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**NGOs, PARTICIPATION
AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Testing the Assumptions with Evidence
from Zimbabwe**

by Jessica Vivian and Gladys Maseko

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PREFACE

UNRISD has been involved in research concerning participation and development for well over a decade now, and has published more than a dozen books and numerous articles dealing with these issues. In recent years, the rising profile of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in development recommendations and policy initiatives, as well as their increased share of development funding, has reaffirmed the centrality of an understanding of the dynamics of "participation" in development studies. With the establishment of a consensus that participation is necessary for development, the question becomes how participatory strategies are to be implemented.

The research presented in this paper was designed to explore factors affecting the implementation of strategies for participatory development through non-governmental organizations, especially local-level NGOs. The study was conducted in Zimbabwe, and while some of its findings are context-specific, many of them will be much more widely relevant.

The authors compare the often idealized picture of development NGOs which appears in the extensive NGO literature with evidence they gathered concerning the range of organizations which make up the rural development NGO sector in Zimbabwe. The approach taken is to enumerate the prevailing assumptions about the characteristics, strategies, and impacts of development NGOs, to test these assumptions against the research findings, and where necessary to account for the differences between the assumptions and the observations. The analysis is based on ten months of fieldwork in Zimbabwe, which included interviews with rural NGO beneficiaries, rural leaders and administrators, NGO staff members and central development planners, as well as a formal survey of rural development NGOs in the country.

The paper argues that the individual organizations which comprise the development NGO sector make up a wide spectrum of organizational types, with a similarly wide range of project strategies and outcomes. Some NGOs are truly creative, independent, and committed to the egalitarian and participatory ideals upon which they were founded. At the opposite extreme, others act essentially as members of a service industry, developing and carrying out their activities in response to requests from donors. Some estimates are given of the proportion of organizations which fall into each extreme of this range. More importantly, however, the paper argues that it is the latter type of NGO - that which acts as part of a service industry - which is most likely to appear as a result of the current growth of interest in NGOs as agents of development.

The authors also analyse some of the reasons that rural development NGOs find it difficult to accomplish all that is expected of them. Among other questions, they discuss the logistical implications of truly participatory initiatives, the institutional constraints involved in reaching the poor, the complexity of the question of how to benefit rural women, the difficulty of going beyond the project approach, and the ambiguity of the concept of NGOs representing the "grassroots".

The paper constitutes a critique, not of the NGO approach, but of the overwhelming expectations placed upon the NGO sector, especially in recent years. The fact that some

NGOs have been very successful does not mean that the entire NGO sector should be expected to match their accomplishments.

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January 1994

Dharam Ghai
Director

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a large literature has emerged to explore the possible contribution of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to rural development, and has described a significant potential for development NGOs. By undertaking comparative or case study analysis, it has been able to establish many factors that have contributed to the success of certain NGO initiatives. Partly because of this literature, NGOs are increasingly being called upon to play a larger role in development efforts.

However, this same literature also recognizes that the potential shown by some NGOs has not been realized more generally, and that "development NGOs cannot yet claim collectively to have made a contribution to be proud of" (Clark, 1991: 210). Therefore calls are increasingly being made for research which explores the impact of the NGO sector as a whole on development efforts in a particular country. The study described here was designed in part to meet this challenge. The approach taken was to enumerate the assumptions made about development NGOs, and then to test these assumptions in a particular country context: that of Zimbabwe. The study design was based on the premise that a set of relatively untested assumptions are currently held regarding development NGOs, and that these assumptions form the basis of the general understanding of the NGO sector, the policy approach taken to NGOs, and the operations of development NGOs themselves.

The study was comprised of three different elements, designed to address different aspects of, and perspectives on, NGO operations. First, a series of interviews was held with groups of rural NGO members. Second, interviews were conducted with professionals - governmental and non-governmental - who deal with problems of rural development. Third, a formal survey of the rural development NGOs operating in the country was carried out. The main findings of the study are given below. As the report indicates, evidence for some of the questions addressed by the research is more conclusive than that for others. In particular, it should be stressed that the research was concerned with only one particular category of NGOs - those carrying out rural development initiatives. Obviously, evidence from this sector is not indicative of the experiences of the entire NGO community. This subset of NGOs was selected because it is quite clearly the fastest growing element of the NGO community, and that to which the bulk of external funds are allocated.

A Note on Terminology

The term "NGO" has acquired a wide range of meanings, and has been exhaustively defined and variously subdivided within the literature. Obviously, a great many types of organizations are not associated with the government, and thus the category "NGO" is enormous. This study is concerned with what we term "**operational rural development NGOs**": that subset of NGOs which identify their function primarily as undertaking work with their own personnel meant to foster rural development.¹ Typically, such NGOs employ staff (or have volunteers) who live in or travel to rural villages to initiate and/or support development projects or programmes.

The study included both national and international operational rural development NGOs. However, many of the international NGOs undertake their work primarily through

¹. This term is shortened to "development NGO" or simply "NGO" below. The remainder of the report is concerned with operational rural development NGOs unless otherwise specified.

funding local NGO "partners" rather than directly involving themselves in field projects; such donor NGOs did not form part of the study. More importantly, it should be stressed that specifically political, advocacy, research, service and urban organizations which are not directly involved in development initiatives were not included in the study. This is not to imply that such organizations are unimportant - indeed, the findings suggest that they may well have a key role to play in development. However, they are not the focus here.

THE CONTEXT: NGOS IN RURAL ZIMBABWE

The problems that rural development NGOs are attempting to address in Zimbabwe are similar to those elsewhere in Africa. Although communal land ownership has meant that absolute landlessness is relatively rare, nearly half the land of the country is still alienated from the majority of the population, and land hunger is becoming an increasing problem. Almost 40 per cent of the land of Zimbabwe is classified as large-scale farming areas, and is owned by fewer than 5,000, mostly white, farmers. Fifty-seven per cent of the population of Zimbabwe, or approximately six million people, live on the 42 per cent of the land area which is classified as communal land (S. Moyo, 1987; CSO, 1992). Already by 1982, 37 per cent of the land in the communal areas was defined as being under great pressure (Muir, 1992), while the population of the country has increased over 38 per cent in the decade since then (CSO, 1992).

Growth in the communal agricultural sector has been significant since independence. However, production increases were largely limited to a small sector of the rural population (Amin, 1992). Moreover, evidence indicates that much of the investment in small-scale and communal agriculture comes from remittances from wage-earners rather than from within the agricultural sector itself (Cousins et al., 1990). Thus farmers who do not have access to wage employment or remittances are unable to invest productively in agricultural inputs. Statistics on drought relief recipients indicate persistent poverty and the absence of food self-sufficiency among the rural population: even in good agricultural years, 12 per cent of households living in good agricultural regions fail to produce enough maize to feed themselves, and 25 per cent of those in the poorer regions must rely on food assistance. In poor years, 24-60 per cent of households receive drought relief (Muir, 1992). In the western provinces of Zimbabwe, which are classified as poor agricultural land, all but one of the years since 1984 have been poor. Thus the majority of the rural population of the western provinces has depended on drought relief assistance for close to a decade.

Since independence there have been notable advances in education and health

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