

Dryland Networks Programme

ISSUES PAPER

Is there an ACORD for the 1990s?

A-C-O-R-D
*Agency for Cooperation and Research in
Development*

IIED

INTERNATIONAL
INSTITUTE FOR
ENVIRONMENT AND
DEVELOPMENT

**Paper No. 18
June 1990**

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"Is there an ACORD for the 1990s?" was originally an internal paper that the ACORD Secretariat prepared for its Consortium members at the end of 1989 in order to provide a perspective on changes in Africa and how ACORD could fit into this changing context.

The contents of the paper result from a five year process of discussion, debate and meetings within ACORD at all levels: village level organisations, field staff, Secretariat staff and Consortium members. The culmination of this stage of the process was a meeting in Paris in September 1989 of ACORD field staff, Secretariat and members to discuss and agree broad directions for ACORD in the 1990s.

Although the Consortium has given its overall approval to the main thrust of this paper not all the components have ACORD Board policy status as yet. The regional support structures (RSS) and regional Programme Committees are agreed policy with specific go-ahead for these structures in Francophone West Africa.

ACORD (Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development) is a broad-based international consortium of European and Canadian non-governmental organisations working together for long term development in Africa. The Consortium is independent of any political and religious affiliations. ACORD responds to development needs when collective action is deemed appropriate in the most marginalised parts of Africa. ACORD's main role is to facilitate the emergence of non-governmental organisational structures or, to strengthen those structures that are weak.

ACORD works in 14 countries in Africa, many of them in the Sahelian belt and is responsible for 24 long term programmes in these countries.

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I. AFRICA

1.1. Africa is on its own

As investment declines, aid is reduced, debt levels rise, and the pressures of structural adjustment and worsening terms of trade continue to bite, Africa in the 1990s will increasingly have to depend on its own creativity to solve its very pressing problems. It will require partners that are willing and able to help it do so. Recent events are likely to mean that the focus of international solidarity in the next decade will be Eastern Europe rather than Africa. And as a recent World Bank report¹ indicates the low rates of return on investment in Africa mean that the burgeoning economies of South-East Asia are likely to be the target of international investment.

Africa represents a mere 4 % of annual World Trade. Unlike much of Latin America or Asia where highly exploitative landlord systems created a large landless population which facilitated a process of industrialisation, African economies, in most cases, are dominated by agricultural production that is characterised by relatively small differences in farm size and the absence of an important landless labour force. The result has been that the beginnings of manufacturing and industrialisation in Africa have been slow or non-existent compared to other continents. Those commodities that Africa does produce are either available elsewhere at less cost and less political risk or, because of technological advances, are being replaced by different products.

Although less, in absolute terms, than that of Latin America, debt constitutes a major stumbling block to recovery. Africa is transferring more capital abroad in debt-service and other payments than it is receiving in aid and new loans. Recent estimates indicate that the total external debt of Africa was \$135 billion in 1988, equivalent to the region's Gross National Product, compared to about 60 % of GNP in Latin America. For certain countries debt service obligations represent 300 % of exports of goods and services.

1

Sub-Saharan Africa, from Crisis to Sustainable Growth. A long-term perspective study, 1989

Although there has been an increase in Official Development Assistance (ODA) when measured in current dollars in real terms resource flows were lower in 1986, 1987 and 1988 than in 1985. Export credits have also declined while other private commercial flows have remained negligible since 1983.

This financial squeeze has been aggravated by the commodity situation. Notwithstanding the recent improvements in some prices, total commodity earnings in 1986 and 1987 remained below their 1985 level. Existing instruments designed to stabilize export earnings including STABEX and SYSMIN have not proved capable of dealing with the magnitude of the problem.

Africa is therefore subordinated to the demands of debt servicing, so that internal policies are determined to a large extent by the international economic situation. As a result long-term planning is neglected in order to meet the short term demands of balance of payments problems. This means mortgaging the future, with nature putting up the collateral. Environmental destruction is the result as poor countries and individuals are forced into exploiting whatever natural resources might be available. Poverty is both a cause and a result.

The challenge facing Africa in the next decade is therefore specific and requires a specific response. Particularly in economically and physically marginal areas the poor will not create adequate "market signals" to state and ODA institutions because the economic returns to research and development will tend to be small. It is all the more important, therefore, that Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) continue to concentrate on those areas that are so blithely written off as not providing a sufficient return on investment.

1.2. Poverty and change

One of the symptoms of the crisis facing Africa is the rapid social change that is provoked as individuals and households struggle to survive. The catalysts of such change, whether environmental, demographic, political or economic produce different effects on different people and groups. In turn their reaction to such change stimulates alterations in those underlying structural causes. People can have an impact on those factors that are often seen as immutable, the example of recent events in Eastern Europe is perhaps the most striking.

Too often as sophisticated theories of development are discussed people, in particular the poor and vulnerable, are neglected. Development is first and foremost about people and equally development should be about those most affected by social change: the poor. However as many authors have argued, poverty is many-faceted, integrated and may include many mutually inclusive factors: lack of assets, physical weaknesses, vulnerability, powerlessness and isolation. It is not simply a question of a difference between resources available and consumption needs, different types of poverty demand solutions that are appropriate to the differing causes that bring them about.

In Africa household-based agricultural activity remains the foundation of most economies and, given the role women play in that system, to see the development of any community is to see the position of women in that society. If gender is not seen to be as important a factor as class and ethnicity in terms of access to resources, power, assets and knowledge then the chances of mitigating the impact of social change (as well as producing it) on the most vulnerable parts of African communities will be very limited. To view change through poor women's eyes will not only prove to be a more effective lens for regarding society as a whole but will provide a perspective on poverty that has for too long been ignored. This is particularly the case now as the stress on rural households is increasing as the provision of basic goods and services by government decline. In many ways this burden falls particularly on women as substitute service providers and as managers of the domestic economy. In turn such stress has led to changes in family composition and the role of women in the labour process.

1.3. Groups and their potential

One of the major bottlenecks to reaching the poor is the lack of organisations which represent the specific interest of the poor, that can defend their interests and provide an institutional mechanism by which their demands can be channelled. The combination of colonial administration followed by modern state formation and the incorporation of isolated and relatively autonomous economies into wider markets has greatly modified existing community institutions. Some have survived as viable and representative bodies, many have disappeared and others have proved to be totally undemocratic, serving only the interests of a narrow elite. In many cases this has

meant that traditional reciprocal networks and indigenous knowledge systems have broken down and therefore the poor, in particular, have nothing left to fall back on in times of crisis. Such additional new pressures and adapted survival strategies have created a myriad of new community organisations. In Africa the effects of structural readjustment on state structures has further encouraged the formation of local "private sector" organisations as civil servants have been laid off and services decline.

What is clear is that experience elsewhere, whether it be unionisation or the establishment of political parties, shows the need for the collective organisation of interest groups and that these are only successful where individual efforts are in favour of developing collectively. Whilst not all of these structures are totally democratic, often recreating the existing inequalities of the societies from which they emerge, care has to be taken not to dismiss their utility in mobilising community solidarity on the basis of issues which unite rather than divide i.e. relations with the exterior, government etc. The existence of such groups provides the building blocks for alternatives to classic development theories as well as providing the structures necessary for the decentralisation of government authority. However if such groups are to play an effective role then the development of interlinkages between them in the form of alliances, networks, federations and unions will be essential. Not only will this provide an exchange of comparative knowledge and information between groups (cross-fertilisation) but also it will give such movements the weight and strength necessary to influence government policy and be involved in the planning process.

The failure of much of the cooperative movement in Africa, however, points to several important lessons for the future. First, is that different situations require different types and sizes of group; a uniform prescription is not possible or desirable. Secondly that unless group members gain greater advantages, often economic, from being a member of a group than if they remained outside the group then that structure is doomed to failure. Finally such groups cannot be imposed upon populations from the outside. What is required is the strengthening of existing methods of cooperation and reciprocity generally with those groups that share a set of interests and a certain social coherence. This means being much more imaginative in defining what constitutes a group and much less insistent on such groups following some norm in terms of their structure. It also means working at a pace determined by the groups themselves rather than establishing structures within timescales fixed by some project format.

1.4. The state and external assistance

If successful group formation is to occur the role of the state becomes fundamental. The state can undermine or repress such initiatives or create the framework in which they can flourish without coopting them. Usually, however, the state's position is ambiguous with a variety of views prevailing, often with marked differences between central and local government and between the government and the administration or bureaucracy. What is clear is that the state will continue to provide or control services, whether technical, administrative or legal, that other structures cannot provide and that will be, in many cases, vital to the survival of community level groups. Less directly the state will also determine whether such groups have the political space in which to function. Increasingly in the 1990s the continued insistence by the major multilateral financial institutions on structural adjustment policies in Africa will require the state to provide the institutional framework and policies that will allow non-governmental bodies to take over certain functions. The danger of NGOs substituting themselves for the state are therefore real. Careful analysis is required on a case by case basis of how best those parts of the state that function in the interests of the poor can be harnessed whilst attempting to alter those parts that function against their interest.

The dependency of most African states on Official Development Assistance and deference to international banking institutions means that they have little freedom of choice. Export oriented policies, despite tumbling commodity prices, will continue to be encouraged to the detriment of inner-directed economic development thus perpetuating dependency on world markets that have proved to be most fickle. At the same time it is ironic that structural adjustment is providing the space for non-governmental groupings to develop whilst also enabling certain African regimes to justify authoritarianism on the grounds of fiscal responsibility.

It is therefore incumbent on international and local NGOs to point out these contradictions in policy and its effect on the poor whilst providing the legitimacy necessary to emergent groups. At present NGOs are in a favoured position currently with bilateral and multilateral funders. If this is simply seen by NGOs as a means of increasing revenue, rather than an opportunity to play an enlarged lobbying role, then a great opportunity will have been lost.

The outcome of the current trends of external assistance and finance to Africa is the withering of the state and an increase in local non-governmental structures coupled with greater conditionality, increased dependency and a concomitant danger of this providing a convenient alibi for the abuse of power by the state. This is increasingly recognised by local and international NGOs who have formed alliances, networks and coordinating bodies in order to give added strength to individual NGOs to fight their corner as well creating international platforms to discuss these issues with governments and donor agencies. However the poor, vulnerable and unorganised are often forgotten in this process. In order to gain access to the support that exists requires a certain level of knowledge of procedure, a degree of organisational strength and resources that are not always available to those that are often simply the objects of discussion or charitable intentions. There is a need, particularly in areas affected by rapid social change - where local structures are weakest - to protect, nurture and reinforce community level institutions and those acting on their behalf in order that they might gain access to the rich diversity of support that exists.

1.5 NGOs

The World Bank report cited above notes that half of the completed rural development projects which they have financed in Africa have failed. At the same time we should recognise that many of the grassroots projects supported by NGOs have also failed. Despite the reputation gained by NGOs in initiating effective and participatory programmes the results do not always justify this. This is often because of a lack of any systematic analysis of who the poor are and why they come to be in that position and, despite the rhetoric, the lack of involvement of the poor in such an analysis and in the design, execution and evaluation of "projects" established to overcome their poverty. In addition similar mistakes have been repeated over and over again as the climate of competition between NGOs has precluded open and effective discussion of what has failed and how best such lessons can be disseminated and learnt by others.

In recent years various international organisations have attempted to overcome some of the problems associated with the lack of involvement of those that they wish to support in decision making by decentralising functions and a limited amount of power to local offices or even local NGOs. However one of the major difficulties of this has been the problem of developing local accountability i.e. how can these

organisations be sure that the person or group to which a certain degree of power has been given is any more accountable to the people they aim to help than they were? How can objective accountability systems be established when some of those who might be a part of that process have something to gain from it?

Nobody has the answers. However there is a danger that the difficulties that have been encountered up to now will be used as an excuse not to proceed further. It is crucial that bolder, more experimental steps are taken to permit a real devolution of power to the groups and individuals that are confronted by the problems outlined above and that such a process is carefully evaluated and the lessons and mistakes made widely available.

2. ACORD

2.1. Lessons to date

ACORD, an international consortium² of 20 European and Canadian NGOs, was created in order to work in those parts of Africa where local structures were weak or non-existent, to benefit from the collective experience and fund-raising potential of its membership and to establish an international platform to discuss development issues. The creation and reinforcement of local institutions has therefore always been at the heart of ACORD's programmes in Africa, even if in retrospect some of those institutions were not the most appropriate in facilitating participatory development and even if the institutional and funding structure of the consortium has not always proved to be appropriate to realising this goal. The Ngara District Development Organisation (NDDO) in Tanzania, the AMADI institute in Southern Sudan, certain cooperatives, village groups and pastoral associations in Northern Mali, the Unions of village groups in Burkina Faso, ARAMET in Rwanda, over 200 mutual savings groups in Uganda are all examples of organisations that have come about through, in part, ACORD's support. They all have their problems - they are not perfect - but they have the advantage of existing and therefore the possibility of improving. In addition they provide ACORD with a rich experience of errors and

2

The Consortium was formed in 1976 through the merging of LACOD (International Agency for Cooperation in Development) and Euro-Action Sahel.

successes that informs our work elsewhere notably in terms of providing the correct balance between institutional support and technical support in promoting activities that permit a degree of self-reliance.

This experience becomes even more pertinent given the changes on the African continent outlined above. Africa is looking for partners that will allow it to recapture the development process but is constrained by decisions and policies that are not determined by Africa. In the same way micro-organisations are looking for support that will help them become self-reliant, not more dependent on donor support and not mere actors in a play that has already been written for them on a stage they have not designed. Apart from technical, organisational and financial support this means political backing and protection where necessary.

One of the main lessons that ACORD has learnt is that its present institutional set up is not appropriate if it is to continue promoting the interests of the poor. Its accountability remains to its funders and members who in turn are accountable to their own boards and public. There is no mechanism whereby the consortium is also accountable to those with whom we work. In addition its decision making, management, support and platform for debate on development issues are too far and too alienated from its work in Africa and the short-term nature of its funding is contradictory to the long-term objectives that have been set. Finally, and some have argued the most damning indictment of all, is the lack of representation of any African individuals or organisations within the consortium structure.

A further weakness has been the failure of ACORD to learn fully from its experiences in one programme to the benefit of another and transmit these experiences to its membership. Neither has it always profited from the members' own successes and failures. The consortium has therefore often failed to utilise its diverse skills to the benefit of Africa.

2.2 The next decade

The 1990s will see a complete revision of ACORD's structures in order to better respond to the realities and complexities of poverty, empowerment and partnership.

This will include:

- 1. the progressive movement of London management functions to Regional Offices and the programmes,*
- 2. the establishment of local boards and committees made up of ACORD's partners and other individuals to which the programmes and regional offices will become more accountable,*
- 3. the development of a southern arm of the consortium made up of such Boards and committees which determine policy with the northern part of the consortium through an enlarged Board and Assembly,*
- 4. in the medium term the London office would remain for the purposes of fundraising, information gathering and dissemination, advocacy work and providing a platform for its northern members.*

In Africa this will mean concentrating on areas of rapid change; areas effected by environmental degradation, urban centres, areas effected by increases in population and resultant land pressure, and areas of political and military insecurity, and, within those areas, working in zones with local groups that are weak and where support similar to that offered by ACORD is not available. It will mean working more consistently with the poor and therefore, necessarily and centrally with women. It will mean reinforcing existing organisations and encouraging, but not speeding up, alliances and groupings between them. It will mean not only providing technical and financial support but providing them with the space in which to grow. In the past ACORD could guarantee a certain degree of protection through its international nature. This asset will continue to be vital but should increasingly stem from an African internationalism, as the southern arm of the consortium develops, backed by northern partners. ACORD will also introduce local groups to all possible support networks that exist and help them, if required, to link in to them on an equal basis.

The result will be a loose alliance of groups that face similar problems and have taken similar steps to resolving them, that feed off each other, support each other and service each other. Whether they choose to be part of an enlarged and modified consortium will be their prerogative and will depend on the northern members' ability to respond to their needs. In the first instance they would be grouped under

the ACORD umbrella, in the long term it is likely that the constituent parts, as they grow in strength, would adapt, modify or disband this in line with change as it affects them and Africa rather than in line with institutional imperatives. It is in fact a bold step, putting the consortium's future in the hands of those representative of the poor instead of those who rely on ACORD's monthly pay cheque. ACORD's relevance to the poor will determine its survival.

In the North this will mean creating conditions for sustainable devolution. In the first few years this will involve establishing the financial viability of the southern consortium, the identification and training of African staff for the regional offices, preparing policies for improved accountability and discussing with the membership the legal and institutional changes that will be required. In the longer term the role and functions of the London office will be determined by the South. If it was found that northern partners and members could satisfactorily represent and respond to the needs, in terms of fundraising and information supply, of the southern consortium it might be that the London office could eventually be phased out. If not then the South would have to work out if it was worth spending a proportion of its revenue in maintaining a northern office.

2.3. An additional role

It is widely recognised that many of the problems facing Africa are caused by decisions taken by governments and institutions in the North and that NGOs have an important role in influencing government policy and educating the public as to the real causes of world poverty. It has always been argued that ACORD's members or other specialised bodies were better placed to undertake this sort of work and ACORD should simply pass on whatever first hand information it had from its field operations to those that were more qualified to play a lobbying or educational role. ACORD has therefore not been set up to play such a role either in terms of personnel or resources. This, in the past, seems to have been an eminently sensible division of labour; however there are perhaps in the 1990s two changes that are likely to occur in this area.

Firstly is the need for supra-national pressure groups to be established in the light of the development of the European community and the effect that other international organisations have on African development (IMF, World Bank, U.N. etc). ACORD as a secular consortium would seem to have a certain potential in fulfilling that role.

Secondly African partners are rightly saying that northern NGOs must take a more courageous political stance in their own countries and regions on issues such as sanctions and debt and in addition must stop presenting Africa as a helpless basket case just because this is the most effective way of raising cash. As ACORD develops into a truly international consortium it could provide the means by which northern partners were held accountable to Africa on how they portrayed that continent and how they explained the causes of problems that it faced. They might then together develop strategies and plans of action that would be more effective, more acceptable to both parties and would carry more weight for being representative of more than a narrow northern focus.

In order for this to be achieved ACORD will be developing, if funding permits, a small Policy and Research Unit that will have the following complementary functions:

- 1) developing the capacity of local partners to measure the impact of macro-economic policies on communities so as to build up empirical evidence on positive and negative effects,
- 2) to gather this information and synthesize it into research and policy papers and thus fix the agenda for discussions with policy makers on the basis of what Africa is really experiencing rather than on the basis of what market, liberal or marxist ideology thinks that it is experiencing,
- 3) to share methodologies for measuring impact amongst African partners so that they might, through the ACORD platform, analyse and present their feelings themselves instead of depending on Northern agencies do it for them.

2.4. An enlarged consortium

The future of ACORD as an integrated whole made up of an equal partnership between southern and northern constituents will depend on the willingness of the current membership to handover a certain degree of their power and provide the resources necessary to build a southern arm to the consortium. It will mean fighting for the idea within their own organisations, with their own governments and at the level of multilateral institutions on behalf of ACORD. It will mean determining where the future power and management will lie for each set of objectives that it wishes to

achieve as well as fixing limits to the role of the North in determining activities in the South and the role of the South in determining activities in the North. It will mean developing joint policy positions but letting those without the financial resources have a say. It means developing a new type of partnership that recognises that it is dealing with resolving the problems of people's control over their own lives; a problem affecting the North as much as the South. If development education and advocacy fail to provoke changes in those policies with which people in the North fundamentally disagree then the way that political systems in the North function is also a contributory cause of the international decisions affecting Africa. The future will need to be based not on models of development, which when they fail blame the fact that reality didn't behave as predicted but on rediscovering the reality of people and how they relate to each other.

2.5 Steps to be taken

In practical terms this will mean creation of Regional offices in Ouagadougou for West Africa³, Kigali for the Kagera basin, Khartoum or Mogadishu for the Horn and eventually an office in Southern Africa might become necessary. In the first instance they would be support units for current ACORD programmes providing technical and methodological input as well as making information available on comparative experiences. As these offices build up regional accountability mechanisms to the programmes, to advisory committees and boards, then London management could be devolved to these offices and the national Representative offices could be lightened. One of the first changes that this would bring to northern decision making bodies in ACORD is the movement of much of the "technical" verification undertaken by the Programme Committee (P.C.) to Regional P.Cs. The members' P.C. would retain a function of ensuring that programmes proposed correspond to individual country policy and to ACORD's mandate. In the longer term as local partners and institutions are welcomed into the southern arm of the consortium then Board and Assembly procedures would be correspondingly modified.

3

This office has now been established following ACORD's Board approval in March 1990

In addition given the diversity of members interests, specialisation and funding potential it will be necessary to cluster sub-groupings of the consortium around clearer geographic or sectoral focii (i.e. the Sahel, urbanisation, development education and lobbying etc). This would have the advantage of a greater involvement of the membership in those areas where they have a particular experience and interest. The problems of compromise and finding the lowest common denominator in order to satisfy a diverse number of interests could thus be avoided. Such "mini-consortia" or special interest groups would also bear some of the responsibility of raising funds that had to be found outside the membership through their own network of supporters and funders.

Finally this process requires the political will on behalf of the membership to open up the consortium to African partners on an equal basis. It requires them to be clearer about what support (financial, moral, technical) they can bring to ACORD over multi-year periods and what they expect of their consortium. It requires a greater degree of trust and solidarity. Above all it requires an acceptance that this will all take time, that errors will be committed and adaptations will prove necessary. ACORD in the past has been criticised for not being innovative enough, for not taking risks, for not doing those things that the membership cannot do. During 1990s ACORD proposes to research a process that is innovative, that is inherently risky and that the members could not undertake yet. For by the year 2000 it should mean that ACORD is a consortium of African institutions that has symbiotic links with the north but is in addition accountable to those most affected by social change.

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