

NGOs: ladles in the global soup kitchen?

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This paper is a reflection on four questions as they relate to Northern or international NGOs (in this paper, 'NGOs' refers to Northern NGOs unless otherwise indicated):

- 1 If NGOs are to have a role in a globalised world, will it be primarily as the delivery service for global welfare — ladles in the soup kitchen — or will they find alternative identities?
- 2 Are NGOs equipped to represent or deliver alternative development models?
- 3 If funding 'success' often covers weaknesses in NGOs, what are the changes that need to be made in order to deepen and broaden impact?
- 4 How can NGOs establish their independence and autonomy from governments? Are there ways for them to be both representative (or locally rooted) *and* global? How can NGOs best combine an ambitious vision with a genuine humility?

Owing to the rapid changes in the international political economy, and to the deeply embedded political and social factors in each complex emergency, NGOs are in danger of becoming increasingly marginal in terms of the importance of their work. To put it in stark terms, they are becoming the delivery agency for a global soup kitchen, handing out meagre comfort amidst harsh economic changes and complex political emergencies, in a world that is characterised by global economic integration and the social exclusion of low-income communities, as well as continuing and widespread levels of civil strife. In effect, NGOs are

handing out bits of comfort, doling out cups of soup, to the victims of massive economic changes and to the survivors of brutal civil wars. While NGOs have claimed the right to a moral as well as programmatic voice in international affairs, their organisational legitimacy and operational impact are in fact being weakened.

For the past two decades, NGOs have occupied a privileged position in the industrialised countries, both in the public eye and with bilateral donors. NGOs have presented themselves as having a significant impact in shaping donor policies and humanitarian responses. Particularly during the latter part of the 1980s and the early 1990s, NGOs were seen as the most effective and efficient entities for delivering international relief and development programmes. That perception is now changing, which raises questions about the future of the NGO sector.

The various strands of what is described as globalisation are helping NGOs into roles that will minimise their long-term impact. The major institutions shaping the world economy — transnational corporations, capital and currency markets, the governments of the largest developed countries, and the international institutions that are promoting a market-centred agenda (World Bank, IMF, and WTO) — have had an explicit confidence that global integration will promote greater economic benefits worldwide. Yet the World Bank's new report on poverty makes it clear that macro-economic growth by itself does not necessarily reduce poverty and inequity. Further, the economic and social crisis that began in East Asia in mid-1997 has highlighted the instabilities and uncertainties of global markets. NGOs, as organisations that emerged in a bipolar world of North–South and East–West, have not adjusted to the new global landscape. Both in humanitarian emergencies and economic restructuring, NGOs are in danger of becoming useful fig-leaves to cover government inaction or indifference to human suffering.

Increased scrutiny and questioning of future roles is difficult for many NGO staff, who are comfortable in the high moral ground often occupied by these agencies. But there is an increasing body of well-researched literature on the future of NGOs in general, the operational quality of NGO work in development, and the uncertainties facing NGOs and other humanitarian agencies in complex emergencies. A growing number of critical assessments suggest that the operational impact of NGOs in community development was less than claimed. Further, the rise of complex emergencies that are characterised by warlords and banditry has shattered the image of neutral humanitarianism that cloaked the work of NGOs in such places as Ethiopia and Cambodia in the past. Finally, the globalisation of economic relations,

the struggle for developing effective national economic policies, and the increase in the clout of NGOs in the 'South' have all presented new challenges in the traditional work of Northern NGOs. They are faced with potential marginalisation as global institutions are reshaped by financial markets, new corporate investment patterns, and the impact of information and communication technologies. By and large, most NGOs in the 'North' have responded with, at best, incremental changes to their practices, without changing core assumptions.

This last point does not mean that NGOs should not have their own programmes of work; nor should NGOs aim only to have an impact on global institutions. Indeed, the 'scaling-up' from programme experience to achieve large programme impact or to affect policy making are among the most important 'value added' aspects of NGO work. Scaling-up can be directed towards local, regional, or national policy issues, as well as global institutions. Linking programme experience and policy making is, however, far less common than most NGOs would care to admit and requires more internal coordination than presently exists. In a world where it is regularly argued by the large global actors and conventional commentators that we are in era of 'TINA' ('there is no alternative to the present drive of global capital'), NGOs can either accept the role of passing out the soup, or they can seek to be something quite different, however difficult that is to achieve.

The future of Northern or international NGOs is now linked to their ability to examine their purpose and goals in a rapidly changing world. A critical examination would offer an opportunity for NGOs to reconsider and reconceptualise their present roles and the future options, not merely in terms of their programmes but in a way that is more fundamentally embedded within their rationale for existence. NGOs need to assess both the existing programme and policy impacts of their work, and potential future options for NGOs that seek to affect global development and humanitarian relief. This requires briefly assessing several levels of NGO work, from local programmes, to relations with national governments, to the complex set of relations that exist with multilateral agencies. Future explorations should be designed to begin with an overview of NGO work at different levels, and then to look at the future of NGOs, given the changing realities of the global economy.

An equally significant question is whether NGOs are increasingly falling short in their responses to complex humanitarian emergencies — the internal wars (Rwanda, Bosnia, Liberia, Sudan) that lead to large-scale disasters that are caused by human agency and usually connected to social

and political breakdowns. It is apparent that the humanitarian context for NGO operations has changed considerably in the past decade. The spread of complex humanitarian emergencies has taken an increasing proportion of international assistance, reducing funds available for long-term development. NGOs may well argue that they are not the masters of violent political settings nor of the political aims of donor governments, yet in practice most NGOs have tended to ignore the tough questions of relief and development politics, rather than seeking to determine where they fit and how to maintain a voice and presence of integrity.

The growth and vocal presence of Southern NGOs likewise present a significant challenge to the role and purpose of Northern NGOs in the future. Northern NGOs need to explore critical questions in the area of their organisational legitimacy, their relations of accountability, and the actual impact of their programmes. While Southern NGOs have begun to question the intermediary or lead role taken by Northern NGOs, governments in the South are also taking a harder line on NGO operations and priorities. In the past few years, several governments in Africa have tightened up regulations on NGO registration, NGO programmes, and even whether certain NGOs are welcome to work in the country. Each country has specific circumstances behind the government's actions, but the overall trend is unmistakable. NGOs are viewed more sceptically in terms of whether they can deliver what they promise and whether they are usurping the role of the government in shaping development programmes and priorities. When combined with the increased criticism from Southern NGOs, the overall direction is for reduced room for manoeuvre and greater demands for transparency, quality of programmes, and accountability to institutions of the South rather than donors in the North.

NGOs are in danger of holding on to a world that is passing away. The language in many NGO documents, and the design of many of their programmes, reflect the concerns of yesterday, not the challenges of the coming years. If NGOs are to refuse to accept a role only as welfare providers, they need to undertake more radical and deeply rooted changes than have yet emerged within most organisations. NGOs have a unique depth of experience in both development and complex emergency settings that could feed into new models of good practice and innovation, as well as policy making. If NGOs were able to work in new partnerships among themselves (which is still too rare in terms of depth and continuity), with sympathetic research groups (not extractive academics), and allies among donors, they could have an impact both on their own internal operations and on wider policy making decisions.

The challenge for each NGO is to locate itself as one of a number of NGOs struggling to determine a future role in international development and humanitarian trends, and also within wider global changes. NGOs need to place their work and overall effectiveness within a wider framework of political, economic, and social changes ('globalisation'), so that the assessment is realistic in terms of options for the NGO sector in the future. The major global institutions and most powerful bilateral donors at times appear to want NGOs to be the ladles, to serve as the front line for global welfare. There are very few coherent ideals or visions about a global future other than in the Washington Consensus of market liberalisation, with the costs of economic integration temporary and less than the global gains. Indeed, out of the East Asia crisis, as many questions are coming from parts of the World Bank or UN agencies as from NGOs. Given the external context, NGOs can either limit their role to providing succour amidst the pain and marginalisation around them, or they can seek to build from their programme experiences to alternative policy frameworks, ones that are modest, non-utopian, and yet willing to challenge a global future that appears to exclude more than it includes.

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