determined by NGOs themselves, rather than shaped by the varied understandings of their main audiences, or the social and political environment in which they operated (Lister 2003).

While these mainstream perspectives shed some light on the processes of NGO legitimation that I observed in Sri Lanka, they did not provide the basis for a convincing account. Although there was some evidence to support the claim that transparent or effective NGOs had more robust legitimacy than corrupt or ineffective NGOs, this picture was by no means a consistent one. Similarly, while qualities of representativeness and accountability seemed significant in some NGOs' struggles to generate legitimacy, they seemed less important for others, and did not seem to constitute the most important determining factor.

The poor fit between the existing literature and the processes observed in this study was partly related to the fact that my focus was on national rather than international NGOs. As argued in chapter two, the legitimacy of these organisations was particularly contested, coloured as it was by their role as intermediaries between international actors and the local arena, and their greater exposure to the vicissitudes of national political arena. This discrepancy was also related to the fact that my analysis focused on a period when NGO

legitimacy was in crisis, and when NGOs' position as legitimate social and political actors was widely questioned.

Unlike most mainstream accounts of NGO legitimacy, this thesis investigated the phenomenon from an 'inside-out' perspective, analysing in-depth case studies, which traced the kinds of qualities and relationships that NGOs were concerned with cultivating and protecting. This investigation was combined with a broader political economy perspective, which examined how underlying power relations and political agendas shaped other actors' judgements of NGOs. My position built upon the approaches of a constructionist school, which highlighted the fundamentally negotiated and contested nature of NGO legitimacy, and sought to understand it in relation to their operating environment (Lister 2003, Hilhorst 2003, Morrison & Salipante 2007, Brown 2008). My analysis goes beyond this position, however, by taking account of the tendency for NGO legitimacy to be instrumentalised by a range of external actors and by using an analysis of NGOs' responses to crisis to develop an understanding of NGO legitimacy that was specific both to the operating environment at any given moment in time and to the particular organisation or organisations concerned.

The research has argued that NGO legitimacy in Sri Lanka was best understood as a highly negotiated and politically symbolic set of properties, closely shaped by changes in the broader political climate and heavily reliant upon the active support or acquiescence of the state. In chapter three, these characteristics were traced to the tight grip and enduring appeal of nationalist modes of political mobilisation over the state apparatus in post-colonial Sri Lanka. The widespread scepticism towards NGOs was also an outcome both of the state's growing domination of the media since the late 1970s, and of the state's own struggle for legitimacy during this period; characteristics that were both moulded by conflict. The dominance of the political class over public opinion politicised processes of legitimation and de-legitimation and undermined NGOs' attempts to generate legitimacy by bypassing the state and building support from the grassroots. Rivalry between cosmopolitan and nationalistic political agendas came to play a critical role in determining and shaping interpretations of NGO legitimacy or illegitimacy, particularly during periods of crisis. As chapters five and six demonstrated, the tendency for NGO legitimacy to become politicised was accentuated during transitional moments of the kind that I observed between 2006 and 2007, when the existing rules and expectations about NGOs' behaviour

and roles underwent a rapid transformation. In these transitional moments, the potential for NGOs to perform a politically symbolic role in the service of others' political agendas increased. Since legitimacy was partly reliant upon support from political elites and the extent to which NGOs could maintain congruence with dominant political discourses, NGO legitimacy was liable to fluctuate in response to changes in the political environment. As well as being context-specific, interpretations and representations of NGO legitimacy were also found to be time-specific. The challenge facing individual NGOs during these transitional moments was to evade critical actors' attempts to stereotype them as a threat to the traditional norms and interests of the Sri Lankan state or society, whilst maintaining a degree of congruence with the agendas and moral assumptions of liberal cosmopolitan actors.

Given the capacity for NGO legitimisation processes to be affected by political change, an interesting avenue for future research might be to explore how NGO legitimacy evolves in the Sri Lankan context in light of the defeat of the LTTE. In chapter three, it was argued that the backlash against NGOs was at its most virulent when the government was at its weakest and relied upon nationalist groups to maintain its parliamentary majority. As the Rajapakse regime became more assured and the influence of these nationalist groups waned, levels of public criticism of NGOs stabilised. In the aftermath of the LTTE's defeat, however, this pattern seems to have reversed. Although the Rajapakse government's political position has been considerably strengthened by the military victory, the government appears to be attempting to fashion a wholesale re-negotiation of the state's relationship with NGOs (perhaps along Indian lines) by implementing a new punitive tax regime for NGOs, taking steps to reduce the freedom of international NGOs, and setting out stricter guidelines for NGO action (BBC 2009, Page 2009, 2009a). As Saravanamuttu (2009) has suggested, the government's more recent targeting of international actors can be viewed as an attempt to sustain nationalist mobilisation by replacing the internal threat posed by the LTTE with an external threat.

As well as identifying the central role played by critical audiences in determining NGO legitimacy, the thesis also described how the legitimacy crisis sparked an upsurge of internal contestation within the NGO sector, or an intensification of what Hilhorst & Van Leeuwen (2005, 558) have termed 'legitimation politics'. This research has demonstrated how NGOs' criticism of other organisations was heavily shaped by calculations about the potential reputational benefits that such statements could accrue. In critiquing or praising

other NGOs, organisations were often also attempting to redefine their own position within the NGO sector. This analysis also revealed that attempts to maintain legitimacy often involved efforts to protect symbolic boundaries as a means of making sense of and structuring perceptions of the NGO sector. NGOs invested considerable energy in maintaining these boundaries by differentiating themselves from mutant NGOs or by asserting their position inside or outside certain NGO categories, for example, by emphasising their 'un-NGOness'.

As demonstrated in chapters five and six, during moments of crisis, NGOs appeared to adopt more direct legitimation tactics that focused on maintaining good relations with, or minimising rebuke from, key actors. As such, NGO legitimation became more closely bound up with fundamental power relations. During moments of crisis or rapid political change, the space for NGOs to cultivate social acceptance or goodwill based on favourable assessments of their actions and behaviour was subsumed by noisy critiques from the political arena. In this environment, rather than attempting to generate legitimacy by carefully working to generate positive impressions from a range of actors, most NGOs became concerned with a more defensive project of maintaining legitimacy by managing the impact of these prominent negative accounts of their work, and managing relationships with the most powerful actors.

Legitimacy crisis

The research examined the extent to which NGOs could respond to a legitimacy crisis and found that NGOs were able to deploy a range of strategies and tactics in an effort both to maintain legitimacy with various key actors that were sympathetic to their aims, and to limit the damage from critical actors. The analysis of peacebuilding NGOs presented in chapters five and six highlighted a number of core tactics, which included altering the scope of their work, modifying the way in which they talked about or presented their actions, differentiating themselves from other NGOs, and modifying their political engagement. While these manoeuvres were often successful in protecting organisations from criticism and maintaining good relations with donors, the analysis also demonstrated that deploying these tactics involved trade-offs: attempts to mitigate the negative perceptions coming from one set of actors in a highly contested political environment would almost inevitably damage relations with another.

This analysis again demonstrated the importance of underlying power relations in determining processes of NGO legitimisation. The research has argued that NGOs' capacity to influence the perceptions of other actors is shaped by underlying power relations: organisations with closer links to the domestic political elite or international funders were more capable of influencing legitimisation processes than smaller, less well-funded or well-connected organisations. In particular, I have argued that organisations with technical expertise or experience of working with donors were more skilled at meeting the changing priorities of donors. This research has demonstrated that while NGOs were to some extent capable of influencing processes of legitimisation, during times of crisis their capacity to do so was tightly constrained by relations of power.

Another aim of the research was to uncover the extent to which the crisis of legitimacy facing NGOs during the fieldwork period was connected to the global crisis of legitimacy facing NGOs outlined in chapter two. As argued in chapter five, NGOs' growing engagement in peacebuilding work during the ceasefire period increased these organisations' vulnerability to criticism. This chapter's analysis highlighted the significant degree to which the elite character of the alliance of international and domestic actors supporting liberal peacebuilding in Sri Lanka, sowed the seeds of its own downfall and contributed to the subsequent nationalist backlash. In this way, the legitimacy crisis that emerged in Sri Lanka could not be understood without reference to these changes in the broader global environment. While these new patterns contributed to a process of de-legitimation that affected the NGO sector as a whole, the impact upon individual organisations varied considerably. NGOs such as FCE, that were more oriented towards, and more closely identified with the new modes of engagement that characterised liberal peacebuilding, were more exposed to the crisis. On the other hand, more socially embedded organisations such as Sarvodaya were less vulnerable. This research has emphasised that while changes in the patterns of NGO behaviour at the global level could affect the legitimacy of national NGOs in Sri Lanka, understanding the impact of these processes required a detailed and historically-rooted analysis of the local context (see Goodhand & Walton 2009).

These issues point to a number of interesting areas for future research. As mentioned in chapter five, there is some evidence to suggest that NGOs operating in conflict-affected countries, or in key sites of liberal peacebuilding such as Nepal, Palestine or East Timor,

faced crises of credibility similar to those observed in the Sri Lankan context (Hammami 2000, Jensen 2005, Jad 2007, Wake 2008, Heaton Shethra 2008). It might be useful to compare and contrast these contexts in future research, investigating the role of a number of factors including the characteristics of the political system, the history of international engagement, levels of funding from donors and the historical development of the NGO sectors in these countries. This kind of examination would also help to refine and test the broader relevance of my framework for understanding NGO legitimacy. It would also be helpful to consider the extent to which NGOs' changing roles and relationships have resulted in any general underlying changes in the character and key features of NGO legitimacy at the global level. A number of authors have argued that as NGOs align themselves towards more capacity-based, technical and politically ambivalent roles, the kinds of normative, cognitive and regulative frameworks that shape NGO legitimacy may also change (Collingwood & Logister 2005, Brown 2008). Comparative investigation into which characteristics are most important in other contexts, and the way in which characteristics may have changed over time will provide useful evidence to support these hypotheses.

NGO legitimacy and morality

The research aimed to assess the extent to which Raymond Bryant's (2005) argument that NGO legitimacy was best understood as a quest for 'moral capital' could be applied to the Sri Lankan context. My initial hypothesis had been that his emphasis on morality in underpinning judgements and perceptions about NGOs did not apply well in the Sri Lankan context, since processes of legitimation and de-legitimation in this context were primarily configured by political concerns. Furthermore, in this case it seemed that the identities of many organisations engaged in peacebuilding work tended to be based around technical capacities rather than moral credentials. This hunch was to some extent borne out by the research, which highlighted important contrasts between the Sri Lankan context and the Philippines environment analysed by Bryant. While Bryant (2005, 5) observed NGOs risking 'intense political heat' in their quest for moral capital, many of the peacebuilding NGOs under investigation here adopted a more ambivalent position, jettisoning some forms of moral capital in an attempt to avoid serious rebuke from the state. In the case of FCE, their appeals to liberal, cosmopolitan moral frameworks were replaced with references to nationalistic moral frameworks. This difference related both to the more technical organisational identities of these NGOs, and the more hostile political climate in which they

were operating. The applicability of Bryant's moral capital thesis seemed highly variable. While this approach has little relevance in the FCE case, the account of Sarvodaya's organisational development in chapter four seemed to reflect Bryant's account more closely.

Although Bryant's argument that NGOs could be seen as engaged in a quest for moral capital did not seem to provide an exact fit with the processes of legitimation observed here, this study did identify a number of important ways in which NGO legitimacy was inextricably bound up in judgements about NGOs' moral standing. As described in the in-depth case study analysis of chapter six, judgements about NGOs' political roles and actions had a strong moral flavour. NGOs were judged in relation to two competing frameworks of political morality: on the one hand, a set of communitarian norms concerned with protecting traditional values and institutions, and, on the other, a liberal cosmopolitan political morality concerned with promoting the freedom of the individual in relation to the state, and a sense of universal morality that could be applied across sovereign boundaries. The clash between these two competing political moralities played a central role in framing NGO legitimacy or illegitimacy.

The in-depth case studies demonstrated that conceptions of NGOs tended to be formed not in relation to simple judgements based on organisation's aims and activities, but rather involved a complex blurring of a variety of organisational characteristics and behaviours, including NGOs' political strategies, perceptions about their activities, the moral disposition of their leaders and their relations with donors. These case studies also stressed that judgements about NGO politics became closely entangled with questions of NGOs' motives. Nationalist critics argued that NGOs were pursuing a political agenda handed down to them by foreign agents, suggesting that Sri Lankan NGOs were motivated by the financial support offered by foreign donors. As was argued in chapter six, these charges were hard to pin on Sarvodaya, which, in common with various nationalist parties in Sri Lanka, used its anti-political rejection of the corrupt arena of national politics as a means of promoting its moral credentials. Although FCE had initially adopted a less morally-informed technical approach to legitimation, during the crisis period it sought ways to assert its moral credentials in an attempt to deflect criticism. As such, this analysis supports the existing literature, which has underlined the central role played by motives and morality in underpinning NGO legitimacy (Bryant 2005, Hopgood 2008) and demonstrates that NGOs'

political behaviour is best understood by considering the extent to which this political engagement functions as a signifier of the organisation's virtue or moral worth.

The more complex picture of NGO legitimation that emerges from this study has underlined the shortcomings of approaches that attempt to separate NGOs' moral agendas from their financial, organisational, territorial or political concerns. While the multi-faceted frameworks proposed by authors such as Suchman (1995) and Lister (2003) serve a useful heuristic purpose, they can also preclude a more nuanced understanding of these processes of NGO legitimation.

2. NGO political action

This research has highlighted the role played by judgements of NGOs' involvement in political action in processes of legitimation and de-legitimation. As argued in chapter two, NGOs' use of political action to pursue objectives was reputationally risky, since it had the potential to undermine an identity rooted in the pursuit of disinterested morally-informed social action (Bryant 2005). In this thesis, I have argued that the consequences of political action for NGOs in Sri Lanka were context-specific and could only be understood in terms of the particular associations and meanings attached to political action in the Sri Lankan context. As argued in chapter three and illustrated through the detailed examination of the legitimacy crisis in chapters five and six, the patrimonial nature of Sri Lankan politics heightened the risks of associating with important political players and encouraged a number of social and political groups to define their engagement in politics in terms of their rejection of the existing system. While some NGOs such as Sarvodaya adopted this anti-political approach, others such as FCE were associated with a liberal cosmopolitan approach, whose strategy of state reform was widely interpreted as threatening and potentially corrupting to nationalist aims and interests. In this way, the thesis has argued that NGOs' political action was best understood in relation to an historically-rooted political analysis that examined the complex symbolic and signalling effects of NGO action to domestic political actors. Such an analysis, it was argued, was notably absent in international donors' peacebuilding programmes, which tended to produce overblown expectations of the capacity for NGO political action in Sri Lanka (Walton with Saravanamuttu 2009).

I have argued that the tensions associated with political action intensified during the crisis period, as the political symbolism attached to NGOs' involvement in projects of state reform increased. The transgression of institutional, territorial and political boundaries that was central to NGOs' role within the liberal peacebuilding approach provided a convenient tool for nationalists both to undermine NGOs, and to construct a broader critique of international engagement in Sri Lanka.

As well as identifying how NGOs' political action damaged relations with critical groups, the study described how this political work was also an important source of debate within the NGO sector and amongst donors. Although most of these actors were convinced that NGOs could play an important role in contributing to processes of political transformation, they differed considerably in their views about what constituted an appropriate political role for NGOs. While these tensions were not unique to the Sri Lankan context (see Feher 2007), the fieldwork period demonstrated how the legitimisation politics that emerged in transitional moments between war and peace engendered particular strains on NGOs' political positions, with divisions emerging around the extent to which NGOs should and could speak out in response to an increasingly ruthless and authoritarian regime.

The research argued that NGOs' engagement in political action was assessed in relation to a complex array of other factors including organisational identity, history, operational style, relationships and leadership. The perceived legitimacy or illegitimacy of NGOs' political work was based on a range of judgements relating to their spatial relationship with politics, their relationship to the party political arena, and their political style. NGOs' involvement in politics was also deemed legitimate on the basis of the perceived motivations of the organisations involved. As Hopgood (2008) has recently argued in relation to judgements about NGO efficiency, NGO political action was deemed legitimate on the basis that it was pursued for the right reasons. NGOs' attempts to reform the political landscape during the ceasefire period became unpopular not simply because they were deemed unacceptable in their own terms, but because they were seen to be driven by foreign backers, who had bought NGOs' allegiance through funding.

By analysing contemporary NGO practice in Sri Lanka, the research has supported widespread claims in the literature that NGOs' work has become increasingly depoliticised. In particular, it described how liberal peacebuilding interventions have conformed to a more consensual and ambivalent model of political engagement, as funding agencies that

worked with NGOs as political agents were replaced with governmental donors who worked with NGOs on a more instrumental basis (Walton with Saravanamuttu 2009).

Somewhat paradoxically, the trend towards presenting political engagement in largely technical terms was accompanied by an increasingly ambitious commitment to engendering political transformation from international donors. While this commitment was expressed in more consensual terms during the ceasefire period, the research noted a discernible shift in the way in which donors envisaged their engagement with NGOs as the ceasefire broke down, with some influential funding agencies seeking partnerships with NGOs that were willing to adopt a more confrontational approach to the government. The research identified two major problems with donors' attempts to re-politicise their engagement with civil society. First, they often lacked the capacity to engage effectively with these unlike-minded actors, or to go beyond the favoured technical specialists. Second, the failure of attempts to re-politicise peacebuilding by working with NGOs and civil society was often based on a suspension of disbelief about the historical role of civil society in Sri Lanka (*ibid.*). As a result of these barriers, donors' efforts to re-politicise their engagement during the crisis period largely occurred at the rhetorical level, and were incapable of prompting substantive changes in the nature of their peacebuilding work. This analysis illustrates that the legitimacy crisis facing NGOs should be viewed in the context of donors' own struggle to maintain legitimacy at a time when their efforts to resolve conflict were faltering. Advocating improvements to existing approaches to building peace provided both NGOs and donors with an effective means of reducing dissonance between stated aims and the realities of the current situation (see Li 2007).

Chapters five and six demonstrated how NGOs' involvement in politics was highly adaptable and could be repackaged and reoriented to suit prevailing political conditions. Tracing these shifts was complex since NGOs often presented a range of political faces to different audiences, maintaining cosmopolitan and nationalistic aspects to their work, and emphasising various characteristics at different times. The way in which pursuing particular political strategies impacted upon NGO legitimacy was closely related to the Sri Lankan political context and the specific time and place in which an organisation was operating. One important feature of this operating environment was the danger of engaging in politics at the national level. Building peace in the hostile climate of the fieldwork period often became about finding spaces outside of the national political arena.

The research demonstrated how, during difficult times, NGOs frequently retreated to the realm of the community to escape this volatile and dangerous national arena, or attempted to dilute their engagement in politics by working as facilitators, or empowering others to 'boldly speak out' rather than engaging directly. Maintaining a broad and somewhat nebulous rationale for building peace helped NGOs to perform these kinds of manoeuvres: the discourse of peacebuilding provided NGOs with a means of doing politics when it suited them, but left them with enough space to retreat to more benign space when this work became too dangerous.

While it has not been the aim of this study to assess which peacebuilding approaches were most effective, it has nonetheless highlighted a number of issues inherent in NGOs' political work, which may usefully inform future donor engagement with NGOs. The research demonstrated that peacebuilding work generated difficult trade-offs between NGOs' capacity to contribute to political change and their ability to maintain organisational legitimacy. While Sarvodaya's approach ensured a fairly robust organisational identity, this greater security arguably came at the expense of a blunted political contribution. Conversely, while the actions of NAWF undermined its legitimacy (and the legitimacy of FCE), these actions caused controversy and can be seen as making a useful contribution to the political debate surrounding peace and conflict in Sri Lanka.

There are two main implications from this analysis. First, the tension between the goals of maintaining a robust organisational legitimacy and contributing to processes of political change suggests that smaller, less formal organisations may be the most effective agents for peace. As Goodhand has argued, some of the most effective peacebuilding organisations have been smaller groups or even loose collections of individuals (Goodhand et al 1999, Goodhand 2006). This analysis suggests that the trend towards a growing dominance of the peacebuilding sector by large national NGOs may be undermining efforts to build peace in Sri Lanka and beyond. While national NGOs' considerable operational reach and capacity allows them to make a significant contribution to conflict resolution, donors should be aware of the consequences of heavily favouring national NGOs at the expense of smaller organisations. As the research has illustrated, an increasingly dominant role for national NGOs is likely to damage the legitimacy of the NGO sector as a whole.

Second, when weighing up tensions between organisational legitimacy and peacebuilding, it is important to distinguish between short- and long-term peacebuilding aims. While NAWF's more politically contentious approach may have been effective in the short-term, there is evidence to suggest that they may also have damaged organisational legitimacy, reducing its long-term capacity to perform peacebuilding work. In contrast, while Sarvodaya's more cautious approach may have blunted their political contribution in the short-term, this approach was justified in terms of the organisation's long-term aims, since it allowed it to maintain its contribution to peacebuilding in the future. As Goodhand & Lewer (1999, 83) have argued, maintaining capacities in 'cold storage' during difficult times, is a potentially useful approach to peacebuilding.

3. NGO peacebuilding

The research has argued that current peacebuilding practice had a significant, if complex, impact on NGO legitimacy. It explained how NGOs' engagement in peacebuilding interventions altered their relationships with other actors, caused shifts in their organisational identities, and made them more vulnerable to legitimacy crises. The thesis described how in Sri Lanka, NGOs' efforts to build peace became synonymous with liberal peacebuilding and were undermined by broader frailties in this project. While liberal peacebuilding enjoyed a brief period of support during the early years of the ceasefire, when the aims of international donors were aligned with the objectives of the ruling party and various powerful interest groups in Sri Lanka, this consensus was fragile and had a weak base in society at large. As Goodhand & Klem (2006) and Venugopal (2008) have argued, domestic and international supporters of a liberal peacebuilding agenda significantly weakened the project's political viability by failing to address the damaging association between the peace process and a market reform agenda, which threatened the state's role as a source of source of patronage and social welfare.

While there has been an emerging impression from the comparative literature that contemporary modes of engagement in 'post-conflict' regions have had a negative impact on NGO legitimacy (Hammami 2000, Jensen 2005, Jad 2007, Wake 2008, Heaton Shethra 2008), this research has provided the first analysis of how a more generalised crisis of legitimacy might emerge during a transition from a situation of relative peace and stability

towards a context of renewed warfare. This analysis may have some relevance for other locations in which peace is strained or where war has resumed after a ceasefire period.

The research has argued that the failure of peacebuilding in Sri Lanka was fuelled by a mutual dependence between donors and large national NGOs, which was traced to the contracting culture that emerged in the 1990s (Goodhand 2006, 185). Donors favoured national NGOs as partners not simply because they felt that they were more effective, but also because they judged that these more technically sophisticated groups would be able to demonstrate the completion of goals more effectively than smaller partners. This focus on maintaining the appearance of success fuelled the dominance of large national NGOs that were best equipped to provide evidence of achieving stated goals, and limited the scope for smaller organisations, which were less able to demonstrate success. The dominance of large national NGOs also acted as a constraint on donors' efforts to reach out beyond more prominent, liberal-oriented organisations. As the case of ISD mentioned in chapter five and the case of the Prayathna Movement raised in chapter six demonstrated, national NGOs were best placed to track shifts in donor priorities and colonise new areas of interest.

The mutually dependent relations between donors and large national NGOs contributed to a formulaic, technocratic form of peacebuilding, in which the maintenance of discursive coherence or the avoidance of dissonance was privileged over achieving meaningful outcomes, and national NGOs and donors colluded to maintain the apparent success and continued relevance of their programmes (see Marriage 2006). This capacity of peacebuilding discourse to reduce dissonance was tested as the ceasefire broke down, when the gap between objectives and outcomes increased, and actors' objectives diverged. At this point, donors became more frustrated with NGO peacebuilding efforts and some relationships broke down. Despite their frustrations with these projects, however, it was national NGOs who were best equipped to maintain funding since they were best able to adjust to changes in donor discourse and attract future funding. The modes of engagement that characterised contemporary peacebuilding interventions consistently strengthened the position of national NGOs within the NGO sector at the expense of smaller organisations.

Towards more effective peacebuilding?²⁷⁶

Whilst the research did not aim to generate a list of recommendations for NGO peacebuilding practice, it has nonetheless pointed towards a number of implications for NGO and donor practice in the field of peacebuilding that can inform future work.

Although the existing literature on civil society peacebuilding during the ceasefire period has been consistent in its criticism of the strategies of engagement pursued by donors (Orjuela 2004, Goodhand & Klem 2005, Liyanage 2006, Keenan 2007), it has been more divided about how civil society could be made more effective. Authors such as Goodhand & Klem (2005) have identified a number of small ways in which donor engagement with civil society could be improved, for example by encouraging donors to make greater efforts to engage with 'un-likeminded' actors who did not necessarily profess to share the same set of liberal, cosmopolitan values. Keenan (2007) has adopted a more radical stance, advocating a more politically engaged approach to conflict, which is reliant upon a radical overhaul of the organisational and institutional architecture of pro-peace civil society. He argues that a shift in the political orientation of NGOs can only be achieved by addressing the democratic deficits of Colombo-based peace NGOs, by developing stronger relations with marginalised groups, and abandoning the bureaucratic modes of engagement with donors.

This study has argued that these potential solutions mask a range of structural constraints and tensions inherent in civil society peace work. First, calls for a more politically engaged civil society run the risk of neglecting the historical relationship between the state and civil society, and in particular the past experience of pro-peace civil society in Sri Lanka, which had become accustomed to patronage or sponsorship from the state, for example during the *sudu nellum* campaign of the mid-1990s. The common perception in Sri Lankan politics is that change can only be achieved in the realm of party political arena. As a result, the capacity for civil society to play such a role in the Sri Lankan context may be reliant upon the prior transformation and opening up of the political system.

Second, these suggestions gloss over some inherent tensions in NGOs' work. On the one hand, links with international agencies have eroded the legitimacy of domestic NGOs. On the other hand, these linkages have been critical, in terms of both material and political

²⁷⁶ This section draws on material from Walton with Saravanamuttu (2009).

support. Drawing on global networks by lobbying international institutions on human rights issues has proved one of the most effective mechanisms with which Sri Lankan civil society can influence state behaviour. As well as providing leverage to restrain and influence government policy, connections with international actors have also provided valuable financial resources and helped to bolster the security of NGOs. As such, dispensing with these links might prove counterproductive.

Tensions between the international and national realms also make it difficult for donors to work with the un-likeminded. Groups that are opposed to international intervention are likely to balk at donors or INGOs' attempts to engage. This analysis also highlights a paradox relating to donors' engagement with national NGOs. By backing these organisations, international donors have to some extent been able to boost their capacity to wield political influence. At the same time, however, greater influence has also increased external scrutiny of these organisations and undermined the moral credentials upon which this influence was founded.

NGOs' contributions are likely to be closely constrained both by their organisational and political roots, and by fluctuations in the political context in which they operate. The research has suggested that maintaining a flexible and adaptive approach towards peacebuilding may provide NGOs with the most effective means of exerting and maintaining political influence in a volatile and antagonistic political environment.

The thesis has highlighted the importance of legitimacy concerns in mediating the outcomes of NGOs' and donors' strategies to build peace. As a result, it has indicated that peacebuilders can enhance their effectiveness by paying greater attention to processes of legitimation. While domestic politics is clearly unpredictable and the extent to which international actors can influence this arena should not be overstated, the analysis has suggested that donors could exert greater influence by becoming more attuned to shifts in the domestic political arena, and making greater efforts to predict the implications of their engagement on NGO legitimacy.

The research has shown that processes of legitimation and de-legitimation have been highly politicised and politically symbolic in the Sri Lankan context. As such, donor and NGO peacebuilding efforts could decrease sensitivities by reducing the use of peacebuilding

labels, or by working with organisations that make a greater effort to make their work intelligible to local political discourses. The legitimacy of these interventions might also be boosted by diluting the close associations between national NGOs and international funders. This could be achieved by establishing donor trust funds or providing more long-term funding that encourages national NGOs to develop more sustained and less generic responses to conflict. This kind of approach would require less emphasis on demonstrating short-term success and greater consideration of the way in which pursuing particular strategies can impact upon organisational legitimacy, particularly during hostile periods. This would imply more long-term support from donors as opposed to the short-term, project based funding that predominated during the ceasefire period (Walton 2008). Such an approach might also imply greater tolerance of failure during moments when the scope for non-governmental political action was limited. During these moments, donors might have to accept that it will be difficult for NGOs to contribute significantly to processes of transformation, and that their primary responsibility during these periods is to maintain capacities for future action.

This analysis of the crisis period has demonstrated the importance of the state in determining the legitimacy of international actors and their NGO partners. As such, it challenges the view that trends in global governance and globalisation have diminished the influence of state actors at the expense of an increasingly influential global civil society (Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor 2001). In Sri Lanka, NGO legitimacy struggles continue to be closely related to questions of sovereignty and the potential for NGOs to undermine the state's traditional role. The research has also illustrated the shortcomings of a generic, good governance view of the state, which ignores the enduring welfarist and nationalist understandings that have maintained such a dominant position in Sri Lankan political discourse. The research has suggested that peacebuilders could navigate some of the tensions generated by a liberal peacebuilding approach by paying greater attention to the symbolic role of the state and the way in which legitimacy is constructed on the ground (Goodhand & Walton 2007). Whilst such an approach would not preclude future friction all together, it might succeed in reducing national NGOs' vulnerability to legitimacy crises.

4. Conclusion

This thesis has provided a corrective to mainstream accounts of NGO legitimacy, which have depicted legitimacy as arising in a stable fashion in relation to generalisable qualities. It has used a case study of national NGOs working in a conflict-affected context to highlight a more politicised set of mechanisms for determining NGO legitimacy, challenging many of the assumptions of the mainstream literature. The research has advocated an approach to NGO legitimacy that pays greater attention to the contextual and political dimensions of processes of legitimation and de-legitimation, and seeks to understand how NGO legitimacy is situated within broader political and societal legitimacy struggles. This study of NGO legitimacy has served as a useful lens for critical reflection on NGO political action and NGO peacebuilding. Such a perspective has helped to elucidate NGOs' tentative and, at times contradictory, involvement in political work by highlighting the centrality of interpretations and representations of NGO politics in processes of legitimation and de-legitimation. Finally, the analysis has revealed the contested nature of contemporary peacebuilding practice in Sri Lanka and demonstrated the considerable constraints facing NGOs that attempt to contribute to processes of social and political transformation.

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