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Abstract

Drawing on material produced by a range of US organizations and agencies in the period 2000-2006, this paper examines the methodologies and contents of USAID-funded assessments and evaluations of civil society, and interventions in civil society. Treating these documents as examples of a particular genre of writing, The paper examines first the extent to which these assessments follow one or more templates or formulas, second whether the information that they contain can be harvested to generate strategic and transferable lessons learned, and third, the argument that the way evaluations are generated, which relies on specialized for-profit firms often working on recurring contracts, raises problems of conflict of interest that impede the production or circulation of knowledge.

My conclusion is that despite being produced by able and committed authors, these evaluations are flawed by organizational interests and a lack of both resources and long-term perspectives which conspire to reduce their value and impact in the policy process. They remain, nonetheless, valuable sources on the enduring structural contradictions inherent in the laudable, but still not fully understood or explained, goal of democracy promotion.