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The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Development Support: The African Perspective

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The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Development Support: The African Perspective

One important feature of the development architecture of Africa is the rising prominence of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). The activities of these organizations became noticeable as a new trend appearing from 1950 to 1960 and accelerated in the 1970s and 1980s as they began trying to fill gaps that government either cannot or do not wish to fill. A World Bank document observed in 1995 that “since the mid-1970s, the NGO sector in both developed and developing countries has experienced exponential growth ... it is now estimated that over 15 percent of total development aid is channeled through NGOs” amounting to roughly about 8 billion US dollars. It concluded that “given that statistics are notoriously incomplete, there was an estimated 6,000 to 30,000 national NGOs in developing countries alone, while community-based organizations in developing world number in hundreds of thousands.” Needless to add that the numbers have grown steadily since that document was produced and that a significant proportion of these NGOs operate in Africa.

The Problem of Definition

The task of addressing the work and impact of NGOs in development in Africa must begin with the issue of definition. Today, the term NGOs invokes a wide scope of organizations of different origin, size, programs, role, strategy, funding, linkage evaluation, ideology, etc. Organisations operating under this umbrella are wide and varied with complex and innumerable parameters. The term NGOs cover a large variety of groups ranging from community groups, grassroots activist groups, research organizations, advocacy groups, corporate think-tanks, emergency/humanitarian relief focused groups, etc. The terms is often used loosely sometime idealistically and sometimes pejoratively, and at different times, interchangeably with different names such as civil society, private voluntary organizations, charity, non-profit institutions, etc.

Consequently, the task of defining NGOs must being with a framework that identifies the basic characteristics of NGOs as follows:

- a) They should be non-state actors that are not based in government
- b) They should be organizations that are not created to earn or make profit

- c) They should be organizations designed to produce a social good e.g. to relieve suffering, provide social services, promote development, etc.

Taken together therefore, the UN defines NGOs as “private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interest of poor, protect the environment, provide basic services or undertake community development.” This definition must be applied with the addition that they must be non-profit organizations that ideally relies on their own free will for action. Hence, there should be an element of voluntarism.

NGOs in Africa: A Historical Perspective

This definition underlines the idealistic roots of NGOs. However, the character and nature of these organizations have undergone tremendous changes as they evolved. The mushroom growth of NGOs in recent times conceal the fact that they are part of the earliest forms of human organization. Long before governments came into being, people organized themselves into social groups that drew on community spirit and needs to tackle social problems concerning the rights of people and common property, resources, health, safety, danger, gender and equity, disease, squalor, poverty, ecological degradation, etc.

The advent of colonialism introduced a new set of values that placed priority on government. The colonial government did not see the need to invest resources in the development of social communities except where it contributed directly to the demands and welfare of the colonial administration. The spirit of cooperation and mutual self-help persisted but at a decreasing premium. Subsequently, in the struggle for independence, nationalist leaders placed premium on governmental responsibility for delivering on social goals. The tradition of nationalist resistance cemented this ethos. The spirit of the time was captured by Nkrumah’s aphorism on the importance of self-government that “we should seek first the political kingdom by capturing government (power and all other things shall be added into it.” The nationalist leaders promised that the onset of self-government and independence would marry governmental resources with community requirements and implied that the process would be self-sufficient.

In the immediate aftermath of independence therefore, they pursued development policies that buttressed this perspective. Increasing governmental revenues that accrued as a result of rising economic growth was often allied with

resources obtained from nationalization of the foreign dominated private sector as governments invested heavily in social development and without requiring or encouraging self-help or local voluntary contributions.

Changes, Transition and Growth

However, in the 1970s the situation in Africa became worse as the continent experienced severe economic crises associated with lack of growth, high inflation, rising internal and foreign debts, crumbling infrastructure and shortage of essential commodities. These harsh economic conditions were often associated with bad governance practices, neo-colonial dependencies and imbalance of global trading systems.

The situation created the recognition of a gap in the social landscape that could only be filled by a private volunteering spirit. The movement of social groups and community organizations that had hitherto in the 1950s and 1960s confined itself to timely action based on religious or charitable considerations oscillated towards development as groups within communities realized the need to embrace a perception of development requiring long terms programs that can help solve the problems facing society.

The exponential growth of NGOs on the continent coincided with this changing philosophy of development but it would be false to suggest that the framework of growth was simply internally inspired. The end of the Cold War in the late 1970s and 1980s made it easier for NGOs to operate. Communication advances, especially the internet, helped to create new global communities and bonds across state boundaries among like-minded people. Globally, resources available had increased considerably with growing professionalism and increasing employment opportunities in NGOs. The media ability to inform more people about global problems along with visual images imported by television, internet and, of late, the social media created broader awareness impelling the public to demand that governments and their private sector take action of some sort to alleviate problems and sufferings. Externally also, NGOs developed as part of a larger neo-economic liberal and political agenda, known as the Washington Consensus, pushed around and spearheaded by the US and Western governments. This agenda tended to minimize the role of the state in providing social services such as health and education and to push funding towards NGOs as an alternative to the State.

NGOs as a Third Balancing Sector : The African Experience

These circumstances have fuelled a tendency to represent NGOs as a third sector of society balancing the transactional interplay of political and market forces. Thus while market forces lead to more and more relaxation of rules and regulations for their benefit, the activities of NGOs come in as a mediating force to balance out negative aspects of market forces such as exploitation, degradation and social suffering. This romantic concept of NGOs is often pushed by donors as a variable ingredient of democratization, with a potential to hold the state in check, and to serve as a moral pulse of society and democratic values.

This triadic unity of state, market and civil society presumes organic harmony and balance that is more or less artificial. It also presumes an altruism, unity and nobility of NGO format which is at variance with the facts.

The empirical experience of NGOs in Africa teaches us that their contribution and value to society depends on the derivation, funding, structure and social purpose. There are NGOs independent of state foreign aid and external funding but these are exceptions rather than the rule. Many organizations within civil society receive funding to varying degrees from the state and private sponsorship leading to a variety of classification that we can consider as follows:

- a) DONGOS – Donor NGOs : these are NGOs often created and funded by foreign donors and adapted to their specific political goals. The agenda is set- externally and the people who work in this establishment are often salaried workers, sometime earning foreign exchange but claiming to be grassroot activities or champions of the people. Majority of DONGOS work in the area of governance, human rights, elections and democracy.
- b) MONGOS and PONGOS – “My NGO or Pocket NGOs”: these are briefcase NGOs founded for the purpose of tax evasions or private gain. The distinction is that the MONGOs, “my Own NGOs”, are created solely to serve the interest of one person who features at large in every consideration, while PONGOs are pocket NGOs that serve a cabal, or limited coterie of people.
- c) FONGOS : these are NGOs that exist largely on paper but can be used to source or attract funds. NGOs in this category often have fictional

structures that exists in law but without structural content. They could be varieties of MONGOS and PONGOS.

- d) GONGOS : these are government NGOs. Awareness of the neo-liberal economic agenda and the impact of DONGOS have attracted counter-reaction among states. Though several of them welcome charities and welfare bodies providing for the homeless, elderly and sick, in part because they reduce state expenditure, most have not taken kindly to advocacy groups with external linkages and funding sources that promote acts contrary to government policies or organizations that challenge the legitimacy of state. Thus states in reactions often create their own government NGOs as advance guard, or spying agencies on community of NGOs. These are labeled GONGOS. The orientation of GONGO effort is to build legitimacy for governments. Their structure is adapted to closely concealing their origins.
- e) BONGOS: Creation of NGOs are not the prerogative of governments. Businesses also sponsor or create NGOs as forms of self-insurance and protection. While businesses or the private sector favor and can sponsor community developments groups, they are often averse to challenges from labor organizations or environmental groups championing labor and environmental standards that affect profit. The result is that businesses or private sector occasionally sponsor NGOs as advertisements for themselves or to build affective social impulses in host communities.

The import of these classifications are that the interplay of state, market and civil society is governed by contradictory impulses. African governments acknowledge that the state can only play a limited role in development and recognize the need for mutual self-help through the activity of organized civil society. Even so, the state of play, particularly issues associated with external interest, foreign funding and “government averse” target oriented activists groups with adversarial political styles have created inclinations towards regulation of activities of civil society organizations, their funding sources and modes of operations.

Perspectives on the present and future

Nonetheless and inspite of this, the development experience of the 1970s to 2000s have raised critical awareness of rising incidence of poverty and squalor

and the ever widening gap between rich and poor. This situation continues to lend momentum to increasing activities and rising profile of NGOs.

Significant opportunities for NGO growth and development is also provided by growing interest among donors and rich governments of the west in strengthening the development of institutions outside the public sector, the demonstrated capacity of some non-government organizations to reach and affect the poor more efficiently, particularly in remote areas. Similarly, some NGOs have shown remarkable aptitude in carrying out programmes on national scale as well as a capacity to positively influence public policies and agencies and local communities. This capacity is buttressed by sharp decline in public development resources that encourages governments to search for more cost effective alternatives to conventional public services and development programs. The result is that the concerns about structures notwithstanding, NGOs are now to be found in conceivably every aspect of social life in Africa.

Options for Development

The reality therefore, is that NGOs play and will continue to play a role that complements that of states and government. They occupy spaces that governments either cannot or would not fill and, often, produce social services that can support those provided by governments. Yet, the first important lesson for the development enterprise in Africa is that realization that NGOs cannot replace government or constitute an alternative to it in a holistic sense. Consequently, a government – civil society – private sector coalition constitutes a useful axis for developing an effective NGO development agenda in Africa. This is not to suggest unanimity of aims and objectives or the need for concurrence particularly on socio-political issues and programs. NGOs particularly in social realms may have the need, at times to project itself in opposition, but should do so as loyal opposition in the image of parliamentary democracy.

This partnership agenda must be anchored on the fact that NGO will continue to play very important roles in development but these roles would vary and their success would be partly dependent on policies of government. Socio-Economic development must therefore be conceived as a shared responsibility. In this context, the primary role of NGOs would be to mobilize people and their resources at local, national and community levels to support self-sustained development. The major development roles they can play in this capacity are

varied. They can plan and implement development programs on a limited scale, mobilize local resources and initiative, act as catalysts, enables or innovators, mediate in relations between government and the people, support and partner with government in providing local and rural development programs, act as agents of information and facilitate development, education, training and professionalization, etc.

The role orientation of NGOs can vary in this context. They could come in as charitable organizations or as capacity builders or empowering organizations that would help the people to develop a clear understanding of social, political and economic factors affecting their lives and to help develop appropriate skills and responses for tackling them. The scale of operations in this regard could be of varying sizes. They could be community based, citywide, national or international.

Conclusion

NGOs have played and would continue to play important and critical roles in Africa but these roles can be buttressed by frameworks of partnership with governments and important international institutions such as the African Union thought an effective coalition process that would afford clearer understanding of the policy environment and the needs of societies and communities. Effective coalition would promote complementary and mutually reinforcing approach and strategies towards development.

As part of this coalition effort, African NGOs can assume responsibility for areas of activity that would add value to governmental efforts and address specific needs of society. They can encourage access by grassroots community to information, promote popular participation in governance and development, provide assistance for popular organization, reinforce the institutional capacity of grassroots organizations and support and provide impetus for the empowerment of youths, women children and vulnerable groups in society. The multiplier effect of these varied endeavors would be to positively increase the scope of community participation in survival and development efforts. The areas of multiple engagements will also foster and encourage a sense of initiative among the grassroots and enable a broad sense of popular ownership of the development process.

Finally, in reviewing the role of NGO in development, it is apparent that Africa and the Arab world share similar experience and concerns. The bulk of states in both hemispheres are developing countries emerging from colonial experience. People and policy makers in both regions agree that NGOs can play a vital role in development but they also recognize that in order to be productive they must operate in a manner that complements and reinforces governmental inputs. There is mutual concern and apprehension about external manipulation and use of NGOs to serve extra-community purposes and a shared interest in providing an enabling environment in which their operations, instruments and goals are adapted to the requirements of community interests. Within this context, it would be important for policy makers in both regions to continue to share experiences and use this to develop common standards or parameters for engagement.