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## **The Role of NGOs and Somalia's Development Needs in the 1990s**

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# **The Role of NGOs and Somalia's Development Needs in the 1990s**

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## THE ROLE OF NGOs AND SOMALIA'S DEVELOPMENT NEEDS IN THE 1990s

### BACKGROUND

Problems of underdevelopment plague much of Africa and particularly the Least Developed Countries (LDC) of which Somalia is a member. Food production per capita has fallen dramatically over the last twenty years in almost every African country (FAO Year Book). Soil erosion, deforestation, over-grazing and desertification in Somalia have reached alarming proportions, some say irreversible proportions. Long-term stability of land and water resources are not keeping pace with rising population figures (Renewable Resource Trends in East Africa, Clark University, 1984).

Explanations of Africa's malaise are many and often contradictory. However, one point is indisputable: the ability of African nations to reverse declines in food productivity and to rehabilitate degraded range and soil conditions depends on the capability of national and local African institutions to identify problems as well as to plan, implement, manage and evaluate rural development efforts.

The task is considerable. Two or three generations ago, Somalia in common with most African nations possessed an infrastructure of indigenous institutions and leadership that provided competent management for its agricultural and grazing resources. Crop rotation, pasture management, fuel-wood collection, food storage, water allocation and public works were the responsibility of local sheikhs, herdsman, chiefs and elders. However, interventions of the colonial era destroyed the viability of indigenous institutions and substituted a cluster of western, centralized and hierarchical institutions in their place. With the arrival of independence in Somalia, as in much of Africa in the 1960s, possibilities existed for the restoration of local institutions to manage basic life support systems of food, water and traditional court systems for settling disputes. However, the new elite who came to power after independence was not prepared to relinquish that power and insisted that the inherited colonial system should be followed. But the transplanted western institutions were ill-suited or unable to extend services and be accountable to rural constituencies. Line ministries emerged as the agents controlling expertise and funds for development. Traditional institutions and leadership were never consulted or utilized. As a result many development decisions took place in isolation from rural Somalis who constituted the groups in greatest need. Given this void in institutional effectiveness,

many investments served urban needs rather than rural priorities and set up a two-tier economy in which Somalia's rural majority received the smallest share of the development cake. While Mogadishu and other major regional capitals have prospered, rural areas and small regional towns have stagnated.

The heads of the central ministries who saw themselves as the sole agents of change in "post-independence" Somalia suffered from four major short-comings:

- They lacked the technical and administrative experience/expertise that is needed to run a modern state.
- They were hardly trained for the posts they occupied.
- They lacked the basic and essential culture for the western style modern system that they have inherited from the colonial administrators; a system that was alien to them.
- They have totally failed to appreciate the role of the private sector including non-governmental agencies.

As the new leaders were unable to cope with the multitude of problems that a modern state presents, the result was inevitably total failure. Therefore, the development record of successive Somali governments, particularly the present government, has been disastrous.

A number of studies on the macro-economic condition of Somalia focussed repeatedly on the important role of the private sector as an alternative to the current centralized economy.

Reviewing the past economic performance and in particular the development records of successive Somali governments, one can only conclude that there is an urgent need for change of direction. New approaches and new alternatives are badly needed. In short, the system needs a new blood transfusion lest it collapses.

There is a growing recognition that this new blood can be found in the newly emerging sector; the non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It is now generally accepted in development circles that NGOs are an alternative to government departments and multinational institutions who hitherto have dominated the development scene.

Because of their unique and important role in development, the formation and capacity building of Somali NGO sector should be seen as a "development need" in the 1990s.

## FORMATION AND ROLE OF NGOS

The lack of indigenous NGOs in Somalia and the failure of international voluntary organisations and government departments in reaching out to the poor to improve their quality of life have prompted the need for the emergence of indigenous NGOs to fill this gap in development at the grassroots level. Indigenous NGOs have a comparative advantage over international voluntary organisations due to their favourable cultural and linguistic interactions with the targeted populations.

Now that the need for the creation of indigenous NGOs has been recognized both internationally and nationally, the Somali government has decided to encourage the formation of indigenous NGOs. In recognising this role for indigenous NGOs, the then Minister of Interior, Mr Ahmed Suleman Abdalla, in launching the PVO Partners Project (funded jointly by USAID and the Somali government) in June 1985, has publicly announced that "there is a role to play for the private sector in general and the NGOs in particular". The President of the Republic has also issued a number of Presidential Circulars encouraging the formation of national NGOs.

Since then, 16 NGOs have registered with the Ministry of Interior. Most of these NGOs are engaged in grassroot development in areas such as water development, environmental improvement, primary health care, education, small scale credit system etc.

In a symposium organised by the Ministry of National Planning and UNCTAD, which was held in Mogadishu 12-15 February 1990, the following recommendations were endorsed:

- The Symposium considers the formation and capacity building of local NGOs as a development need for the 1990s.
- The Symposium having recognized the important role NGOs can play in the national development process, recommends that the government and international donor agencies contribute to the institutional building effort of local NGOs.
- The Symposium further recognizes the need to involve NGOs in the development process and recommends that NGOs be involved in development activities for the following reasons:
  - a) Voluntary organisations are more cost-effective.
  - b) NGOs respond more quickly to emergencies and grassroot development.
  - c) NGOs neither have excessive overheads nor do they have to wade through cumbersome red tape bureaucracy to implement their projects.

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- d) NGOs tend to involve communities in their projects and on the whole execute community based projects to ensure sustainability.

In a number of conferences sponsored by the UN system, the need to strengthen and utilize indigenous African NGOs for grassroots development was highlighted. More and more countries in the third world and particularly in the Least Developed Countries are using or planning to use NGOs for development at the grassroots level. Somalia cannot afford to be an exception. The reasons why the Somali NGO sector should be involved in the development process are many and include:

- Because of the widening economic gap (probably the worst in Africa) between the rich and the poor in Somalia, the weakness of current economic development is being realised. Prevalent development strategies are and have been responsive only to a small segment of the people, particularly those able to have a voice in policy debates. There is an urgent need for people-led, people-centred development where strategies are conceived and implemented by the people, rather than for the people.
- NGOs advocate and are involved in development which is participatory, self-reliant and sustainable. NGOs bottom-up approach and their interaction with rural communities is more effective than government's top-down policies. Government departments are usually removed from the people.
- Somali NGOs are more cost effective than international NGOs, multinationals and government agencies.
- NGOs can work in remote/difficult and hostile areas.
- Many NGOs are operating within their own communities and are uniquely placed to understand local needs, conditions, resources and aspirations.
- Somali NGOs are specially well placed to activate communication networks between various important actors in the development scene such as target communities, government departments and donor agencies.

Somalia is totally dependent on foreign aid. It is estimated that nearly 80% of Somalia's annual budget comes from foreign sources. The proper administration and utilization of that aid is, therefore, vitally important. It has been indicated that some donors are not happy with the way government departments handle this foreign aid and prefer to channel some of their contributions through NGOs.

In the light of the above, and because of national NGOs' comparative advantages over government agencies and international NGOs in responding to grassroots development needs, Somali NGOs should take their rightful place in Somalia's economic development and recovery processes.

For NGOs to be better equipped to assume greater role and responsibilities, it is necessary to develop and strengthen their capabilities. Indeed it is imperative to consider the strengthening of national NGO capabilities as one of Somalia's development needs for the 1990s.

#### NEEDS OF SOMALI NGOS

If the indigenous NGOs are to take root in Somalia, they have to be assisted in a number of key areas:

- a) **Training:** In general, most Somali NGOs have few professionally trained staff in areas critical to NGO operations. Their staff need training in administration, financial management, project identification and project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. They also need to acquire technical competence in community development theory and practice, natural resource management such as water resource management, range management and other areas relating to community improvement.
- b) **Funding:** Indigenous NGOs, no less than International NGOs, need funding to operate. There is a rich Somali tradition of community based giving. However, because the idea of NGOs is relatively new, there is no certainty that funds sufficient to sustain NGO operations will be forthcoming. This will require extensive and carefully thought out information, education and fund raising activities.

Another possible source is government development funds. Because of the relative newness of indigenous NGOs, the Somali government has not yet considered them as an important receptor of public funds for development. This does not mean that sometime in the future the Government will not view the funding of indigenous NGOs as a viable and important development strategy.

In the current state of affairs, funding from international sources appears to be the most likely prospect for indigenous NGO funding. Numerous bilateral and multilateral agencies support NGO activities in Somali. While traditionally they have funded international NGO activities, they are beginning to show interest in indigenous NGO activities. However, International Donors are reluctant to fund organisations without a proven track record. Indigenous NGOs should overcome this constraint over time.



## RECOMMENDATION FOR STRENGTHENING INDIGENOUS NGOS IN SOMALIA

What can be done to promote indigenous NGOs in Somalia? Our experience suggests the following points:

1. The Government should recognize the complementary role of indigenous NGOs by including them in their development plans, strategies and budgets.
2. Donor agencies should be willing to provide funding for promising NGOs without the prior condition that they demonstrate competence through previous experience. In particular UN agencies who have until now funded International NGOs but failed to assist local NGOs should change their discriminatory attitude and give equal opportunities to all NGOs.
3. International NGOs should consider the funding of indigenous NGOs as a valid alternative to their own implementation of development projects. This could take the form of sub-contracts or separate funding.
4. International NGOs should share their training resources with indigenous NGOs. Space for indigenous NGO staff should be included in local training programmes on a regular basis.
5. Indigenous and International NGOs should collaborate in the design, management and implementation of development projects to benefit from the strengths of each.
6. Donors should provide funding for local, regional and international training of indigenous NGO staff.