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Participation of Non-Governmental Organisations in Social Development Process in Africa: Implications +

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ABSTRACT

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have participated in social development process throughout the world. In African countries this participation has assumed even greater significance because of the complementary, or occasionally supplementary, role NGOs play to that of government in social development. However, it is suspected that lack of clear definition of the relationship between NGOs and states in social development in Africa has led to uncontrolled, uncoordinated and ineffective participation of NGOs in social development. This paper, therefore, argues that participation especially by foreign NGOs in social development will yield better results if states in Africa clearly define the relationship with NGOs in terms of values, ideology and approaches. The discussion also looks at some of the implications of the relationship using examples from Zambia.

The Context

NGO activities in Africa cannot simply be dismissed as inconsequential or irrelevant. At times, in Africa, and I believe elsewhere in the developing world, the absence of their activities simply means no social development for the people. Their activities tend to focus on the poor, disadvantaged or marginalised segments of the population especially in rural areas:

"... However, NGOs can be effective in working with those groups ignored by or bypassed by large state development schemes. The main priority should be to try to reach the growing numbers of people not affected by liberal reforms or increases in wealth"

(Pratt & Byden, 1985).

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In successful experiences, the NGOs' contribution has been demonstrated by the extent to which they have empowered the disadvantaged at personal, group or community levels. NGOs have assisted disadvantaged people to break out of helplessness in order to effectively control their own developmental efforts and ultimately their own destiny.

In fact, on certain occasions, NGOs have provided services for which the needs persist even beyond the public services or have developed programmes to meet emerging needs not yet within the scope of the public service. This is especially so when most states in Africa are either ravaged by unresolved, protracted and devastating internal conflicts; or under the yoke of the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). SAPs in Africa, and perhaps elsewhere in the developing world, have been the one solution popularly prescribed by the International Monetary Fund for economic recovery. African countries are plagued by abject poverty, hyper-inflation, negative growth, or massive devaluation, high unemployment, squalor and poor quality of life. According to the Human Development Report (1991:23):

"Asia has the largest number of poor people – 500 million – but there is a steady concentration of poverty in Africa. It is estimated that Africa's share of the world's poor will rise from 39% today to 40% by 2000, overtaking Asia ... Indeed, if African leaders and the international community do not take action now, more than half the continent's population will live below the poverty line at the end of the decade" (UNDP: 1991).

Emphasising material poverty Norbye (1983:1) indicates that:

"The extent of material poverty reflects the inadequate flow to the poor of basic needs' goods and services such as food, clothing, fuel, housing, very basic household goods, and goods and services normally provided on a collective basis like water supplies, communal sanitation, roads and transport services, and notably basic school and health facilities".

Putting in focus the growing mass poverty and the declining human welfare in Africa as largely caused by SAPs, Oxfam (1993:23) provides a sobering scenario:

"Statistics on income levels do not convey the full human tragedy of Africa's development crisis. Rates of infant mortality in the region are 50 per cent higher than the average for low-income countries and over 50 times higher than the industrial world. In 1990, an estimated 4.2 million under the age of five died as a result of malnutrition-related diseases.

Another 30 million were under weight (in Zambia; the number of children suffering from malnutrition has risen from 1 in 20 to 1 in 5 over the past decade). Millions are affected by poverty-related health problems ... The health of African women is considerably worse than that of men. The most striking indicator of their poor welfare is an unacceptable high maternal mortality rate".

Most states in Africa under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and other donors have adopted the SAP measures. Generally, throughout Africa these have included measures of retrenchment and redeployment, foreign exchange auctioning, decontrol of prices, upward adjustment of interest rates, wage freeze, decontrol of imports, restriction on government expenditure, and liberalisation of foreign currency. All in all, the experience of SAP throughout Africa has been disastrous. The magnitude of the human tragedy caused by SAP may not be easily understood to-day.

There are also other important attractions about the NGOs activities in social development; the NGOs' manner of developmental process appears to be an efficient manner of promoting responsibility and autonomy of the individual groups and community which have become over-dependent on state provision (Brenton, 1985). By the very nature of their activities NGOs encourage social responsibility in order to empower individuals, groups and communities. The process of participation while the project lasts creates a sense of identification through democratic channels and the feeling of having been part from the beginning to the end. People learn and know how to do it! There is then the feeling of independence and self-confidence coupled with a sense of having control and self-determination. This in some way may appear to be the "human face" of NGOs' activities.

Against this backdrop, NGOs' participation in social development process in Africa assumes even greater importance and significance:

- a) the dire need of assistance to alleviate conditions of abject poverty, and
- b) the complementary or supplementary nature of NGOs' participation in social development.

However, NGOs participation remains unclear resulting on some occasions, into uncoordinated and self-seeking missions (Jones, 1977). It could be argued that states are highly placed and perhaps too pre-occupied to be concerned about the dealings of NGOs; although some states have provided structures for the NGOs, eg in Zimbabwe. However the structures in those states have not adequately resolved the problem of participation in social development by NGOs in Africa. It is argued therefore that participation of NGOs in social development will be more

positive and significant when states in Africa provide a clear definition of the relationship. Failure to do so will simply perpetuate the status quo with its concomitant effects. The discussion also intends to examine some of the effects and implications of such situations with examples from Zambia.

NGOs: Definition and Types

The central concern in this paper is not with the definition of the NGOs. However, several authors such as Balogun and Mutahaba (1990) define NGOs in terms of:

1. independent resource base
2. autonomy of thought and action
3. healthy relationship with government, private sector and donor agencies
4. responsiveness to the needs of their target groups
5. accountability in their organisation and administration, and
6. non-profit making.

The above definitional attributes cannot escape controversy. Indeed, it is recognised that NGOs have different ideologies, values, missions and strategies. But it remains true to say that NGOs share certain basic characteristics, such as:

- a) NGO formation is engendered by private initiative
- b) voluntary membership
- c) non-profit making, and
- d) focused activities.

These attributes appear common to NGOs. However, it suffices to say that there are many NGOs operating in Africa. There are those NGOs referred to as foreign NGOs. These have come to work in Africa with a sponsorship usually from their country of origin. There are also local NGOs which are basically home-grown with support either from abroad or local institutions. And lastly, the "hybrid" NGOs which are usually a combination of foreign and local people. In general, there is not much significant difference in terms of control, ideology and, programme design since the financial support is usually foreign-based. The source of funding usually sets the agenda and therefore control of the programme of action.

The foreign NGOs have their own self-interests which become the primary purpose and guide for their actions. Opoku (1985:4) indicates that:

"While one does not doubt the sincerity of many volunteers and some other idealistic members of aid agencies in the developed countries, neither development nor humanitarianism is the main motive. One needs only to note the existing poverty in the developed countries to realise that the humanitarian motive is doubtful... The emphasis on a humanitarian or development motive is more for public consumption both within and without..."

The discussion will focus on foreign NGOs because of their special role and orientation in social development process in Africa.

Theoretical Framework

Despite its centrality in social development efforts, the relationship between state and NGOs has not received much critical analysis nor has it often been the subject of empirical research. Consequently, most of the practice wisdom is simply normative and relies heavily on evocative metaphors (Schwartz, 1984) such as *partners in development*, *collaborators*, etc, with little or no attention given to the effects and implications, especially the potential conflict between state and NGOs (Weber, 1976). Probably, this is to be expected since the relationship between the state and voluntary organisations has never emerged as one of the leading themes in the discussion of political economic models in the recent past (ZARD, 1993; Hasenfield, 1985).

In fact, few attempts have been made to conceptualise the relationship between NGOs and government as one of the central variables in social development in Africa. The relationship affects the tempo of development with respect to prioritisation, mobilisation, control, organisation, allocation of limited resources and the relationship between NGOs and the intended beneficiaries. More often than not, the focus has been on the issues pertaining to the area of operation, nature of service and fiscal lay-out. There has been relatively less attention paid to the variance in their status, ideology, pre-conceived mandate, mission or agenda, values and approach employed. Apart from that, attention has not been paid to how the relationship can affect NGOs' participation in social development process.

Collins Concise Dictionary (1988) defines *relationship* as "... a state of being connected or related... the mutual dealings, connection or feelings that exist between the two countries, people etc...". Other literature seem to support the view that relationship is a bridging concept (Compton & Galaway 1984:220):

"The essence of the relationship has been called an interplay, a mutual, emotional exchange, an attitude, a dynamic interaction, a medium, a connection between two persons, a mutual process".

The purpose of the relationship from the above then becomes one of creating an atmosphere, the means for carrying out specific functions, stating and focusing reality and particular social demands. And since it is a channel, it is a dynamic interaction of attitudes, ideology, values, emotions, traditions and approaches, in this case, between NGOs and the states. It is assumed that for an effective working relationship, the state and NGOs should share mutual purpose, interest, trust,

values, etc. The absence or lack of these elements in the relationship, would breed self-interest, mistrust and suspicion. Obviously such a situation would not create an atmosphere for co-operation with a view to genuinely assisting disadvantaged people in society. The relationship is then denied the necessary unconditional affirmation of mutual responsibility and therefore no longer a tool for social development. The next section will examine factors that affect the relationship between state and NGO in Africa.

Factors Affecting Relationship

Values

Explication of underlying values in the relationship between NGOs and states are necessary because they influence the relationship. This analysis may be approached on at least two levels; at the upper level the analytic focus would be on policy in the general sense of the word. The idea here is not to dwell so much on the dimensions of choice in the relationship but rather how these values influence the design of relationship, eg the issues of power in decision-making, design and content of programmes and adequacy. At a lower level, the analysis would then specifically deal with value preferences. At this level, more consideration of value is made (Gilbert & Specht; 1974). For example, the values of self-determination, interdependence, freedom of choice, dignity and local autonomy may influence the design of developmental programmes, design of service delivery, finance arrangements, the criteria of cost-effectiveness and self-effectiveness. States in Africa may hold values that may be different from the NGOs.

Ideology

Ideology does not possess a clear and settled meaning acceptable to all users. Observers of this concept including Nove (1980) tend to define ideology as a system of underlying beliefs, a set of basic principles about human conduct and the organisation of society. However, ideology is used here to mean a body of ideas that reflect the beliefs of a nation, political system, and class (Chambers, 1986). Most importantly, ideology provides a perspective through which to understand and act upon the social world. In terms of relationship between state and NGO, ideology therefore carries critical importance in that variance in the belief systems may create difficulties for mutual cooperation. This is especially so in Africa with diversity of ideologies.

As Corbett (1965) notes, to accept a certain ideology is to be committed to a way of life. So a divergence in ideology creates a conflict of ideas with far-reaching implications and consequences for social development. The conflict of ideas

means a disagreement about organisation, conduct, role, inputs and outputs of development activities. From a theoretical and operational or practical level, ideology becomes a value attached to roles and responsibilities. Competing ideologies create conflict of ideas in terms of roles, responsibilities and interventions (Hatch, 1980) and especially if conflict of ideas is about the status quo; or attacks the existing order (Baradat, 1984), or a view of the future. Conflict may also result from differences in the strategy to be employed. It should also be recognised that ideologies are based on value systems of various societies; that they represent a view of the present and a vision of the future; and that they require people to take definite steps to improve their lives (Baradat, 1984). It can be readily understood, therefore, why the state and NGO may experience variance in ideology which may adversely affect social development.

Since independence up to the end of the Second Republic (1964-1991), Zambia employed the ideology of Humanism which was socialist in outlook and orientation. This ideology created difficulties for capitalist-oriented NGOs to operate in Zambia. Their value orientation, basic principles of life and belief systems created conflict and incongruence in the perception of reality. For example, the definition of what constitutes productive and unproductive activity could be a matter of ideological orientation. Many NGOs were opposed to various types of subsidies which the state deemed essential for social development to succeed.

Ideological orientation which is regarded as a tool for mass mobilisation gives rise even to the approach to be employed. People are expected to take specific action about a given social problem. NGO(s) and the state may not be agreeable about the approach due to ideological differences.

Approach

Many NGOs, with good or bad intentions, tend to adopt unconventional means in reaching the grass-root levels. In Zambia, for example, there are structures that are laid down from the community up to the national level. This was especially true in the Second Republic where the party structure was emphasised. But more often than not, these structures were subverted by the NGOs to go direct to the grass-root level. This, at times resulted in unpleasant situations of the government either expelling such NGOs or simply regarding them as spying agents. With that kind of label, it becomes difficult for any NGO to effectively provide service despite the good intention. More often, well-intentioned projects have been rejected by the intended beneficiaries due to what may seem to be a suspicious approach adopted by the NGOs. For example, an Irish NGO initiated a community rehabilitation project to assist the villagers to improve water, roads and pit latrines in some villages of the northern part of Zambia (Zambia Daily Mail, November 11, 1993). The villagers were not consulted on the priority of felt needs, nor were the proper

channels of communication followed. The NGO "was concerned about the rampant outbreaks of dysentery in the compounds..." and therefore improvement of water and pit latrines was deemed necessary and urgent by the NGO. Therefore people were required to participate in the programme. The approach ignored fundamental principles of working with people to establish their needs and priorities through acceptable structures. The project was rejected by the people.

Self-interest or Mandate

Ideally, NGOs should be invited on the terms of the host government which should be in a position to indicate the type and nature of assistance, and define the specific objectives, inputs, activities and outputs, the fiscal outlay, etc. However, NGOs come on their own terms; they represent a precise and concrete action by the donor country, a flow of resources both financial and people to the recipient country (Arnold, 1985). The state then, merely acts as a passive recipient without much leverage because of the dialectical interaction of need for such assistance on the one hand and the conditions of such assistance on the other.

It is not unusual for NGOs to react immediately when their self-interest or that of their sponsor is threatened. In 1986, the Zambian government broke off its relationship with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank over the issue of subsidies. The breaking up of the relationship led to suspension of debt facilities. Interestingly, several NGOs followed suit, they suspended their activities but resumed only after the government restored the relationship with IMF and the World Bank. NGOs behaving in this manner are regarded as proxies. And as proxies, NGOs, contrary to popular belief do what they do, not for reasons of altruism at all. They are not in the business of providing charity, though the activities appear humanitarian and lead people to regard them as altruistic (Arnold, *ibid*). The activities are simply a camouflage for their mandate as referred to above.

Implications on Social Development

Some NGOs motivated by their mandate sometimes lack any professionalism and can create more problems than they solve. They hardly understand the local situation; the extremely complex situation encompassing economic, political, ideological, value-based and personal elements. There are differences in outlook, attitudes and cultures with both the state and the beneficiaries of the programmes which are difficult for the NGO to adequately grasp because of limited exposure to the recipient society (Havnevik *et al.*, 1988). And more difficult perhaps is for the NGO to take criticism or accept rejection of what is considered to be a gift. They see no reason why a project should be rejected. For example the Irish NGO could not understand why the villagers could not accept the rehabilitation project.

In the eastern part of Zambia, an NGO decided to assist in provision of clean water. After subverting the national and provincial structures, the NGO succeeded in persuading the district authority to launch this "wonderful water project" in 1980. The water project, was finally launched in 1981. The project was meant to cover over 20 villages by 1986. However, at the end of 1986 only 5 villages had been covered. The evaluation of this project reveals several problems including lack of understanding of development structures, values, maintenance and local participation. In fact the project created more social problems in those five villages than it solved (see Mwansa: 1986).

There is often enormous duplication of effort by NGOs as they seem to compete with one another. Where one NGO could be effective, six or ten NGOs will be involved doing exactly the same project without ever interacting among themselves. They may even squabble among themselves for their piece of the action. I witnessed a situation in Eastern Province, (Zambia) where three NGOs were separately involved in water projects each operating with a group of villagers in close proximity. Similarly, several NGOs are separately involved in women's activities without reference to one another. Some NGOs have even gone to the extent of demarcating part of the country as their area(s) of operation in which no other NGO should operate. It reminds one of the "partition" of Africa – at a micro-level – partitioning of a country by NGOs.

Meagre resources which trickle in the country through NGOs is not necessary directed to the most urgent needs in the country. The definition and prioritisation of needs are all premeditated by the NGOs. The decision upon the type of needs and priority of needs is dictated by their self-interest. Driven by poverty and want, the recipient state(s) cannot afford to challenge the NGO lest the assistance is taken to another country. So the state becomes impotent to the extent of capitulating to the demands of the NGO.

In Zambia, NGOs have yet to undertake consultation not only with the government but the grass-roots. Usually, the NGOs define the developmental needs of the people and simply informs people of the project(s) and expects them to participate. This is either a conscious or unconscious mistaken notion of social development. The activities could either be income-generating, consciousness-raising, educational, etc. Beneficiaries are never consulted. Further the state has no control over the nature of activities of the NGOs that they seek to carry out. These activities are pre-conceived well before they come into the country. Consequently, these activities may well not be in line with the priorities of national development or indeed the beneficiaries' own priorities. It is of little wonder that NGOs on many occasions set out on programmes that have little appeal to the direct consumers of such programmes. Neither the state nor the beneficiaries are consulted on the needs, the manner of meeting such needs, and the possible outcomes.

Conclusion

The concept of NGO as has been applied (quite widely) in social development in Africa could yield better results if the relationship between NGOs and the state is clearly defined. It is also observed that the relationship is also influenced by self-interest or mandate of the NGOs. This leads to control by NGOs and the imposition of development programmes on the people. These programmes may not be regarded by the people as really meeting their pressing needs. States are in a weaker position in this relationship due to lack of resources and the need for such assistance.

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