

**IN SEARCH OF NGOs: TOWARDS
A FUNDING STRATEGY TO CREATE
NGO RESEARCH CAPACITY**

**IN
EASTERN AND SOUTHERN AFRICA**

by

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Introduction

A decade ago, few development experts paid much heed to the existence of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) let alone their contribution to development. Today, development 'experts' and social scientists engaged in development studies, would have a difficult time justifying their position and knowledge if they do not know something about NGOs.

Unfortunately, what is 'known' about NGOs is often clouded by what is 'believed' about them. Theoretically, it should be relatively easy to distinguish fact-based knowledge from belief based on some articles of faith. In practice, however, such analytical distinction is extremely difficult. The reason is that, in the current sociology of knowledge of NGOs and the accompanying epistemology of this knowledge, NGOs, as principal sources of this knowledge have tended to generate and target this 'knowledge' in a way that creates some myths about themselves; a feat achieved often by deliberately blurring the line between fact and belief.

NGOs beliefs about themselves are, however, sincere and, therefore, it is no surprise that these beliefs have over the years become a major part of our 'knowledge' of these development agents. It is only recent that systematic empirical investigation of NGOs' contribution to development has begun to take place¹.

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The recent (1988) publication of a fairly comprehensive directory of NGOs in Kenya by the Kenya National Council of Social Services (KNCSS) is one indicator of this trend. In addition, Research institutions at Universities are beginning to mount systematic research programmes on NGOs. Such a programme is now in existence at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) of the University of Nairobi. An important by-product of this research programme is that several graduate students are now writing their

Hitherto, what has been 'known' about NGOs has been based on the belief that²:

- 1 NGOs are **altruistic organisations** which are designed to respond to the needs of others rather than imposing their own solutions;
- 2 NGOs are **autonomous** and therefore distinctive and independent from governments;
- 3 NGOs foster **participation** and therefore provide channels for ordinary citizens to participate directly in development;
- 4 NGOs are **efficient** and therefore mobilize and use financial and other resources in a cost-effective fashion;
- 5 NGOs foster **co-operation** and therefore have a distinctive mutually beneficial relationship with the target populations.

In addition to these beliefs, it is now generally accepted that the role of NGOs in development has grown tremendously in the last decade or so, a fact which is itself reflected by two other facts; (1) from a relatively few charity and relief oriented organisations in the 1960s, examples of which included the Red Cross, Y.M.C.W.A., CARE, OXFAM, various churches, etc., the number of NGOs has grown enormously, especially in the last fifteen years. It is now estimated that there are well over 2,000 NGOs in the industrialised North which are channelling financial

theses on the contribution of NGOs to development. The recent publication of a *World Development Issue* (Vol. 15: Autumn 1987) entirely devoted to NGOs is another indicator of the current attempts to systematically study the work of NGOs.

- 2 These articles of faith are discussed in more detail in *Bridges of Hope: Canadian Voluntary Agencies and the Third World*. The book, published by the North-South Institute in 1988 and written by Tim Broadhead and Brent Herben-Copley with the research collaboration of Anne-Mane Lambert, is an excellent review of the Canadian NGO scene. However, the study has several short-comings, the most important ones being (i) It is primarily based on what NGOs had to say about themselves (beliefs) and (ii) the field work was inadequate in that only six field trips were undertaken to Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Haiti, Jamaica, Mali, Peru and Zimbabwe and in our view the "one month" duration of each trip was too short a period, (iii) the study was conducted by an outsider. Therefore, it is not obvious that they were fully capable of correctly interpreting the extremely complex

and human resources, either directly or indirectly to some 10,000 to 20,000 NGOs in the South³, (2) an increasing share of resource transfer from the North to the South is passing through the NGOs. A recent report (1986)⁴ by the Organisation for Economic Development (OECD) notes that NGOs now receive as much as US\$ 3.3 billion from private sources and another US\$ 1.5 billion from official aid agencies. A related, and somewhat similar estimate is that the NGO sector probably grants almost US\$ 4 billion a year to assist some 100 million people in the Third World⁵. The Environmental Liason Centre in Nairobi estimates that there are between 8,000 and 9,000 NGOs operating in Africa. The situation in one developed country, Canada, provides more evidence of the growing might of NGOs.

In Canada, a 1981 estimate put registered charities operating in that country at 40,000 'with more being created everyday'⁶. A 1988 study estimates that some 220 Canadian development agencies can be classified as 'voluntary agencies whose primary activity is international development'⁷. The agencies are extremely diverse, especially in 'financial size'. Some like the World Vision Canada and World University Services Canada (WUSC), have annual budgets of over US\$ 25 million each. Other smaller ones, like the Christian Farmers Federation of Alberta and the Comite' de Solidarite' Tiers Monde have combined budgets (1984-1988) of

local NGO scene.

3 Piers Campbell "Management Services for Development NGOs." ESAB Newsletter: Autumn 1986. Mr. Campbell was, at the time when he made the estimate a Programme Director of management for development of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) in Geneva. He was therefore well positioned to know the NGO scene.

4 OECD, Development Assistance Committee. *Development Co-operation 1988 Report*. Paris: OECD 1986.

5 Campbell, Piers. *op. cit*

6 Statistics Canada. An overview of volunteer workers in Canada. *The Labour Force* (May, 1981).

7 Tim Broadhead et al. (1988) *op. cit.* page 9.

US\$ 100,000.

In all, however, the traditional 'matching grant'^{*} programme of support for NGOs stood (in 1986) at 8% of the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) overall budget. Furthermore, 'new channels of CIDA funding over the past five years have boosted the share of Official Development Assistance (ODA) going through NGOs to about 12%. Added to privately raised funds, NGOs account for some 22% of total aid funds, both public and private'⁸.

No wonder then the NGO sector has been referred to as the new 'growth sector', a sector which thrives on and indeed celebrates values derived from **altruism, charity, development participation, efficiency, co-operation, diversity, pluralism, institutional autonomy, individualism and strength in diversity**. The overall philosophy of NGOs is, in turn, supposed to be derived from these values.

The philosophical values and the factual expansion of the NGO sector are currently and will in future be used as criteria

In 1981, CIDA's matching grant programme was re-organised to include responsibility for the participation of Universities, Colleges, Unions, Professional Associations and Co-operatives; many of the large volunteer-sending NGOs were transferred to a separate programme, the International Co-operation and Development Services (ICDS) division. In its first year, the NGO division disbursed some US\$ 5 million to 50 development projects carried out by 20 agencies. By the mid 1980s, matching funds were being provided by almost 200 agencies in support of 2,400 projects. Nor is support restricted to NGO division/ACDS channels; development agencies also received funding from the matching grants programmes of several provincial government. CIDA's International Humanitarian Assistance (IHA) division funds relief and recovery projects and increasingly the bilateral division of CIDA offers a number of special arrangements for NGOs. For further details see: Tim Broadhead et al *Bridge of Hope: Canadian Voluntary Agencies and the Third World*. North South Institute, (1988) Chapter 1.

⁸ Tim Broadhead "NGOs: In One Year, Out the Other". *World Development* Vol. 15. Autumn (1987) page 1.

against which the development contribution of NGOs will be assessed. The overall burden of this assessment will be to match philosophical beliefs and self-image against actual achievements.

Though this particular review does not call for a detailed reflection on what are and will be the main issues in the on-going assessments of NGOs contribution to development, it is worthwhile to keep three issues in mind. These are:

- 1 What exactly do NGOs do?
- 2 Within what institutional and policy frameworks do they operate?
- 3 What is the nature of the partnership between Northern and Southern NGOs?

The issue of partnership between Northern and Southern NGOs is of particular interest since it allows for some observations on the related issues of donor funding, effectiveness and evaluation of NGO activity and of central concern to this study, the issue of creating research capacity within the NGO sector.

Research is crucial to the growth and development of any organisation and the achievement of the organisation's objectives. The private profit-oriented economic sector has long recognised this. Is there such a recognition in the *private, non-profit development sector which is essentially what the NGO sector is? Is research funding an integral part of an NGO programme from the beginning? How do they define research? Who conducts research and about what? Where does the research originate?* This study attempts to answer some of these questions.

Research Objectives

This study had four objectives to;

- 1 provide an operational definition of NGOs.
- 2 provide a review of NGOs in the region.
- 3 address the question of Research and Development within NGOs in the region and its relationship to other issues such as the overall contribution of NGOs to development, their

- 4 weaknesses and strengths, their sources of funds, etc, and, make observations on the state of databases that provide information on NGOs.

Data Gathering

The study is based on several years of interaction with NGOs during which more than 30 NGOs were interviewed on a wide range of issues including the issues discussed herein. These intensive and extensive interviews yielded extremely useful insights which form the bulk of the original observations in this study. This is in addition to secondary data presented in this study.

The open-ended interviews were held with two categories of interviewees. The first category consisted of people who were considered knowledgeable about the subject matter. This included mainly NGO personnel in Kenya.

The second category of interviewees consisted of people outside the NGO community but who have had some interactions with NGOs. These included members of the donor community*, academic colleagues and private consultants who have in the past consulted for NGOs.

In addition to interviews, visits to Embassies and High Commissions in Nairobi were undertaken to solicit information and collect materials on the social-political-administrative context under which NGOs operate in the countries under study. Unfortunately this proved less useful than expected. Perhaps due to the specialised

* The author is a member and has been a discussion leader of the Population Donors NGO Consultative Forum. This is a fairly informal forum hosted roughly every 2 months by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA). Nearly all the major donors and all the major NGOs in Kenya are usually represented. The discussions revolve around a pre-selected topic and are led by the pre-selected person considered knowledgeable on the topic. Past discussion leaders have included academics, representatives from Ford Foundation, UNESCO, FAO and the World Bank, among others.

nature of the subject, little information exists in the Embassies and High Commissions. The visits were, however, useful in another respect; they did reveal the degree to which the subject of NGOs is a sensitive topic.

Overall, it was difficult to obtain data on some countries. Even in countries where data was available, it was fragmentary. As stated in the introduction and will be reiterated in the last section of this study, the state of our knowledge of NGOs is very poor. This was summarised up by one High Commission official whose duty is 'to co-ordinate activities of NGOs which operate from Nairobi'. After one-and-half hour discussion, the official remarked: 'If you get any information on NGOs in my country, please let me have it', adding that 'tell the donor agencies that perhaps the first thing they should do before even worrying about research by NGOs in my country, is to fund a research project to produce a directory of NGOs in my country'. This particular official, like most people who 'know' NGOs had great difficulty defining an NGO.

The various data gathering methods were intended to yield a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data with a view to assessing whether and how best to assist NGOs develop some research capacity.

The Problem of Definition

Some questions come to mind when perusing the few available documents on NGOs from this region. The crucial question seems to be: who qualifies to be an NGO and under what criteria? Is it the legal status? Is it the kind of work the NGO does?

A common agreement is that currently, there are no common terminologies available or in use which actually describe what NGOs are. There is also common agreement that as a term, 'NGO' is relatively new but as a concept it is very old. Furthermore, as a term and as a concept, 'NGO' is extremely complex if not

downright misleading.

It is unfortunate that documents on NGOs, especially NGO directories, do not shed enough light on what organisations qualify to be called NGOs. One only gets a rough picture of what NGOs are but not an exclusive concept describing what NGOs are as opposed to other types of organisations. A few examples illustrate the problem.

The 1988 Voluntary Organisation in Community Enterprise (VOICE) directory of NGOs in Eastern and Southern Africa which deal with Women Issues, Economic and Technical Advancement and Development Research, lists NGOs as university institutes, women's groups and what are clearly Unions. Thus, in Lesotho for example, the Institute of Southern African Studies of the National University of Lesotho, is listed as an NGO even though the University is clearly a public institution. In Kenya, the Kenya National Farmers Union (KNFU) is listed as an NGO and so is the Kenya Planters Co-operative Union (KPCU). Three specific women's groups are also listed as NGOs. Given that Kenya has between 20,000 and 25,000 women's groups, one begins to worry about the criteria used to qualify only three groups to be NGOs when they are presumably doing the same thing as the other women's groups.

The 1985 NORAD directory of NGOs in Botswana reveals another interesting dimension of the problem; trying to use the legal status as a criterion for differentiating NGOs from other organisations. Here, four types of legal status are all listed. These are societies, companies limited by guarantee (profit-making) and private companies that work as co-operatives. Southern Rural Development Association of Botswana, a company limited by guarantee but profit-making is listed as an NGO. The Tshwaragano Enterprises, a private company which 'works as a cooperative' is listed as an NGO. Note that normally, NGOs are usually registered under the Societies Act or under Companies Act as companies

limited by guarantee, non-profit-making.

The 1988 *VOICE* directory of NGOs in Zimbabwe and the 1988 Kenya National Council of Social Service (KNCSS) directory of NGOs in Kenya, illustrate yet other dimensions of the problem. The *VOICE* directory lists two UN bodies, namely United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) as NGOs. Normally one would think of these, not as private organisations, but as Intergovernmental Public Organisations. The KNCSS directory, to use just one example, lists the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) as an NGO. IDRC is funded entirely through public funds, and its board of directors is appointed by the Canadian government. Is IDRC an NGO or a Public Donor Organisation, albeit with a highly specialised mandate?

The problem of deciding what constitutes an NGO extends to the terminologies used to describe these organisations. The two most commonly used terms to describe the kind of organisations we have in mind are 'NGO' and 'PVO'. NGO is essentially a negative term connoting that the organisations' activities are 'not governmental activities. Whether 'not governmental' should be extended to mean 'not funded by government' or 'not primarily funded by government etc.' or 'the board of directors not appointed by government etc.' is part of the debate on the nature and organisational set up of NGOs.

Private Voluntary Organisation (PVO) on the other hand, is an American term which, some feel, is much better than NGO in that it positively identifies two characteristics which are relevant in America, viz, private and voluntary. Of the two terms, NGO is thought to be the more universal and is the term recognised and used for organisations accredited to the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in which context it was originally defined in Resolution 288(x) of February 27, 1950.

A related term, which often creeps into NGO literature, is

'Voluntary Agency', often used interchangeably and incorrectly with NGO. Though there is no universally accepted distinction between Voluntary Agency and PVO, it is suggested by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) that the "main difference between PVO and Voluntary Agency is that the former can receive a significant proportion of, or even all, its funding from the government whereas the latter must receive most of its funding from private sources"⁹. This makes IDRC for example a PVO. For our purposes PVOs and Voluntary agencies are therefore distinct types within the overall term "NGO".

In spite of reservations about and the shortcomings of NGO directories and other related materials from Eastern and Southern Africa, it appears that overall the materials contain an implicit definition of NGOs. Furthermore, the definition seems to correspond fairly closely to ICVA's¹⁰ summary of a Voluntary Agency as an organisation which should

- 1 be established by a group of individuals or NGOs
 - 2 be autonomous
 - 3 be managed by an independent, volunteer board of directors elected periodically by the membership
 - 4 have a clearly defined constituency and be accountable to that constituency
 - 5 be financially independent (from government)
 - 6 have a formal legal status, permanent headquarters and employ professional or volunteer staff
 - 7 have humanitarian objectives and programmes.
- Most of the organisations that are conceived and listed as

9 International Council for Voluntary Agencies, *Definitions of Non-Governmental Organisations, Voluntary Agency and Related Terms*. Geneva. *Mimeo* 1983, page 3. As quoted in Alan F. Fowler's "NGOs in Africa: Naming Them by What They Are" in K. Kinyanjui (Ed). *Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) Contributions to Development*, Nairobi, Institute for Development Studies (IDS), Occasional Paper (OP) No. 50, 1985.

NGOs in this region do indeed possess several of the above characteristics in varying degrees. We should however, emphasize that one of the most important defining characteristic of an NGO is its legal status, perhaps not as stated by ICVA but in the sense that the organisation must declare itself as non-profitmaking. This alone would disqualify profit-making consultancy firms and other private institutions from receiving research grants intended for NGOs. It is in light of this that a known authority on NGOs in Kenya has defined NGOs as "organisations that are not part of the government and are voluntary, non-profit making and non-partisan"¹¹. This is a better definition of an NGO and together with the ICVA's characteristics listed above constitute a good operational definition of an NGO.

10. *Ibid*, page 3.

11. Sam Kobia *The Old and The New NGOs; Approaches to Development* in K. Kinyanjui (Ed) *Ibid*. Page 32. Reverend Sam Kobia is currently the Secretary General of the National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK), an umbrella NGO constituting the Protestant denominations in Kenya.