

Dryland Networks Programme

ISSUES PAPER

**The Role of Indigenous
NGOs in African Recovery
and Development**

**The case for Regional and
Sub-Regional Cooperation**

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THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS NGOS IN AFRICA'S RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE FOR REGIONAL AND SUB-REGIONAL CO-OPERATION *

1. Introduction

Each generation must, out of relative obscurity discover its mission, fulfill it, or betray it.

Franz Fanon, The Wretched of the Earth, 1961

We commit ourselves; individually and peoples to establish national, sub-regional and regional institutions of self-reliance and self-sustainment.

Lagos Plan of Action for Economic Development of Africa, 1980 - 2000, 1981

This paper argues that contrary to the dominant views on strategies for Africa's recovery and development, as expressed in a number of documents and declarations, the mobilization and empowerment of grassroot peoples holds the best hope for future development of the continent. The indigenous non-government organisations and grassroot groups have a critical role to play in the process of mobilization of the ordinary people to participate in their development. This is an enormous task for indigenous as well as international NGOs working in Africa. It calls for creative and imaginative planning to turn the unfavourable circumstances prevailing in Africa into opportunities for the grassroot groups. To do this, the African NGOs have to work together not only nationally, but also establish mechanisms for co-operation regionally and sub-regionally.

* This text is an abridged version of a paper prepared for the Conference on the Role of Indigenous NGOs in African Recovery and Development, Khartoum, Sudan, January 10-15, 1988.

II. Conventional Wisdom on Recovery and Development

The prevailing conventional wisdom on Africa's recovery and development as evident in the World Bank and the OAU documents rests primarily on what the governments on the continent can do and the support that can be garnered from the international community. The African submission to the Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly on Africa's Economic and Social Crisis in 1986 articulated and underlined this faith.

The Africa's Priority Programme of Economic Recovery 1986 - 1990 (APPER) is particularly emphatic on the role of African governments and the international donor community in bringing about the political, economic and social changes that are needed to usher in a period of recovery. These articles of faith were enshrined in the United Nations Programme of Action for African Economic Recovery and Development, 1986-1990, (UNPAAERD).

To ensure the success of the programmes which the African governments were proposing, that is restructuring their economies, mobilising domestic resources and establishing regional co-operation, a set of new relationships between Africa and the international community was envisaged in the form of 'a compact'. This compact would be 'built around the principle of co-responding in which support for Africa will be linked with evidence of growing determination on the part of the African people and their governments to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps'. In their turn, the international community would commit themselves 'to a new approach in their co-operation with Africa which will be based partly on substantial increase in the

flow of highly concessional resources and, no less important, to putting in place essential policy measures which will enhance the capacity of Africa.....'

Available evidence, on the other hand, indicates that the international economic system and indeed the policies followed by the African governments, are part and parcel of the problem in the re-awakening of the African society. In essence the people have gradually come to perceive their predicament in this way. To understand how the international economic system works to cripple the process of African recovery, let alone development, one has to look at the prices of primary commodities in the last ten years and the debt burden accumulated in the same period. In the last ten years, the price of most commodities exported by Africa has fallen by an average of almost 4 per cent per annum, sugar and vegetable oils being affected most adversely.

Nevertheless we need to realise that Africa's role as a producer of primary agricultural commodities could be threatened by major breakthroughs in biotechnology which are likely to bring into the Western markets commodities produced through genetic engineering. In this way African production of commodities like sugar or cocoa could be rendered irrelevant in the world market. Advances in biotechnology do also offer enormous potential for improving food production in Africa. The question is whether we have the capacity and vision to benefit from these scientific and technological breakthroughs.

In a situation where prices of commodities have been declining, the prices of imported goods are skyrocketing, the debt burden is

soaring and the expected financial resources from the international community are not forthcoming, Africa has become, willy nilly, a net exporter of capital. It is therefore very surprising that the OAU, the African governments and the World Bank continue to propagate an approach to recovery and development which will ultimately lead to disaster and leave many people writhing hopelessly in a serious economic and social quagmire.

It is therefore unfortunate to observe that the International Conference on Africa: The Challenge of Economic Recovery and Accelerated Development held at Abuja, Nigeria, June 15 - 19, 1987 continued to perpetuate the belief that the African governments and the international community held the key to recovery and development. This was perhaps a question of maintaining faith in a situation which was clearly becoming desperate. The Abuja statement reconciled this situation by arguing:

that the approach so far to the African external resources needs is rather ad hoc and partial in nature and therefore likely to have limited impact. What is required is a comprehensive approach to the debt problem and aid flows that would provide the financial resources required for economic recovery and development in Africa. (Abuja Statement: 1987).

In view of this kind of thinking, it is not surprising to note that when the OAU convened a special conference in Addis Ababa on the issue of debt burden, towards the end of November 1987, the African leaders repeated the same old story of appealing to the goodwill of the international community to increase capital flows to Africa, suspend interest repayment for a grace period,

stabilise commodity prices and open markets of the industrial countries to Africa's exports. This strategy, as can be discerned in the efforts of UNCTAD, has not worked in the past and does not seem to offer any hope in the future. The challenge is for the Africans to critically review past approaches and come up with a new paradigm for change and hope. This is a difficult task but a necessary one for all those interested in revitalizing this continent.

III A Critique of the Conventional Approach to Recovery and Development

The capacity of African governments to initiate and undertake widespread programmes for renewal and development is becoming increasingly limited. The main preoccupation of most of the governments in Africa is how they can safeguard their power and maintain control in their countries. In these circumstances, maintaining law and order through various state apparatuses is the main concern of the ruling groups, whereas serious development programmes are given a second level priority.

A policy of recovery which pins its hope on these governments is at best ignoring the reality of governance on the African continent.

In fact, the Abuja conference also argued for the need to go beyond issues of economic restructuring and financial flows, in order to base future prospects on a 'refocusing of the African ethos and a regathering of all African forces', which draw their strength and vitality from the socio-economic and cultural reality of the people. Tied with this is the need for

transformation of the African leadership and democratisation through popular participation (Abuja 1987).

What then seem to be emerging from the Abuja Conference Statement are two differing approaches to African recovery and development. The first approach reaffirms the thrust of APPER and UNPAAERD documents, while the second approach hinges on internal forces which bring about a transformation of African leadership and the participation of the people in decision-making in all sectors of development.

This brings into discussion a fundamental question which must be seriously addressed if we want to deal with the African crisis. The issue is: What are the internal forces, social groups or traditions that need to be fostered or harnessed to bring about and guide the process of recovery and development in Africa? Where are the signs of hope for change or renewal on the continent and in the sub-region? These are neglected issues in the current debates and policy proclamations on recovery and development. We need to question ourselves whether the grassroot groups, associations, mutual support societies and other non-governmental initiatives offer this much needed hope and opportunity. Africa has, to a large extent, neglected the one resource in its development strategy which is not in short supply, that is, her people. How do you mobilise and improve the quality of the population so that they can release and utilize their energies, creativity and knowledge for change and development?

The expansion of the state apparatus in colonial and post-colonial Africa tended to curtail the participation of ordinary

people in the activities which affect them on a day-to-day basis. The African elites and governments have made the people spectators in the development game, instead of them becoming the main players in the process of revitalisation and development. Where this situation has changed by either deliberate policy or by default, the results have been dramatic in terms of activities and energies which have been unleashed. This approach therefore calls for empowerment and awareness building among ordinary people; and a political, economic and social arrangement which widens space upon which forces for change and development can play their respective roles. As Paul Harrison has observed, this approach to development brings changes to the expectations and functions of the African states and international aid donors.

The role of the state and aid donors changes in this new model. No longer are they the providers of all things related to development. Instead they become facilitators, providing technical expertise and essential resources to help people to realise their own aspirations individually and collectively (Harrison: 294-295: 1987).

We can take this discussion a little further by observing that the emphasis which Africa has placed on regional and sub-regional levels will not materialise unless creative energies of the grassroot groups are given space nationally and regionally. Regional and sub-regional co-operation, like the other aspects of development we have observed above, has tended to be the exclusive province of governments and to a lesser extent the donor community. Co-operation even among the people who belong to the same ethnic group and live on two sides of a common border is usually not given much encouragement. These kind of initiatives are usually demarcated as the concerns of governments.

Nevertheless, we need to note that the issues which are the concern for a sub-regional organisation like the Intergovernmental Authority on Drought and Development (IGADD) in Eastern Africa are the very same issues which the non-government organisations and grassroot groups are attempting to tackle. These are food security, sharing of research information, establishment of early warning systems, livestock development (cattle, camels, etc.), water and energy resources development, drought and desertification control.

IV. In search of Regional and Sub-regional Co-operation

Among NGOs

For long-term recovery and development on the continent, it is necessary that the dominance which is exercised by African governments in all spheres of economic, political and social life is curtailed, and other institutions, both national and regional take increasing responsibilities especially in the initiation and management of economic activities. Regional and sub-regional co-operation in matters related to trade, communication, energy development, environmental conservation, water management and industrialisation is one way in which African states can surrender some of their powers for the benefit of wider economic development and integration. In this way natural and human resources of the wider entities can be tapped for the well-being of the populations in the geographical areas covered by the co-operation. For the potential of regional co-operation to be realised it is important that the movement of the people across existing boundaries be liberalised. Free movement of peoples,

goods and services requires resolution of the existing conflicts between states and within states. This is a prerequisite for genuine co-operation, integration and sharing of development experiences among the various African countries.

Another important element in fostering regional co-operation in Africa is to bring grassroot groups, pastoralists, farmers and other interested groups together to work on common regional problems. A prerequisite for the emergence of this kind of regional co-operation would be the democratisation of African societies and popular participation of ordinary people and groups in the economic, social and political circumstances of their societies. In such situations the responsibilities for the development process would be shared among various actors in society.

Jean-Marc Ela has argued this point forcefully where he writes:

It is not only drinking water and animal protein that so many Africans are missing. They lack a space of freedom, as well, a space where they may speak without muzzles and without censure, where they may speak without the risk of compromising their families or bringing down a thunderbolt on a village or indeed an entire region of the country. At times it seems as if the only thing so many beg for is simply the freedom to express themselves without having to fear for their relatives or friends (Ela: p.75: 1986).

The emergence and consolidation of this space by grassroot groups and other interests in each country is, in my view, important in overcoming the economic and social crisis in each and every African country. A meaningful and workable regional co-operation can only rise out of this kind of development in each African country.

We have argued here that the real engine for African recovery and development is the initiatives taken at rural grassroot levels and in the urban informal sectors of our societies. Co-operation and sharing among the groups and non-government organisations working at these levels should be encouraged at all costs. It is this kind of co-operation that can be the basis of regional co-operation among indigenous NGOs. This kind of co-operation depends to a large extent on the willingness of national governments to provide the space and environment for this to happen. This is equally true at a regional level.

For this situation to emerge, African governments need to enter into a compact with their peoples which will spell out the responsibilities of each party in the strenuous struggle for recovery and development. A covenant of this kind which is nationally implemented, enforced and respected would unleash enormous energies from the African people for development.

V. A model of Co-operation in the Sub-region

Our search for a model of co-operation among indigenous NGOs in this sub-region, leads us into a sphere which has been the concern of the Pan-African movement since the beginning of this century.

There are three broad categories of regional organisations and bodies in Africa. First, there are government initiated and supported regional co-operation organisations. These range from river development and management authorities to economic and

trade organisations. Some of the outstanding organisations in this respect are the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS), the Communauté Economique de l'Afrique de l'Ouest (CEAO), The Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference (SADCC), the Indian Ocean Island Commission and the Preferential Trade Area for Eastern and Southern African States (PTA). The primary actors in these regional organisations are the African states and are intended to promote trade and the emergence of economic communities. The success and weakness of these organisations revolve around the political will and commitment of the governments concerned. The ordinary people have little say or involvement.

The second form of co-operation in Africa takes the form of scientific, professional and academic bodies and institutions. African universities co-operate in a limited way in promotion of research, exchange of students and scholars. In addition there are a number of regional networks for co-operation in research, technology and training. Scientific and professional bodies like CODESRIA, African Academy of Sciences, Pan-Africa Union of Scientists and Technologists and others foster interaction and co-operation within the professional and scientific community. Equally there are business and commercial bodies, such as chambers of commerce which promote co-operation in trade and business matters.

The main feature of this kind of co-operation is that it is promoted by the communities which are directly the beneficiaries

of the co-operation. It is usually undertaken without state patronage but may receive foreign donor funding.

The third form of co-operation is among religious non-government organisations, particularly the Christian organisations. Regional co-operation among religious organisations is usually fostered by regional bodies like the All African Conference of Churches (AACCC), the Association of Episcopal Conference in Eastern Africa (AMECEA) and the national Christian Councils. These organisations often co-operate on relief, training, sharing of information and co-ordination of their relationship with international donor agencies.

Co-operation and sharing of experiences among secular indigenous NGOs in this sub-region is limited. An opportunity, however does exist for initiation and promotion of this kind of co-operation and exchange. There is need therefore for research into the existing forms of co-operation and networking in the sub-region, and a close look into possibilities that can be initiated or encouraged. An equally important aspect of this exploration is to analyse critically the operation and exchange of experiences, knowledge and training opportunities. The work of sub-regional Networks needs to be assessed in this way so that their experiences can be utilised for the benefit of strengthening NGOs co-operation in Eastern Africa.

VI. The Thrust of Possible Sub-Regional Co-operation Among NGOs in Eastern Africa

Below we outline the objectives of a possible co-operative

arrangement or network among the NGOs operating in the Eastern African sub-region.

(a) To provide channels for communication of information, experiences and concerns in all matters related to development and recovery, such as sharing of stories, writing of experiences and approaches to training and adoption of innovations.

(b) To provide a forum for discussion of appropriate development strategies and innovations in the region.

This kind of forum can also undertake the work of exposing inappropriate development projects, technologies or policies followed by internal as well as external agencies operating in the region.

(c) To provide a specialised forum for discussion and sharing of information and experiences on problems specific to this subregion, e.g. famine, desertification, pastoralism, dryland farming, ecology and environment, conflicts, peace etc.

(d) To support or commission research activities which enhance the work of NGOs in the sub-region and to encourage the dissemination of the emerging knowledge widely, particularly with the goal of its utilization by grassroot groups and communities.

A regional research and information network which serves NGOs should be encouraged. Such a network should be in a position to identify and collate useful research findings and knowledge and thereafter disseminate it among NGOs.

A network of NGOs in the sub-region should play an advocacy and co-ordination role among the research

institutes undertaking relevant and useful research in our universities and elsewhere.

- (e) To relate to the governments of the sub-region and specialised regional bodies, e.g. IGADD, and explore ways and means of working with these governments and organisations on regional problems and especially in looking for solutions to pressing and common problems.
- (f) A body like the one we propose could also play an advocacy role for NGOs in the sub-region. As a starting point such a body could look into the legal, economic and political environment under which the NGOs in this area are working and thereby suggest ways in which this environment could be improved and enhanced, to maximise the usefulness of NGOs to the sub-region, and at the same time enable the NGOs to operate efficiently and effectively. Work of this kind could enable the governments in the area to formulate enlightened guidelines and policies for the operation of NGOs.
- (g) Another area where a regional NGO body could provide leadership is in identification of development priorities which could be given attention by NGOs. This process could be undertaken in close co-operation with the governments of the sub-region. In this way, the resources which the NGOs have access to could be used effectively in areas of greatest need.

VII. Constraints to Regional Co-operation

Many African governments realise the potential benefits of co-operation at regional and sub-regional levels, and

often they are willing to sign agreements establishing such bodies and organisations. However, when it comes to implementing programmes of co-operation, their record has not been at all equal to their declared commitments. Often narrow national, political and economic considerations make it difficult to undertake measures necessary for the realisation of goals of co-operation. The NGOs should recognise these problems as they attempt to co-operate beyond their national frontiers. For instance, any NGO co-operation envisaged in the Eastern African sub-region, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Kenya, Somalia, Sudan and Uganda must face up to the dominant and painful economic and political realities.

The first challenge to NGO co-operation in this sub-region relates to the on-going or potential conflicts. These conflicts not only inhibit co-operation between NGOs in these countries, but also make it difficult for any programmes for recovery and development to be undertaken. This problem is particularly acute for indigenous NGOs in this sub-region. Nevertheless, while this situation is a serious challenge to the indigenous NGOs, it can also offer an opportunity for regional co-operation in the search for peace, justice and conflict resolution.

The second constraint to co-operation is the existence of different political systems and ideologies. Behind these dominant ideologies are however competing nationalisms. This situation is complicated by competing religious and super-power interests.

The above problems have to be viewed in the economic context of this region. Serious problems of transport, communication, shortage of foreign exchange, and on the whole the orientation of the national economies to the metropolitan countries make co-operation difficult. In short, the infrastructure for co-operation is absent and the NGOs will have to contend with the constraints resulting from the under-development of the region.

VIII Conclusion

This paper has pointed out the general weakness in the approaches which so far have been adopted by African governments in their attempt to revive and generate social and economic development. In contrast to the government approaches, we have argued for a people-centered approach which places a great deal of faith and hope on what grassroot groups and non-government organisations can do in the process of recovery and development. While we place a great deal of hope on NGOs, we at the same time realise that Africa lacks strong grassroot organisations which can undertake the enormous task which has been thrust upon them by the prevailing circumstances. We would like therefore to suggest that the strengthening of indigenous NGOs be given priority so that they can adequately address themselves to critical national or sub-regional problems. Indigenous NGOs should not only be strengthened in their organisational and managerial structures, but also in their approaches and relationships to the people they are supposed to serve. In this way, indigenous NGOs can develop strategies for mobilising grassroot groups for

participation in their struggles for development.

It is not enough therefore for NGOs to have resources to undertake projects. They must also have resources and time for building their capabilities as development institutions. This entails investment in the process of building institutions which have leadership skills and independence in analysing and interpreting the African reality from the perspective of grassroot communities, and thereby formulating and setting the agenda for development in their respective localities, countries and sub-regions. In this way local NGOs will have the capability to resist the temptation offered by international NGOs and governments of setting the development agenda for them. Indigenous NGOs which are strong, informed and above all rooted in the reality of grassroots communities in Africa are likely to be better partners of governments and international NGOs in bringing about recovery and development. Weak and subservient NGOs will not help in the search for alternative strategies, actions, innovations and vision which Africa desperately requires at this juncture. Institution-building is therefore a crucial process to the survival and advancement of the work of the NGOs in Africa.

Secondly, it is important to encourage and strengthen the emergence of functional networks in various parts of Africa which would facilitate exchange of information, experiences, expression of solidarity and could engage in co-operative projects, training and research which enhance their work nationally and regionally. As the Asian experience has shown, co-operative linkages in

different sectors and spaces is usually slow and at times painful and therefore requires meticulous planning and implementation. Finally, it is important to underline the importance of encouraging the indigenous NGOs to become channels for articulation and practitioners of alternative visions and approaches to recovery and development. For instance, in this sub-region the NGOs should articulate the need for peaceful and just resolution of conflicts as a prerequisite for meaningful development. For this to occur, the NGOs must be firmly rooted in the reality of the African situation.

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