A New Role for NGOs in Development?

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The persistence of poverty is a clear indication that existing systems of governance and delivery of the benefits of development are not functioning as they should. In very few cases, however, is this failure directly due to the lack of political will to do what is needed to eliminate poverty. In most cases the causes are more complex. For example:

- Since 1975, India has consistently produced annual grain surpluses. The failure of resources to 'trickle down' and feed the estimated 300 million living below the poverty line is directly attributable to barriers of class and caste that derive from a feudal tradition thousands of years old.

- In the so-called overpopulated and eroded areas of Central Tigray of Ethiopia, where several hundred thousand perished during the 1984 famine, simple water and soil conservation techniques could ensure adequate food for all. Such techniques were unavailable while the government spent the bulk of its income on military campaigns and policies to alienate the majority non-Amharic population.

While many Third World nations are subject to direct and indirect pressures from more powerful First World nations or influential multilateral institutions and corporations, most have a consistent range of internal distortions which were introduced or are maintained by various vested interests, such as a traditional privileged class, urban elite or military junta.

In many developing countries, anomalies and distortions of this kind coexist with enacted laws and constitutions that enshrine remarkably similar manifestos, emphasising the rights of all citizens to water, health, education, and to freedom of the press, of movement, speech and religion, avenues for redress and many other human rights. It is little wonder tension often exists between a government's stated policy objectives and the political realities that limit the will or capacity of Third World governments to implement these policies. It is in this environment of tension and contradiction that non-government organisations (NGOs) must operate.

First World and Third World NGOs

In 1993, the OECD recorded more than 29,000 NGOs in the First World, ten per cent of which described themselves as involved in various aspects of international development. Although there is no tally of the total number of Third World NGOs, the number is known to be many times the number of First World groups active in international development. In India alone, there are at least 15,000.

The evolution of the modern NGO: nation-building to advocacy

In most Third World countries, NGOs specifically concerned with the well-being of secular society emerged in real numbers only after the Second World War, alongside the dismantling of former colonies. Many such organisations evolved from anti-colonial independence movements. The Indian Congress, for example, having successfully involved huge numbers in the Quit India campaign, eventually divided to form a political movement, which became the first national government under Pandit Nehru, and a Sarvodaya movement, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. The latter movement was dedicated to the 'upliftment of the poor', and implicitly recognised that government alone could never solve the problems of poverty and injustice, such as the issue of untouchability, in India. Sarvodaya taught that the people must be brought to a new way of life by voluntary groups undertaking constructive work at village level. Today, more than 15,000 of these voluntary groups are at work throughout India. This example is also true for the many other Third World nations which followed India to independence at around the same time.

During the 1950s and early 1960s, the euphoria of post-colonial optimism meant that there was little friction between government and NGOs. They fought side by side to build their nation and serve their people. The most important expression of this cooperative phase was seen in the community development movement which attracted world interest in the early 1950s. The Etawah project in Uttar Pradesh, Northern India, a pilot project which generated much enthusiasm at government level, demonstrated that a team of village-level workers was able to stimulate impressive gains in agricultural production using a self-help approach. The Etawah project involved the training of multi-purpose workers to assist villagers to articulate their needs, assess their resources, plan their own development programmes, and to develop an administrative structure capable of responding to 'bottom-up' initiatives.

The evolution of the modern NGO began to emerge towards the close of the 1960s, with growing disillusionment generated by the persistence of poverty and a general lack of progress achieved over the past two decades. In time this realisation stimulated a reassessment of the roles of government and NGOs as collaborators in nation-building.

Most Third World governments which had adopted the community development approach were more interested in the impressive results of the Etawah experiment than in understanding the painstaking processes which had been
undertaken to achieve those results. Consequently, governments failed to see the folly of using conventional bureaucratic structures to administer ‘bottom-up’ initiatives. The paternalism of the civil service defined a passive role for people, effectively destroying any possibility of genuine community involvement in defining and pursuing development objectives. The bureaucratic process guaranteed that only those villagers with a better education and higher political status would benefit from these programmes (Korten 1980). Rather than being an instrument for genuine community development, therefore, projects became instrumental in the breakdown of social cohesion and further enrichment of the most advantaged and politically favoured members of the community.

A major disappointment during this phase of NGO development was the near total collapse of the cooperative movement, hailed as providing the solution to a whole host of development problems. Instead, during the early 1960s, cooperatives became associated almost universally with corrupt leadership, inefficiency and political manipulation. This led some NGOs to question what kinds of organisation were required to represent the poor, and whether, in fact, the poor needed special help to be able to build organisations to represent their interests adequately. Whereas in the past NGOs had worked in collaboration with governments and elite groups to promote economic development, now they began to target the poor, and, in many cases, the poorest of the poor. During this reorientation, NGOs continued to pursue the common purpose of working for the poor, and it mattered little whether this was in the form of relief or more durable development programmes.

One consequence of the failure of community development was a realisation among NGOs that ‘awareness raising’ or ‘conscientisation’ of the poor to the opportunities and problems that exist in the systemic structures of their societies cannot be ignored. Development demands an understanding of the roots of poverty and the ways in which those roots can be attacked so that individuals can be free to reach their full potential.

By the end of the 1960s, NGOs were beginning to differentiate into recognisable types, along a spectrum marked at its extremities by the ‘welfare’ and ‘liberationist’ approaches. The former saw its role as working for the poor and providing those essential support services that the government, for whatever reason, was failing to deliver. The latter, which constituted a more radical type of NGO, saw its role as working with the poor to provide the education and organisation necessary to overcome the structural barriers to poverty eradication.

At the same time as NGOs were responding and adjusting to the lessons of the community development debacle, significant influences from several key areas were impinging on NGO thinking. The success of China in meeting the basic needs of its huge population reinforced the profound influence of Maoist ideology on the ideologically disposed NGOs. From Latin America, the experience of Cuba and the writings of Paulo Freire (1970) were providing a new conceptual framework for understanding poverty and injustice, and liberation theology was having a profound effect on the many social action groups linked to the Catholic Church. Liberation theology provides much of the philosophical foundations for the reform of NGOs into institutions committed to the poor and the pursuit of justice. Whereas in the past NGOs had essentially been the preserve of educated, middle-class groups helping the poor from above, the new ‘liberation’ view defined development as a process that could only be undertaken directly by the poor themselves, characterised by such slogans as ‘justice not charity’.

Backlash

At village level in Latin America and Asia, NGOs were able to arouse a level of excitement and expectation amongst the poor that provoked violent and unexpected responses from government. Peasant leaders were assassinated, striking labourers were jailed by police working in league with landlords, and peasant movements were split apart with bribes, threats and alcohol. In Thailand, where development NGOs were just beginning to emerge, a violent army attack on students at Thammasat University in April 1976 created a wave of fear and suspicion amongst NGOs that was to last almost a decade. With its strong socialist, populist and frequently Marxist overtones, the new NGO thinking that dominated the scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s provoked a strong political reaction in most Asian and Latin American nations.

In a country like Indonesia, for example, with a lingering communist paranoia, NGOs are still unable to operate without very close government scrutiny and control, despite the fact that cooperatives had long been the backbone of the official political system. The 1985 Law on Social Organisations (which came into effect in June 1987) requires all Indonesian NGOs to adopt the state philosophy, Pancasila, and to report details of their establishment and composition to the government. In addition, individual NGOs are compelled to join umbrella organisations which are under close government scrutiny, and to accept government guidance in the conduct of their activities. The Indonesian government has the right to suspend the board of any social organisation which fails to accept ‘guidance’, or which carries out work considered to be against the national interest.

Apart from eliciting an unwelcome reaction, the more radical NGO approaches also raised a number of unanswered questions. Once awakened from their ‘culture of silence’, as Paulo Freire (1970) described the fatalistic attitude of communities which had been subjected to extreme poverty and oppression for a long period of time, would poor communities automatically adopt social structures and disciplines that would increase prosperity and justice? Or would a new leadership and structure emerge from within poor communities that would assume all the same exploitative characteristics of former oppressors?
This fourth phase of NGO development thinking is characterized by a more pragmatic and cautious approach by NGOs and, on the government side, by a reluctant admission that NGOs can play a useful role in stimulating grassroots involvement in government development planning and implementation. The current national plans of countries such as India, Kenya, Mexico, Thailand and Uganda all contain specific reference to the potential role of NGOs in development and the desirability of cooperation between government and non-government agencies. By collaborating with NGOs, governments hope to mobilise the support of local people and resources, and to ensure that government-supported development projects are sustainable and appropriate to the circumstances of the intended beneficiaries. This phase of NGO development is characterized by less conflict, a less adversarial mode of operation and an advocacy approach to the pursuit of justice and poverty reduction.

Lessons from the experience of NGOs in development

The wealth of individual case studies of NGO activities reported in the development literature highlights some important lessons to be learned from their experiences.

Lesson one: The need for in-depth analysis of poverty.

Perhaps the most obvious lesson is that organisations which fail to address fundamental questions related to the causes of poverty and the kinds of development assistance required to help specific groups, are inevitably unable to promote effective development at the grassroots level. NGOs also need to ask what role they can play in particular contexts. By failing to ask these vital questions, they risk missing the target group, stimulating inappropriate development activities which can undermine initiative, and wasting resources.

One of the most impressive examples of this type of analysis was carried out by the National Institute of Social Work and Social Sciences (NISWASS) in 1981 in Orissa, India, which studied the situation of the poorest people in two areas in Phulbani District. Initially, NISWASS conducted an analysis of the demographic features, cultural profile, economic status, and the efforts of government and NGOs to alleviate poverty in these areas. The researchers tried to understand what the facts actually meant by looking at the forces working in a given situation, and what the concept of poverty actually meant to the people themselves.

The resulting picture of poverty formed by NISWASS described a situation consisting not only of physical deprivation but also of mental misery. This involved a reinforcing set of factors - hostile ecology, underutilized resources, low productivity, low levels of literacy, high birth rate, low nutritional standards, high incidence of diseases and high death rate, all reinforced by superstitions, fears and high dependency on elites. On the basis of this analysis, NISWASS was able to work with the people to develop an innovative 'strategy for survival' based on a realistic and comprehensive understanding of their environment.

Lesson two: Development initiatives for the poor must emanate from the needs of the poor as perceived by them.

Any initiative to change the conditions of the poor must, logically, come from the people themselves if the cycle of dependency and exploitation is to be broken. This lesson has significant practical implications. It means that any initiative must begin with, and build on, the existing capabilities of the target community. Any development assistance efforts which fail to appreciate this, and either force people to move too fast or seek to substitute for their inadequacies, essentially become part of the process of domination. Strategies which give high priority to motivation, mobilisation and consciousness-raising amongst the rural poor take on a greater significance.

Lesson three: Chronic, systemic poverty requires change that concentrates on strengthening the social and political situation of the poor, as well as their economic conditions.

The classic approach of many government and international development agencies is to concentrate on improving the delivery of services to the poor. This overlooks the deeper problem of the inability of the target community to absorb and make use of these services.

For example, the 'land to the tiller' movement in India in 1951 did not immediately bring about the expected benefits to the poor and the landless, because the 'new' landowners needed additional support in order to make productive use of their land, including credit for land development, agricultural inputs, extension services, short-term sustenance and marketing services. Most importantly, the beneficiaries required extensive support and training in organisation and management so that they could develop the confidence to seek out, coordinate and therefore control inputs which were potentially available from government departments. For example, from 1979 to 1987, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) organised nearly 100,000 villagers, whose economic projects now generate nearly one million person days of employment per year. Over 60 per cent of the poor people resident in the areas surrounding BRAC's 43 centres have been organised into self-help groups.

Lesson four: The poorest are more likely to benefit if development activities are designed in such a way that appropriation by others is difficult or unprofitable.

Programmes which are designed to focus on a particular target group and to respond specifically to their needs tend to be more successful in preventing other groups from drawing off the benefits. This political economy perspective is seldom taken into account when government projects are designed.

Lesson five: The simpler the design, the greater the likelihood that the poorest can control and benefit from development projects.

Although this seems a truism, it has been one of the hardest lessons for development organisations to learn. Whatever
the potential benefits of the high-yielding varieties of crops which were developed as part of the Green Revolution, many of the intended beneficiaries were unable to participate because high-yield varieties required land, water and other inputs, and hence capital, which the poorest did not have. Such development programmes supposedly designed for the poor often actually prevent their involvement by demanding unrealistic prerequisites and conditions.

Lesson six: Development for the poor necessarily involves changing the structures which keep them in poverty, and a readiness to cope with the conflict which may accompany such changes.

Aid organisations which fail to understand that assisting the poor may involve conflict with vested interests condemn the poor to a relentless process of trying and failing. Those who seek to avoid conflict, axiomatically seek to avoid change; those who do not anticipate conflict or prepare the rural poor for the possibility of conflict, expose them to setbacks and suffering. NGOs which both anticipate and prepare can be very effective in helping communities to re-establish their equilibrium and take up a stronger position in society.

Challenges facing NGOs

Is there an ‘appropriate’ role for NGOs?

There are a number of contradictions and challenges facing NGOs working with the poor in Third World countries. To be successful, development initiatives need to emanate from the poor, yet the poor are often so oppressed that they do not have the time, energy or optimism to engage in new endeavours.

Success requires a multifaceted approach to development, and yet the poor need to engage in simple initiatives if they are to have the capacity to control the development process. As our description of the evolution of NGOs indicates, this is precisely why many government programmes have failed to reach the poor. As Verhagen points out, ‘By “being reached” the position of the poor may be weakened, not strengthened. NGOs which both anticipate and prepare can be very effective in helping communities to re-establish their equilibrium and take up a stronger position in society.

The challenge of professionalism

Many Third World NGOs have staff who are technically proficient and pay a great deal of attention to the development of their professional competence. As these organisations get caught up in the day-to-day affairs of carrying out a particular technical programme, they run the risk of losing sight of their mandate and the competence needed to help people change their own lives by their own efforts. The result can be a programme which differs little from that which any government department might implement. First World NGOs can exacerbate this process by insisting on Western concepts of ‘professionalism’ in terms of formal project planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation procedures which cannot by themselves guarantee more positive development results, but which may make unrealistic demands on the poorest indigenous NGOs. The challenge for both Third World and First World NGOs is to refine and develop that form of professionalism which gives the highest priority to a shared commitment to the poorest.
The challenge of charitable intentions

Some organisations never manage to formulate any clear development goals as they concentrate on relieving the enormous sufferings of those in the midst of disaster. If an NGO does not back up its relief activities by more substantial development work, it tends to entrench the NGO and the target community in dominant-dependent relationships.

The relief approach to development has been both initiated and reinforced by many First World NGOs responding to disasters. By concentrating on fund raising for relief activities, NGOs risk overlooking what may be the most effective methods for distributing and using aid funds to support sustainable development for disaster victims. NGOs worldwide continue to struggle with the relationship between relief and development.

The challenge of scale

Many Third World NGOs recognise that the weakness of the poor is directly related to the small-scale, unproductive and isolated nature of their survival strategies. Similarly, the capacity of indigenous NGOs to assist the poor is influenced by their size, their efficiency and the nature of the activities they support. In order to improve their ability to reduce poverty, Third World NGOs have sought to increase the scale of their operations, improve their technical proficiency and diversify the areas in which they are active. In so doing, they run the risk of developing into institutions which are bureaucratised and no longer accessible to the poor. But in scaling up, indigenous NGOs have confronted governments by performing parallel functions to that of local governments, or, being co-opted by government to become little more than a QANGO (Quasi Autonomous Non-Governmental Organisation). In the latter case, the NGO may cease to be trusted by the poor and thereby loses the capacity to perform an effective linking function with the organisations of the poor.

A parallel danger exists among First World NGOs, many of which have been wooed in recent years by bilateral and multilateral agencies to accept very large grants. These grants are not a corrupting influence in themselves. But to the extent that NGOs have a special responsibility to support micro-projects which, in terms of people’s development, are what is needed, the acceptance of large grants from the domestic or multilateral public purse compromises their non-government status, especially when it induces NGOs to imitate the values and modes of operation of government agencies.

Future challenges

A number of Western government and official multilateral sources have increased their support to the NGO sector to carry out the ‘humanitarian’ components of foreign aid programmes, but few have done so in the conscious recognition of the need to channel funds through organisations committed to representing the interests of the poor. One response by First World and Third World NGOs to these increased funding opportunities has been to redefine their roles. In the past, at least lip-service was given to the belief that Third World NGOs defined the direction, pace and method of their development work while their First World partners provided resources and committed support. Since the late 1980s, First World NGOs have found themselves pressured to become allied to the priorities and administrative dictates of donors and to impose these on their counterparts, to the extent that indigenous NGOs can too readily become an unwitting tool of cultural imperialism.

Do NGOs have a choice? Can they afford to overlook the massive resources of major aid donors and the potential influence that they might have on how these resources are spent? Yes, they have a choice. No, they should not ignore the resources available from the aid sector, but they must reject those funds offered on conditions that compromise the ability of the NGO to remain true to its purpose and independence. As the world prepares for a new millennium, the challenge for NGOs is to find a new way which neither renders them irrelevant to mainstream development initiatives, nor exposes them to the risk of losing touch with grassroots realities.

This new way would appear to have two components. One involves NGOs adhering to their people-oriented approach in the face of unsympathetic governments and donors, while at the same time challenging governments and donors to adjust their development perspectives to accommodate the legitimate interests of the poor. International NGOs such as OXFAM (UK) and NOVIB (Holland), and environmental groups in the US, have had some success in challenging the large donors, such as the World Bank, to ensure that the projects they support are not harmful to the local environment and populations in project areas. World Bank reforms that now require environmental impact assessments for every large infrastructure project, are in large part a response to pressure from the NGO sector (see Clark 1991).

The second component of this new way relates more directly to the poorest people themselves. Ultimately, if the interests of the poor are to be represented in major development initiatives, the poorest people must develop organisations of sufficient strength to enable them to deal as equals with key decision makers. These organisations are distinguished from NGOs in that they have a formal structure which is directly under the democratic control of the people they are designed to assist (see Korten 1990, 1994). These organisations must become a vehicle not only for articulating the needs of the poor but also for distributing information and resources from government to the people. Perhaps most importantly, however, is the fact that in the process of setting up and running these organisations, poor people acquire desperately needed knowledge, skills, discipline and organisational capabilities. This process is, by definition, slow.

What is urgently required in the next few years is to strengthen NGO attempts to engage governments and major donors in constructive dialogue. At the same time, NGOs need to use their networks to create international linkages between
people's organisations, to offset the effect of the government-to-government linkages which are a dominant influence in the lives of Third World people.

Influential writers have reinforced the conventional wisdom that NGOs are especially adept at grassroots development and working with the poor. It does not follow, however, that NGOs have a comparative advantage in the delivery of development assistance that is poverty targeted. The sparse evidence on the comparative advantages of NGOs remains anecdotal because it has not been subjected to systematic analysis for a broad cross-section of NGOs. Conversely, the conventional wisdom that government-initiated or implemented grassroots development schemes tend to fail because they lack this comparative advantage is also unproven. As the many case studies of NGOs and NGO-implemented poverty reduction projects show, there is more evidence to support a rival hypothesis to explain the success of NGOs in poverty targeted rural development and institutional innovation. This rival hypothesis is simple: it is not that NGOs do grassroots development better, but that NGOs tend to do the 'right' things. NGOs tend to work with the landless, with women and children, supporting household sector 'survival' enterprises, to improve their productivity. If the World Bank and governments did the same, they too would have greater success in helping the poor escape from poverty. If NGOs have a comparative advantage, it is more likely to be the result of doing the right thing more often, than because there is a magic formula to working with the poor that governments and their collaborators cannot master.

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