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NGOs and Africa's Development and Economic Growth

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Abstract

The contribution of NGOs to Africa's development and economic growth has moved from a largely marginal role in the early, post-independence days, centred on providing peripheral services, to a central role founded on campaigns for good governance. They serve as conduits for disseminating aid western aid, especially in periods of national crisis. NGOs today distribute between 10% and 20% of all aid transferred to Africa. For instance, the US government transfers about 40% of its aid programs through NGOs. NGOs no doubt have helped Africa. But, sad to say, the increase in the activities of NGOs in Africa has not seen commensurate development in good governance and economic growth on the continent. This has attracted some condemnation from some scholars and social commentators who continue to ask what NGOs really are doing in Africa. NGOs have further been accused for being Africa's long-term problem even as they preach that more aid, fair trade and debt forgiveness is needed for Africa's development, notwithstanding the fact that they voluntarily monitor policy implementation and good governance indicators. Despite their long involvement in African affairs, they continue to produce harrowing pictures of a continent gravely stricken by poverty and disease. The issue that then arises is whether Africa should discard NGOs, or whether NGOs working in Africa should be more grassroots-oriented in order to achieve more results. The central question is: How can NGOs best serve Africa's development interests? The purpose of this paper is to review these issues. It argues that the mandate of NGOS in Africa should be shifted from that of a conduit for advocating good policy, good governance, and disseminating western aid, to that of a channel for capacity building and local community empowerment. This is the only way that long-term development and economic growth can be encouraged and achieved in Africa.

Key Words: Non-Governmental Organisations, Development, Economic Growth, Capacity Building,

1. Introduction

Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), which is part of the larger body of civil society, are synonymous with the issues of development, good governance and economic growth in Africa as well as elsewhere. NGOs have been in Africa since colonial times up to the present, involved during pre-independence times with the peripheral problems of providing social services in the areas of health, education and sanitation, particularly in areas largely ignored by colonial masters. At the time, religious undertones accompanying such services were the hallmarks of the NGOs, which included missionaries and other charities, (Manji and O’Coill, 2002).

Since then, the role of NGOs in African affairs has increased with time, both in its nature and magnitude, especially with the widespread poverty and underdevelopment prevalent in the continent. These roles have been gratifying, bringing some help to some of Africa’s population, especially in moments of national crises, drought, and famine. The recent droughts and famine in Mali and Niger, and the conflict in Darfur, Southern Sudan, which have all visited untold suffering and carnage on the citizens, attracted the attention of International NGOs, such as Oxfam. The mismanagement of African fortunes by the leaders and elites, the political conflicts and wars, and the lack of capacity development at the grassroots level, which have all served to make Africa a backwards and poor continent, ensure that NGOs will continue to remain relevant in Africa.

Surely, Africa is in a poor state. The greater percentage of the African population lives on less than \$1 a day (The Economist, 2006), the African continent has the greatest number (20) of the least liveable countries in the world (UNDP, 2005), and there is a persistent lack of access to the basic things of life like water, health care, electricity, shelter, and food. Over time, NGOs have taken on the gauntlet to fight perceived injustices in the system, whether they are caused by poor governance or corruption. They have also positioned themselves to serve as conduits for disseminating aid from western donors to Africa and monitoring of government performance in diverse areas of human endeavours and both national and regional

discourse. Today, NGOs distribute between 10% and 20% of all aid transferred to Africa, and the US government transfers about 40% of its aid programs through NGOs (Manji and O’Coill, *ibid*).

As a result, NGOs are now a part of an important segment of the African development vehicle, commenting and providing expertise on diverse issues such as free trade, debt relief, good governance and global warming. For instance, representatives of Oxfam and ActionAid are reportedly part of a Millennium Development Committee set up under the chairmanship of the Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo, to monitor the outcome of the debt relief granted Nigeria by the Paris Club (Sankore, 2005). NGOs are thus better described as “a vast institutional and disciplinary nexus of official agencies, practitioners, consultants, and other miscellaneous experts producing and consuming knowledge about the developing world” (Manji and O’Coill, *ibid*), of which Africa is a part. This has also led to an unprecedented increase in their number which is made up of local, national and international NGOs. The importance placed by NGOs on the issue of poverty, development and economic growth, can be seen from the fact that Concern Worldwide, an International Northern charitable NGO that provides humanitarian and development aid to combat extreme poverty in developing countries, employed 174 expatriates and roughly 5,000 national staff working in ten developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Haiti (UNCTAD, 2005) by the end of 1995.

Furthermore, NGOs have been seen as mutually reinforcing partners in the overall efforts to improve the lots of people in developing countries. This has accounted for their recognition by the United Nations and the World Bank. This recognition has been attributed to the fact of the United Nations recognition that governments and official institutions cannot succeed in facing the challenges posed by developing countries by acting on their own; cooperation with the civil society has become essential in international, national and regional level decision-making (*ibid*). It is to be noted, however, that NGOs have been recognized under Article 71 of Chapter 10 of the UN Charter and some given consultative status with the ECOSOC. The need

for NGOs has also been attributed to the need to make government services more efficient and effective, necessitating the increased cooperation between governments and NGOs (Deliveri, 2005). In fact, former UN Secretary General Kofi Annan once referred to NGOs as the “conscience of humanity” (Annan, 2002). This recognition as partners in development with government and intergovernmental institutions, especially in the affairs of developing countries, has given a new impetus to the activities of NGOs. But despite their efforts, the performance of NGOs in Africa has attracted much cynicism and criticism, even as they preach debt relief and free trade for Africa.

The major criticism is that their huge roles in Africa have failed to significantly improve the lots of Africans. Despite their activities in the continent, Africa still posts a disheartening picture of economic stagnation, poverty and underdevelopment. Thus, the role of NGOs in Africa is being viewed with suspicion and has been likened to that of early missionaries to Africa who, it was claimed, were used as instruments of subjugation by colonial masters. The Women’s Association, Maendelo Ya Wanawake (MYWO), and the Christian Council of Kenya (CCK), have been cited as examples of colonial NGOs involved in government funded schemes designed to subvert the Mau Mau resistance in Kenya (Manji and O’Coill, *ibid*)

As gratifying as the services rendered by NGOs in Africa have been, the overall impact of these services and activities on economic growth and development in Africa has been quite insignificant and dismal; moreover, it doesn’t appear to be commensurate with the hype surrounding it. Why is this so? Why is it that, despite the many years of NGO activities in Africa, a dismal and pathetic picture of a sick continent is all that greets its people? This paper takes a look at the performance of NGOs in Africa’s economic growth and development, with a view that suggests ways by which NGOs can make significant contributions, through capacity building, increased grassroots involvement, and the empowerment of local citizens. While this paper will not seek to single out any particular type of NGO, it makes attempts

to distinguish between international (northern and western) NGOs, who are actually the driving force in this debate, and national (southern) and local NGOs, which are not as well-equipped to tackle problems of national development and economic growth.

2. The Role of NGOs in Africa's Economic Growth and Development Efforts

Africa, no doubt, is a continent bedeviled by poor governance, mismanagement of resources, poor infrastructure, and corruption in every strand of its national and regional life. Ever since colonial times, the multiplicity of Africa's problems has attracted the attention of western NGOs (see the introductory part of this paper). Today there are over 2,000 NGOs concerned with the problems of Africa, ranging from HIV/AIDS, poverty, disease, corruption, illiteracy, national debt, and the lack of gender equality, free trade, democracy, basic human rights, environmental rights, and the like. It is estimated that there are over 50,000 NGOs in South Africa, alone, while about 240 NGOs are registered each year in Kenya (Chege, 1999; Wikipedia).

The activities of NGOs have unwittingly veered from collaborating with international institutions to working with the committees of national governments (Sankore, *ibid*). This has put them in a position to contribute meaningfully to economic growth and development in Africa. African governments no doubt recognize the problems of Africa and have often adopted measures to combat them. However, without foreign aid, the lone efforts of the national governments seemed not to be enough. It was in light of this that the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) evolved. It was seen that, without the expertise and support of NGOs, the governments lacked the capacity to engineer the change needed and to achieve growth and development. Furthermore, the perception of corruption surrounding most governments in developing countries, particularly those in Africa (Transparency International, 2005), also ensured that western donors channeled their aid and developmental assistance through NGOs rather than through national

governments. Another argument put forward in this direction has been that NGOs have comparative advantages in the areas of advocacy and participatory models of development that focus on human development. They are very effective in demonstrating that poverty, no matter how endemic, can be tackled by involving project beneficiaries in planning, implementing and sustaining projects (Chege, *ibid*).

According to Chege, “many donors view NGOs as an important part of Africa's democratization process, acting as watchdogs and advocates for human rights and good governance.” Thus, increasingly, there has been a major shift in the pattern of funding development and economic growth in Africa, away from governments to NGOs. This shift has been continuous, but the greatest boost came when the US ambassador to Kenya announced the US government’s policy to channel most of its development aid, estimated at \$711.3 million, through NGOs rather than governments (*ibid*) for the year 1999. Today, NGOs operating within the context of African development manage over \$3.5 billion in external aid (*ibid*). This is in spite of the fact that the total official development assistance to the continent has been on the decline.

The increased preference for NGOs in disseminating aid stems from the fact of their comparative advantage in the following areas: (UNIDO, 1997)

- Expertise and Advice
- Local Accountability
- Independent Assessment of Issues and Problems
- Provision and Dissemination of Information
- Awareness Raising
- Reaching Important Constituencies

With the support of the above list of advantages, NGOs have created a niche for themselves in Africa, in spite of the fact that NGOs have been accused of spending about 75% of the money they collect on the administration of their organizations

(Younge, 1998). They have played an important role in the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa and they have also remained vocal in most key issues, not only in South Africa, but in the entire continent. The environmental degradation and human rights abuses in Nigeria's Niger Delta were brought to the international limelight by NGOs. Moreover, they played a key role in trying to rehabilitate Rwanda refugees, and they were there to bring help to the victims of the carnage in Darfur. Their presence is therefore greatly felt everywhere in Africa, from the provision of pipe borne water, to the running of health centers. But for all these efforts, the picture of Africa remains dismal. A major cause of this is that the local people have not developed the capacity to contribute to economic growth and development.

It remains questionable how much NGOs have contributed to economic growth and development in the continent within their over 20 years of significant involvement in African affairs. Their efforts at rehabilitating local services, for instance, only survive as long as they are on the ground, the reason being that most international NGOs working in Africa do not put much effort into capacity development, grassroots mobilization, and empowerment; rather, they concentrate on disseminating information and aid. Many western NGOs operating in Africa also fail to build strong partnerships with locally-based NGOs and the local governments, whose activities affect the life of the people. Meaningful and sustainable contributions to Africa's development are not possible without strong and deliberate investment into the lives of local Africans.

NGOs will always be part and parcel with life in Africa- they have come to stay. The emphasis has to shift from doing it for Africans to teaching Africans how to do it themselves. Local NGOs as well as the people must be involved in these projects if any meaningful result is to be achieved. The next section examines this in detail.

3. Overcoming the Problem

According to Mahmadou Thiam “the UN Special Session on Africa (1986), which resulted in the creation of the UN Programme for Africa's Economic Recovery and Development (UNPAAERD), demonstrated that the international community has committed itself to helping African people in their struggle against underdevelopment and poverty” (1994). As stated above, NGOs have been at the forefront of these efforts, but the only way that NGOs can help Africans achieve development and economic growth is by rethinking their policies of aid and development in Africa. It necessitates a paradigm shift away from dispensing aid as a means to achieving development and economic growth, to developing the human capacity for self reliance.

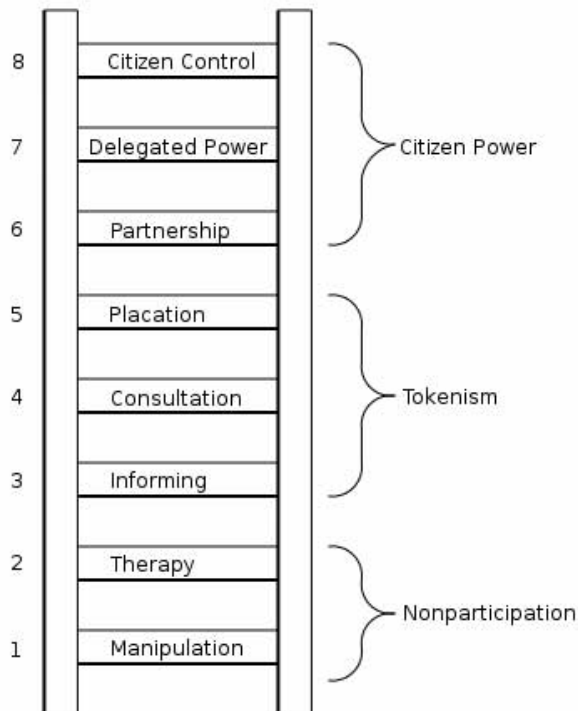
As a first priority, international NGOs should identify community-based NGOs and associations with similar goals and establish some form of partnership with them. In this way, they can improve on their capacity for local service delivery. The reason for this is that community-based NGOs are the easiest links to reaching the local population. Being home-based, they can sustain any development and capacity building project embarked upon by international NGOs in the long run. It has been noted that the establishment of the Private and Community based HIV/AIDS Control Initiative (IPC) in Burkina Faso, which is a liaison agency for the London-based International Alliance against HIV/AIDS, was able to achieve gradual change in behaviour through “participative, peer-directed discussion groups in communities” (Sawadogo, 2001).

The difficulty of the dissemination of information and building awareness campaigns due to communication barrier (for instance on HIV education) arise as a result of illiteracy. This is easily fixed when community-based groups are trained and involved in the process. Again, international NGOs that have been involved in political and democratic campaigns in Africa have often been accused of engaging in subversive activities, as in Zimbabwe and South Africa (Chege, *ibid*). This has undermined their efforts to contribute to the growth of the democratic process,

without which development and economic growth will be an illusion. However, where African and community-based NGOs are empowered and involved in the process of mobilizing, informing and organizing local civil society groups into politically influential groups, the accusation of subversiveness will be greatly reduced while efforts at mobilization and enlightenment will be greatly enhanced.

There is no denying the fact that a participatory approach to development is the key to Africa's economic growth; thus, the need for a "participatory, bottom-up and people-centred approach to development cannot be over-emphasized" (Zamaere, 2000, see figure 1). As much as possible, NGOs should aim for citizens' participation in all projects affecting their lives. According to Sherry R. Arnstein (Arnstein, 1969), participation, at its highest level, equates citizen control, delegated power and partnership, which requires getting communities involved at every stage of the project cycle. Thus everyone within the community gets involved throughout the development process; this is genuine participation which encourages capacity building and empowerment (Zamaere, *ibid*). Zamaere argues the following (*ibid*), that "other types or levels of participation are considered to be tokenism, whereby communities are just consulted or informed about decisions already made elsewhere." As it is in Africa, today, this strategy does not positively impact development and economic growth. Only partnerships with local communities and citizens group can engender human capacity development and economic growth. This cannot be achieved without community participation in NGO activities.

Figure 1: Ladders of Participation



Source: "A ladder of Citizen Participation," (Arnstein, 1969) available at:

<http://lithgow-schmidt.dk/sherry-arnstein/ladder-of-citizen-participation.html>

An NGO policy that focuses on training Africans to be self-reliant will achieve more in terms of development and economic growth. Thus, what is needed is a strategy and process that will enable the poor to participate in development. NGOs should, therefore, promote opportunities that make "popular participation in development more effective," creating "greater freedom for grassroots initiatives" and involving the local communities in any decision that affects their lives; for instance, local personnel can be trained to manage micro-credit schemes and the running of SMEs. The income generating activities experiment (IGA) in Senegal by SIDA was community oriented and tailored to provide training and support for people living with HIV in order to enable them to manage income generating activities, help them become financially independent for food and medicines, and provide support for their families, including paying for their children's education (Diam and Angono, 2001).

Successful applicants receive three days of management training because most do not have experience in managing funds. The training is designed to enable beneficiaries to better manage income-generating activities. It also provides some management tools including registering and replacing stock, maintaining cash books and weekly sales records, understanding the concept of minimum stock level, and conducting inventory. It also introduces the notion of profit to help recipients calculate their potential earnings and handle accounts. After the training course activities begin, a social worker is assigned to supervise a project all the way from purchase activities to final sale" (ibid). This buttresses the fact that direct empowerment and the creation of opportunities for local and community participation (see figure 1) is the most effective way of encouraging development and economic growth. Thus NGOs should channel more of their funds and energy towards this kind of initiative.

There is also the need to expand the partnership between government and NGOs. This kind of partnership will draw the necessary synergy needed to achieve development and economic growth. The comparative advantages of NGOs over governments have been noted above (UNIDO, ibid) but governments still remain the focal point for policy initiatives and the platform for providing the delivery of local service.

It is noted in this instance that there are certain things that NGOs cannot do; for example, there was a case where an NGO was given funds to train farmers to become better coffee producers. Many funds were allocated to the project and as a result, the yields were very promising. But the farmers had no way of taking their coffee to the factory because there were no roads. NGOs do not build roads. It is the work of the government. You cannot ignore the government (Nyang'iro, 1999).

Thus, NGOs, the nation and local governments, and communities should work together to identify areas of need for capacity development in the communities. They must meet the needs of the market and channel their aid and efforts in this

direction, whether in the form of formal education at the primary level, in vocational training, or in SMEs development; in this way, they can begin to help with grassroots development and self-reliance.

4. Conclusion

NGOs, no doubt, are helping Africa in its quest for development and economic growth, but the only way to achieve this is through a paradigm shift away from tokenism to grassroots and community participation in NGO activities and projects. This remains the alternative vehicle for achieving self-reliance and human capacity development for long-term sustainable growth.

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