THE ROLE OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs) IN STRENGTHENING CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIC DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

The paper examined the role of Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) in strengthening Civil Society and Democratic Development in developing Countries. Since the provision of social services is a development strategy which is adopted bythe government and non-governmental organizations, even private individuals, the terminology associated to many of these organizations ranging from North-based charities to local self-help organization domiciled in the South, both with the aim of improving the quality of life of the rural dwellers. This motive has made NGOs to become an important platform for the involvement of the civil society in public affairs for community development. The civil society is there from referred to as the third sector. Non-governmental organizations are popular due to their exhibition of the rare feature of non-government based, nor funded, non-profit-based, autonomous, non-membership, relatively permanent and with grassroot mobilization. They play service delivery, welfare, technical, legal and financial services in collaboration with community based organizations in basic service and infrastructural provision. It often covers the loopholes created by partial service delivery of the government in developing countries. NGOs have also been involved in civil society and democratic development, as evident in the politics of development across the developing world, expertise in development software and grassroot representation brining legitimacy and community mobilization to programmes and projects. The strengthen the state system through their participation in improving the efficacy of government services, acting as strategic partners for reform-oriented ministries, filling the gaps in service provision, and helping the government to forge ties with the grassroots. It was concluded that NGOs are having to link both local and international objectives of if they are to be effective in strengthening civil society and democratic development. And that NGOs need to maintain the attributes of impartiality and independence, veracity and reliability of purpose, representativeness and transparency.

Keywords: Civil Society; Democracy, Development and Non-governmental Organization.

Introduction

The provision of social services is a development strategy adopted by both the government and non-governmentalorganizations; even private individuals are also involved in the provision of social services to the society. While the former make the provision, the beneficiaries who are the community often participate by contributing labour or

counterpart funding. Hence, the combination of these variables results to community development. By definition, the United Nations in its African Governance Forum defined Community Development as the process by which the efforts of the people are added or contributed to that of the government to improve the wellbeing of the communities, to enable them to contribute their quota to national development [1 and 2].

Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) is applied to many kinds of organization ranging from large Northern-based charities to local self-help organizations in the South, both with an aim to improve the quality of life of the people. They are many private initiatives involved in development issues on a non-profit basis. The term 'NGO' is comprehended to refer to those autonomous, non-membership, relatively permanent or institutionalized intermediary organizations, which work with grass-roots organizations in a supportive capacity. Therefore, NGOs have become an important and vocal platform for the involvement of civil society in public affairs for community development and are referred to as the third sector [3].

Since the 1950s, NGOs have been playing increasing vital role in the formulation and implementation of development policy, becoming key actors in the political economy of development. From the foregoing, there has been increased collaboration with the government and aid agencies that could offer an alternative model of development and play a key role in   democratization processes [4]. NGOs were seen as more administratively flexible, closer to the poor, innovative in problem solving reform and more cost effective than corresponding state partners. Donor pressure towards structural reform and privatization underlies the increased interest in NGOs as 'service deliverers' – part of a wide and explicit objective to facilitate productive NGO-state partnerships.

The expansion partnership between Northern and Southern NGOs originated in changing attitudes in the North in the 1960s and 1970s. A view took hold that merely transferring resources in the form of tools or funds was not an adequate response to poverty when that was rooted in structural problems. Indeed such transfers could just preserve the situation by creating financial dependency. The establishment of research departments and policy units in Northern NGOs marked this change in approach and contributed to its sustainment [5]. The humanitarian function of NGOs evolved to embrace poverty reduction, environmental sustainability, gender equality and democracy.

Northern NGOs respond to emergencies, short-term relief and long-term rehabilitation, such as victims of war and of natural or man-made disasters. They raise money in the North, from the general public, the private sector and governments, to pay for their work and to share as much as possible with their Southern counterparts, to help in building the capacity of Southern NGOs and to educate their own constituencies in the North about the underlying causes of poverty, as well as drawing people into active lobbying and campaigning for change. On the other hand, Southern NGOs have the basic responsibility among NGOs for leading the development process in developing countries and the expertise to do so. Relationships between Northern and Southern NGOs must be based on an equal partnership incorporating transparency, mutual accountability and risk sharing, which refers to the unequal relationship between donors, Northern NGOs [6] and Southern NGOs [7].

The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations

NGOs are receiving currency due to their demonstration of unique and spectacular characteristics features and capabilities. NGOs play dual fundamental roles of either service delivery outlets, NGOs provide welfare, technical, legal and financial services to the poor, or work in collaboration with community based organizations in basic service and infrastructural provision. Often, it is an issue of frequently filling the loopholes created by the partial service delivery of governments withdrawing from involvement in provision. Before now, governments of developing countries were observed as leading the development process. However, such paternalism got to its limits when it became crystal clear that government did not possess the financial muscle or resources to fute the bills for the services of the poor and lacked the organizational expertise and know-how to effect the expected outcome. In such circumstance, the important role for NGOs since the mid-1980s has been in mitigating the adverse costs of structural adjustment and promoting donor reform packages in offering insurance against a political backlashagainst harsh adjustment regimes. Such a role raises important questions. Patterns of service delivery through the voluntary sector may lack compatibility and coordination. In so far as such efforts rely on governments funding, their ultimate durability may also be queried. At a deeper level, there are worries about the long-term impact of NGOs service provision on the sustainability of national health and education systems and access to quality services for all.

The other role of NGOs is policy advocacy, seeking to effect social change by influencing attitudes, policy and practices, seeking to reform state services on the basic of NGO experiences and to lobby directly for the policy changes. It includes involvement in participatory, public interest politics, and NGOs engaging in such activity realize the

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increasing importance of information as they begin to utilize the power of ideas and information to promote positive change in the wider structures of government and the official aid community. NGOs often play a catalytic role.

Nonetheless, neither of these roles needs exclude the other, most NGOs progress from filling a gap in service delivery to recognizing the need to look to the bigger picture in which the need arises, finding themselves drawn, possibly by involvement in NGO networking [7], into national or global policy advocacy [8]. NGOs partner with grass-roots organizations and community based organizations which often is made up of poor groups and marginalized ones. On this note, both widen and deepen in terms of personal and organizational capacity and the possibilities for citizen participation. NGOs have been essential in mobilizing large scale of individuals against either entrenched elite groups or state interests, campaigning on their behalf and seeking to influence public policy. For example, the cancelation of debt of indebted states, nations, placing them on the programme of the developed European Summits. This type of bottom-up democracy has been successful in many cases where it might eventually lead to top-down political change. NGOs have become principal actors in a process of transformatory development. They can affect norm changes that lead to regime change or the restructuring of world politics. They do this, especially Northern NGOs through the communicative power of information, lobbying, research, campaigning or media work, acting on the basis of their moral authority. For example, in the areas of human rights, free trade, debt relief and child labour. Furthermore, NGOs create alliances and networks to place pressure on the state [9]. NGO have been drawn into networks of growing complexities. Many Northern NGOs, such as Christian and Humanitarian Aid, have moved away from the direct implementation of projects to a 'partnership approach' with Southern NGOs, but the precise nature and terms of such partnerships often remain undetermined [10].

The Role of NGOs in Strengthening Civil Society and Democratic Development

It was in the 1980s that the contributions of NGOs to development might be more important for political rather than economic reasons by Michael Bratton, and that there is increasing interest in the role of NGOs in promoting democratic development. The perspective of 'security policy' democracy poses the threat of opening a Pandora's Box of ethnicity, conflict and instability. Their role is emphasized in the context of their existence as autonomous actors; NGOs are to pluralize and therefore to strengthen and expand the institutional arena, bringing more democratic actors into the political sphere. More civic actors mean more opportunities for a wider range of interest groups to have a 'voice', more autonomous organizations to act in a 'watchdog' role vis-à-vis the state, and more

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opportunities for networking and creating alliances of civic actors to place pressure on the state. For example, (Jubilee 2000 debt initiative), NGOs enhance democracy by expanding the numerical strength and range of voices addressing the government. NGOs played an important role in opposing the Pinochet regime throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, and their role has witnessed some degree of change since the early 1990s [11].

Non-governmental Organizations have become inextricably implicated and or involved in civil society, democracy, good governance and social capital. [12], in one of his studies which examines the role of NGOs in the politics [13], of development across the developing world, opines that the failure to theorize the political impact of NGOs has led to an overly "inadequate, explicitly normative interpretation of NGO ideology" (1998a: 40). This failure has encouraged a criteria to take NGOs positive political role as natural or self-evident.

NGOs provide expertise in 'development software'; they are more innovative, adaptable, cost-effective and aware of the lost situation; and their grass-roots representation bringing legitimacy and community mobilization to programmes and projects. NGOs strengthen the state through their participation in improving the efficacy of government services, acting as strategic partners for reform-oriented ministries, filling the gaps in service provision, and helping the government to forge ties with the grass-roots. The impact of states on NGOs is therefore absolutely central in defining the role that NGOs can play in national developments; for it is governments which give NGOs the space and the autonomy to organize, network and campaign [14]. That been the case, it is difficult to generalize about state-NGO relations, as local political networks are always diverse.

NGOs are on the high rise being funded by states and official aid agencies, and questioning what impact this trend has on NGO accountability. Concerns are raised by many in relation to the internal and external accountability of NGOs. NGOs have downward accountability to members and upward accountability to donors and governments (Patrons). NGOs are internally accountable to beneficiaries, donors, board of directors, trustees and advisory committees. They are externally accountable to organizations and actors with which they affiliate-international government organizations, states and people throughout the globe. Accountability is indeed crucial for NGOs as they have only their reputation for credibility on which to base their action. In NGOs, accountability needs to be appropriate for their work, for the needs of the beneficiaries (clients) and for the values of the organization itself. There is functional accountability in relation to accounting for resources and their impacts, and strategic accountability, which relates to the writ large implications of an

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NGOs workability. These are basically mechanisms for assessing effectiveness, and for the monitoring and evaluation of NGOs in relation to their effectiveness thereby making accountability in NGOs quite complex and cumbersome.

Conclusion

The fundamental issue raised from the foregoing is whether and how NGOs will adapt to the changing global best practices which are currently underway. NGOs constantly have to link both local and international agendas if they are to be effective, and they will increasingly be forced to learn from and adapt to changing demands and opportunities. The increased availability of large-scale funding has been one of the primary factors driving NGO growth in the 1980s, encouraging the proliferation of social welfare organizations which often had little or no political agenda. The inherent' advantages of the NGOs themselves are gradually worn away by increased funding, professionalization, bureaucracy and the shifting of objectives away from 'social mobilization' towards service delivery. This process may lead to a widening rift between well-resourced service providers and poor-funded social mobilization organizations. This highlights the fact that NGOs exhibit potentially illuminating contrasts in emphasis and packaging of activities, in client groups and organizational style. Considerable diversity exists in relation to how autonomous NGOs are from the influence of funding agencies or donors.

Increasingly, questions have been asked. Can NGOs deliver all that is expected of them? Is the glowing image realistic? How effective are NGOs in their service delivery? There seems to be more concentration on success stories such as the Grameen Bank and Seva, and a gap appears to be emerging between rhetoric and practice, which raises issues of objective monitoring and evaluation of NGO's projects, effectiveness, legitimacy, performance and accountability.

Recommendations

Arising from the forgoing, despite the growing interest in evaluation, there is still a lack of reliable evidence on the impact of NGO development projects and programmes. It NGOs want to continue to sustain their claim to moral authority; they need to maintain attributes such as impartiality and independence, veracity and reliability of purpose, representativeness and transparency.

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