

Book Review

Julie Fisher (2013). *Importing Democracy: The Role of NGOs in South Africa, Tajikistan, and Argentina*. Kettering Foundation Press: Dayton, Ohio, 404 pp.

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Julie Fisher's book, *Importing Democracy: The Role of NGOs in South Africa, Tajikistan, and Argentina*, provides a fascinating study into the behind-the-scenes role of local and national NGOs in the process of democratization. Drawing on 103 field interviews and five meetings with NGO representatives across three countries, Fisher fills in the details of NGO work in this area that have long been missing from our picture of civil society and its participation in direct democracy-building. She looks in particular at how these organizations are drawing on both imported and indigenous democratic ideas and traditions. She is adept at not only capturing the successful and unsuccessful stories in this arena but also at making crucial connections across civil society democratization efforts and the states they are attempting to influence.

Fisher approaches discussions on each of the countries by first setting the stage with chapters devoted to an overview of the nation's history, politics, and civil society. These introductory chapters speak to her appreciation of the importance of context for democratization NGOs, a theme that runs throughout the book. These chapters are followed by two chapters for each country on the role of civil society. Specifically they examine how civil society supports democratization through nurturing a democratic political culture, deepening political participation, and building a loyal opposition and law-based civil liberties. In the case of Argentina she also includes how civil society strengthens the state. Each of these topics is explored in-depth by drawing on interviews and Internet and literature searches for the three countries. These chapters lay the groundwork and provide the qualitative evidence for two chapters at the end of the book where Fisher compares the experience of democratization NGOs across the different countries and then pulls out specific findings based on this comparison.

Indeed, in many ways the real value of the book is in the discussion and findings that Fisher relates in the last two chapters: Conclusions and International Implications and Recommendations. She states up front in the Conclusions chapter that, "the fate of democratization ultimately depends on the state, on civil society, and on the relationship between them" (p. 277). She then proceeds to illustrate this connection along with the ailments that can beset

countries on the path to democracy including corruption, authoritarian tendencies, and poor socioeconomic environments. She notes how the political context can structure what advocacy and otherwise supporting activities democratization NGOs can engage in including how directly they can focus on the actual democracy project in a country. Fisher's insights suggest that even in more authoritarian bound societies, such as Tajikistan, there are activities democratization NGOs can work on through and around the state.

Fisher's specific findings in the Conclusions chapter also act as recommendations in the areas of building a loyal opposition, law-based civil liberties, participation, and political culture. Among her suggestions for building a loyal opposition she includes that democratization NGOs should work more with advocacy coalitions on socioeconomic issues because such efforts face less government resistance and provide an opportunity to engage other civil society actors in democratization work. More generally she focuses here on the ways in which democratization NGOs can build capacity through mutual engagement as well as through international support for their work. For example, she suggests they become involved in mutually beneficial exchanges with one another in the areas of "public journalism", management training, and research on democratization as well as seek international funding for the community-based organizations they support.

In the area of law-based civil liberties, Fisher makes a number of recommendations based on the idea that because legal reforms are difficult to achieve and can be dangerous for activists, other strategies could be used including expanding the legal system (rather than reforming it), focusing first on legal reforms on the local level, and drawing on and partnering with international legal associations in the case of human-rights advocacy. In terms of participation, Fisher suggests various strategies including the use of public deliberation to improve participation and the importance of local level participatory activities that could be communicated better to democratization NGOs on national and international levels. These activities include the creation of innovative participatory tools by local democratization NGOs and the use of traditional or indigenous democratic organizations to improve participation.

Many of Fisher's recommendations in the area of political culture focus largely on educating the public and other NGOs in various ways. These include educating citizens about the law and legal rights, telling stories about political successes in the democracy, online networking and mapping of democratization activities around the country, providing civic education that engages students in current reforms including freedom of information, and policy training to "crowd out" corruption.

In her final chapter, Fisher concludes by offering twelve steps for advancing democracy that are targeted to those engaged in international democratization

assistance including international NGOs and bilateral and multilateral donors. These recommendations fall along the lines of increasing collaboration across international and national democracy advocates and actors and increasing support in a number of specific ways including for anti-corruption efforts, nonpartisan training for political parties, internships at innovative democratization NGOs, and establishing stronger connections with grassroots organizations involved in socioeconomic development. She also recommends making long-term commitments to NGOs that can be tracked and measured, especially for their long-term benefits.

Fisher does an admirable job tracking the work of democratization NGOs across three countries and distilling out essential lessons for use in practical applications. Indeed, the purpose of her book was largely to do just that – to gather information on civil society organizations involved in democratization activities that built on her many years of work in this area as a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. One cannot help but feel nonetheless that there might be a missed opportunity for better integrating this valuable work into the existing literature on democratization theory. Much of the current discussion in this arena gives a nod to civil society but does not follow through with a detailed empirical investigation into how civil society supports democratization processes. Fisher's book provides this detailed study however more may have been done to use this research to inform and build on existing democratization theory.

For research purists there may also be a lingering desire for a more precise definition of the type of civil society organization Fisher studies here. She defines "democratization NGO" as a subcategory of intermediary NGOs in chapter one however never clearly establishes the parameters for what an intermediary NGO is. Indeed, in reading about the organizations she interviews in the country chapters, they seem to fall across a very broad range of NGO types including but not limited to intermediary NGOs as conventionally defined. This results in a rather fuzzy conceptual picture of the shape of these organizations that the reader carries throughout the book which is compounded when local NGOs and community-based organizations are brought into the discussion more in the final two chapters.

Regardless of these issues, Fisher's book fills a large gap in the civil society literature on the work of NGOs in the area of democratization. Indeed, this book provides an invaluable resource to the many individuals and organizations around the world who are keenly interested in this topic, especially in terms of tools to move democratization forward. With this book Fisher has done one of the things she calls for by facilitating information exchange across democratization and other organizations so that they can learn from one another and further strengthen democracy.