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Civil Society, NGDOs and Social Development: Changing the Rules of the Game

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United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

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Acronyms

ABONG	Association of Brazilian NGOs
ACSPPA	Ateneo Centre for Social Policy and Public Affairs
ACVFA	American Council on Voluntary Foreign Agencies
ADAB	Association of Development Agencies Bangladesh
ADAB	Australian International Development Assistance Bureau
ADB	African Development Bank
AIDS	acquired immunodeficiency syndrome
ALOP	Association of Latin American NGOs
ANGOC	Asian NGO Coalition
BRAC	Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee
CAS	country assistance strategy
CBO	community-based organization
CDF	Comprehensive Development Framework
CDRA	Community Development Resource Association
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
CIVICUS	World Alliance for Citizen Participation
CODE	Caucus of Development NGO Networks
CSO	civil society organization
Danida	Danish International Development Agency
DFID	Department for International Development
DNGDO	domestic non-governmental development organization
EADI	European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes
ESCOR	Economic and Social Research Management Unit (DFID)
EU	European Union
FAVDO	Forum for African Voluntary Development Organizations
Finnida	Finnish International Development Agency
GDP	gross domestic product
GOM	Gemeenschappelijke Overleg Medefinanciering
GRO	Grassroots organization
GTZ	German Agency for Technical Co-operation
HDI	human development index
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
IDA	International Development Association
IDR	Institute of Development Research
IFCB	International Forum on Capacity Building (formerly IWGCB)
IFI	international financial institution
IFRCRCS	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGDO	international non-governmental development organization
INTRAC	International NGO Training and Research Centre
IWGCB	International Working Group on Capacity Building
MDB	multilateral development bank
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MST	Landless Rural Workers Movement
NCOS	Nationale Commitee voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking
NGDO	non-governmental development organization
NGLS	Non-Governmental Liaison Service
NGO	non-governmental organization
NGDOSO	NGDO support organization

NNGDO	Northern non-governmental development organization
NOVIB	Nederlandse Organisatie voor Internationale Ontwikkelingssamenwerking
ODA	Overseas Development Administration (now DFID)
ODA	official development assistance
ODC	Overseas Development Council
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OED	Operations Evaluation Division (World Bank)
PGA	people's global action
PLAN	Plan International (formerlay Foster Parents' Plan)
PO	people's organization
PRIA	Society for Participatory Research in Asia
PVO	private voluntary organization
SAPRI	Structural Adjustment Participatory Review Institute
SIDA	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
TANGO	Tanzania NGO Council
UNCSD	United Nations Commission for Social Development
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDAF	United Nations Development Assistance Framework
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VANI	Voluntary Agencies Network India
WSSD	World Summit for Social Development
WTO	World Trade Organization

Summary/Résumé/Resumen

Summary

This paper broadly evaluates the role and performance of non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs) in promoting social development before and since the 1995 World Summit for Social Development. Two kinds of analysis and recommendations are offered. The first concerns the practices of NGDOs and their relationships with other “partners in development”. The second focuses on the deep-rooted pathologies of the aid system that condition the form and effectiveness of many development interventions not only by NGDOs but also by the larger universe of entities comprising civil society organizations (CSOs). This review concludes that, in the absence of thoroughgoing reform, the aid system will continue to hinder mobilization by the larger civil society with NGDOs to bring about genuine development in the Third World.

The concept of civil society has altered development thinking and practice in the major donor countries. However, the Western image of civil society that donors employ does not necessarily apply to civil societies elsewhere. This has serious consequences for efforts to mobilize civil society organizations in developing countries. In practice, donors need to have a much deeper understanding of the configuration and capacity of civil society in the specific locations where they intend to intervene. Donors must also recognize that NGDO efforts, while useful, are limited, and that they cannot substitute for those of the wider civil society.

The tasks NGDOs set for themselves, and the expectations of those that finance them, are complex and (probably too) demanding. They cover most facets of social development: reducing poverty and exclusion; improving access to basic services; conflict prevention; fostering democracy; influencing public policies, etc. NGDOs also function at multiple levels, from the individual, through households and intermediary institutions into the arena of international relations, conventions and commitments. In doing so, they may touch some 20 per cent of the world’s poor. However, evidence suggests that the NGDO contribution to social change is less substantial and durable than imagined.

NGDOs would like to do better and are doing something about it themselves. However, they are limited in this by the unfair, power-imbalanced and donor-serving framework of aid that they operate in. At the same time, NGDOs remain substantially aid-dependent and vulnerable, which can result in questionable motivations and behaviour. For NGDOs to improve their contributions in mobilizing for development, they must better learn to:

- understand and overcome the factors undermining their efforts;
- work differently with communities to ensure that change is sustained;
- develop an ability to cope with relative powerlessness within the “partnerships” that are possible in an unreformed aid system;

- improve relations between themselves;
- alter Northern NGOs' roles vis-à-vis Southern partners and their own national constituencies, and work together with all kinds of NGOs in coalitions and networks;
- broaden and bring enduring structure into interactions with wider civil society;
- interface more broadly with national and local government;
- operate in the international arena with downward accountability, while adopting advocacy strategies that do not undermine domestic governance or provoke a government "backlash".

But structural features of the international aid system limit NGOs' capacity for self-improvement. Under existing rules, most recipients of aid are relatively powerless and are kept that way. The distorted language of "partnership" is a current example of how rhetoric masks major disparities in power and the maintenance of dependency. And this power imbalance generates perverse incentives for aid recipients. It blocks their necessary ownership of and commitment to change. Six reforms are proposed to attenuate or remove the institutional dysfunctions of aid, and hence make feasible the possibilities for NGOs to work with diverse CSOs on a larger scale.

First, bring greater equity, co-responsibility and ownership into the aid process. Trust funds, or similar mechanisms, have often been proposed and should be implemented. These should create an appropriate distance between the giver and receiver of aid, set within a transparent governance framework.

Second, recognize relationships other than "partnership". The aid community requires an array of relationships, named for what they are, each designed to serve different purposes. Different relationships require the open negotiation of different rights and obligations of the parties involved.

Third, establish "honest brokers" along the lines of an Ombudsperson, as is now being considered by agencies working in humanitarian and emergency operations.

Fourth, prevent "development mono-culture" by encouraging NGOs to do what they should do best: work with local agents of change to understand and promote integrative, cross-cutting, thematic, participatory and innovative

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