



International
Institute for
Environment and
Development

African NGO
Networks

NGO File Essay Series no. 1

The Voluntary Sector and Sustainable Development in Africa: NGO Dilemmas

Bolaji Ogunseye

1997

The Voluntary Sector and Sustainable Development in Africa: NGO Dilemmas

by Bolaji Ogunseye

April 1997

Bolaji Ogunseye is Associate Programme Director, African NGO Networks Programme, at IIED. The views expressed in this essay are his, and do not necessarily represent the official position of IIED.

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Background	3
African NGOs: Context of Being	5
The Model Dilemma: From 'Development' to 'Sustainable Development'	7
NGOs and Which 'Civil Society'?	11
Inside the NGO: Dilemmas of their Way of Being	14
Between NGOs: Challenge of Networking and Coalition-Building	18
NGOs, Communities and People's Organisations: An Uneasy and Potentially Useful Relationship?	20
In concluding	22

The NGO File Essay Series

Many development practitioners see and learn a lot in their 'profession'. This is especially true of field officers, who gain invaluable hands-on experience in their daily work. But few ever get an opportunity to **express** what they see, feel, and know from repeated involvement both in similar and varied project and programme activities.

In Africa, in particular, many voluntary sector activists and development practitioners are weighed down both directly by the challenges of development, and indirectly by the demands of responding to them. In the face of the pressures of implementing projects, and meeting donor deadlines and commitments (often involving answering to multiple donors), finding time to reflect **coherently** on what they know and confront daily is a luxury which many African NGO practitioners cannot afford. Even NGO meetings, seminars and workshops afford rather limited opportunity in this regard. Usually slated to last three days, and with the need to give the greatest number of participants an opportunity to contribute, participants are generally only able to render a 'short-hand' account of their experience.

Many feel the same issues and points are repeated in more or less the same way at most meetings - the same development constraints, the same challenges, the same donor problems, the same policy problems, same NGO problems. Everyone knows a lot, but hardly ever gets to be able to say it all, and say it as it is felt. The nearest some get to **saying it as it is**, is in the relaxed company of fellow NGO types, in the drinking bar, or at private home visits.

The **NGO FILE** essay series is introduced as a vehicle for African NGO practitioners to 'voice openly' many of those things that they know and talk about privately, concerning why development just isn't working in Africa. Or why donors may be part of the problem. Or why one feels the more one does 'NGO development', the more it all feels empty, at least in so far as one's mission is concerned. More importantly, the publication wishes to **deliberately encourage** African NGO contributors to **express** all they have seen, learnt and even suspected in the course of work, without feeling constrained by a need to know the 'relevant' development theories, models, and paradigms. Nor do they need to belabour every page of their essay with the usual undergrowth of references and notes based on the correct 'literature review' as would be demanded of an academic series. The **NGO FILE** is intended to provide practitioners who know, see, feel and learn daily in the field an opportunity to **JUST SAY IT!**

IIED's **African NGO Networks Programme** plans to commission an **NGO FILE** essay every six months. This first publication in the series presents a 'helicopterish' overview of a number of issues familiar to NGO practitioners in Africa. It does not claim great depth. That is left for the subsequent essays, to be written every six months by the men and women who daily confront the daunting challenges of **sustainable development** in the continent.

The Voluntary Sector and Sustainable Development in Africa: NGO Dilemmas

Introduction

Many development analysts have concluded that the 1980s were 'a lost decade' for Africa. This has been despite a decade-long regime of economic restructuring administered on the continent through the religiously enforced code of market forces and liberalisation. 'Non Governmental Organisations', (NGOs) which were established in massive numbers by Africans and international agencies during the decade, were an important part of this new reality in the continent's development experience.

But almost a decade later, Africa's development conditions and prospects are today regarded as even more despairing than those of the 'lost decade'. What went wrong, and what is wrong? The notion of an irredeemable state failure in African development has more or less become an ideological given, at least as promoted and reinforced by the multilateral institutions and dominant economies who shape the 'new' world order. If state failure is a foregone conclusion, and private, non-governmental actors have, since the 1980s, become the acknowledged and enthusiastically supported agents of change, why have they failed to shift African development in more encouraging directions?

In particular, why has Africa's NGO sector not made much difference to the continuing, continent-wide malaise? Why, for instance, is the 'institutional voice' of NGOs virtually unheard during major emergencies, policy or political crises in African countries? Why, unlike the business and manufacturing sector, the military, and other sectoral vested interests, do NGOs fail to influence the annual national budgeting process? Questions about NGO limitations merit consideration because, in spite of a hardly impressive record to match the massive support they have received, increasing rather than decreasing expectations are placed on these 'voluntary' and 'non-governmental' development agents.

The essential 'attitude' of this essay is to raise questions and underline dilemmas facing the NGO mission in Africa. Answers and 'solutions' feature very rarely. But it has tried to communicate hope. A hope of instigating a critical look at the dilemmas raised by the new reality of NGO involvement in African development. It further hopes that in so doing, serious debate and reflection can be provoked on many of the fundamental challenges posed for NGOs and the other actors that influence their work. And hopefully, the questions and dilemmas highlighted will help to stretch the reader's concern beyond the immediate or daily imperatives, jargons, phrase-making and assumptions of development professionalism. All this without killing off the possibility of hope in African NGO capacity to undertake necessary and urgent remedial measures to respond to their limitations as potential contributors to sustainable development.

Apart from a background and concluding sections, the essay considers the following aspects of the NGO challenge in Africa:

- African NGOs' context of being;
- Dilemma of the sustainable development model;
- Problems of NGOs' role in civil society;
- The African NGO 'in-house';
- Challenges of African NGO networking and coalition-building;
- African NGOs and grassroots constituencies.

By highlighting African NGO limitations and dilemmas, it is by no means intended to cast a condemnatory blanket over all voluntary organisations grappling with the challenges of sustainable development in the continent. The essay is presented with a full sense of awareness of the tremendous efforts and incredibly selfless sacrifices made by a few of the men and women who work in, and manage the affairs of these organisations. Some of these few are in fact, eminently effective in pursuing their mission, and do achieve relatively impressive and meaningful results in the face of a wide range of constraints. Particular mention must be made of the high quality efforts of some African environment and development research NGOs, networks, and service NGOs, such as 'KENGO' (Kenya), 'ZERO' (Southern Africa), 'MWENGO', (East and Southern Africa), 'IRED', (Africa), NGOServe (Nigeria), 'ISPEC' (francophone Africa). These and a few other intermediary groups of their kind deploy the best of Africa's human and intellectual resource in the service of the continent and its people. This incomplete list of examples of a 'few of the few' among Africa's NGO frontliners is intended only to underline that African people, self-organised into real institutions, do mobilise in response to the continent's sustainable development challenges.

Finally, all reference to 'Africa' will mean sub-Saharan Africa, and 'African NGOs' will mean those owned and directed or managed by Africans in Africa. While the essay's ultimate intention is to convey an idea that African NGOs are not bad news for Africa's sustainable development prospects, it has posed questions which clearly underline that they are yet to become the good news which the common wisdom of donors and development agencies presumes them to be.

Background

Debt payment to Northern banks and governments, and to multilateral creditors, leveraged by structural adjustment programmes, has constituted the most significant influence on the process of development in the South since the late 1970s. The ideological environment for the acceleration and deepening of the adjustment process was provided by the adoption of neo-liberal, market-oriented policies in the major Western economies. The key boost came from the USA, Germany and Britain, where leaders with explicitly pro-market and anti state-intervention convictions had been voted into power between 1978 and 1980.

In Africa, post-independence attempts at state-led development, though reasonably successful in some social sectors and in physical capital formation, were largely undermined by economic and institutional ineffectiveness, corruption, and inefficient macro policies. The prevailing reaction against Keynesian macro-policies in the main creditor countries meant that the economic adjustment being recommended to Africa had a strong anti-state underpinning. Control by Northern creditor-countries over the Bretton Woods institutions (mainly the World Bank and IMF) - who supervise debt repayment and adjustment made the process virtually impossible to resist.

Among the actors to achieve prominence in Africa's adjustment environment have been the non-governmental organisations (NGOs). While service NGOs are not an entirely new, post-1980 phenomenon in the continent, they have achieved a rapid growth in numbers, resources deployed and general recognition as development actors since the 1980s. Since African indebtedness appeared to be due mainly to excessive state intervention, over-regulation of enterprise, corruption and inefficient monetary, fiscal and social policies, NGOs and the private business sector were viewed as the more logical, efficient and ideologically suitable alternatives.

The stage was thus set for increased participation by non-state actors. Donors and development agencies believed that along with the private business sector, NGOs would henceforth fill the gap created by restriction of the state's developmental role. NGOs are seen as particularly qualified for this new role: their administration is far less costly compared to the state, they are less bureaucratic, more capable of implementing substantial activities over a far shorter period than government institutions, more operationally flexible, quicker to adopt and adapt to new development policies and strategies, have a grassroots reach, and are more in tune with the needs and realities of excluded socio-economic segments of society.

So who are NGOs?

Perhaps the first issue of interest about NGOs will be the very definition of their status. There is a question concerning the uniqueness of being 'non-governmental'. For are all non-state group-actors in society not 'non-governmental organisations', - private banks,

businesses, the informal sector, the gun-lobby, multinational corporations, including even those who dump toxic wastes in unsuspecting Southern villages?. In what ways then is the fact of being 'non-governmental' automatically synonymous with the objectives of people-centred, sustainable development implicit in NGOs' self-definition and perception?

Several label re-formulations have been adopted by NGOs themselves to address this ambiguity of identity. But even sticking with one of their most ingenious re-formulations - 'NGOs' as 'NGDOs' (non governmental development organisations), the dilemma still persists. After all, the term 'development' (in the context of the dominant modernisation model) also appropriately describes the work of virtually all other sectors named above. The banking sector, for example, is involved in financial development, while a multinational company is concerned with the development of goods and services (especially through their R&D efforts). An identity crisis persists for NGOs in securing a distinctive label which compels clear appreciation of their credentials as change agents and promoters of sustainable development.

Understanding the place of NGOs in African development requires taking a historical look at the sector's evolution in the continent. NGOs came on the scene as a service-providing development agent among the poor in many African countries after World War Two. Mostly religion-based development agencies (mainly church and missionary projects, and less commonly, Islamic agencies), they concentrated on supporting farming, artisanal and other small-scale activities for subsistence among the poor in their membership. Rarely did this early development assistance include activities with any significant socio-economic impact or broad development objectives.

In addition to the absence of a consciously self-applied sectoral label - 'NGO' - Africa's pioneer voluntary agencies did not operate from a self-perception as representatives or advocates of the 'civil society', the poor and marginalised in a society-wide context. They were largely altruistic workers within the spatial and parochial context of their own religious family.

Prior to the 1980s, the entire voluntary sector and its work remained generally an unknown quantity in Africa's development process. This 'NGO facelessness' was made possible by the post-1945, world-wide wave of economic expansion, which also swept through the newly independent countries of Africa. The post-war international economic boom featured increased opportunities for employment and for social welfare provision, subsidised education and public services, massive, public-financed, physical capital creation, rapid upward mobility and material accumulation for the educated classes, low energy costs and robust export earnings for the African states.

In such an atmosphere of widespread, government-induced, socio-economic contentment, no voluntary development actor felt any need to be celebrated as 'non-governmental', even if they were already so in reality. The 1980s were to change all that. As real and imagined evidence appeared everywhere of the developmental failure of the African state, coupled

with the mountains of state-incurred debt, plus a partly inaccurate tendency to blame the state for all development ills of the post-colonial period, it became quite respectable and desirable to be 'non-governmental'. Moreover, the spectacular collapse of the Soviet statist project had combined well with other evidence to facilitate the rise of the non-governmental sector. As one of the newly recognised guarantors of future African (and world) sustainable development, NGOs became, in some quarters, somewhat ideologically-twinning with the private business sector, to form the anchor of a non state-led development.

African NGOs: Context of Being

The process of national development - as a deliberate societal undertaking - and the NGO sector, are both new, post-1945 imports into much of Africa. Neither is an organic outgrowth of the continent's socio-economic and historical experience. While the state's role in Africa's developmental failure has been well analysed, questions concerning NGO limitations during the last two decades have not been sufficiently raised, especially by Africans. For, in spite of its post-1980 expansion and increased recognition, the sector remains a relatively ineffectual actor in Africa's development process, lacking a critical mass in capacity, macro-influence, autonomy of choice and action, and an effective connection with Africa's grassroot populations. Many NGOs are weak in agenda formulation and articulation, and lack an appropriate knowledge base for much of their action.

These limitations reflect many of the fundamental contradictions and dilemmas in the general context in which NGOs exist, as well as in the dynamics of their 'way of doing'. One of the sector's most fundamental dilemmas relates to the 'end point' of its intervention in African development. Relevant questions in this regard include: what is the nature of the NGO mission in African development? Are they engaged in a 'surgical' intervention, which requires them, as do surgeons, to either stop as soon as the operation is successfully performed, or to acknowledge a failure of the operation, and pronounce the patient terminally ill? Or, will NGOs continue indefinitely to tinker at the edges of mainstream development, as currently driven by the state and business? In the complex and dynamic terrain of sustainable development, where should voluntary sector intervention end, and how do NGOs recognise such a point when reached? Indeed, can sustainable development be achieved without NGO intervention?

There are several dimensions to these dilemmas. For example, one often hears some 'progressive' NGOs proudly declare at workshops and conferences, how they have successfully achieved or built a 'withdrawal strategy' in their programmes. NGO leaders who cannot report such achievements listen in admiration to those who can. The questions and discussion usually raised in this connection clearly underline the importance attached to the objective. Yet, isn't there also general agreement among the most experienced field practitioners that the best guarantee of effective NGO contribution to sustainable development is a readiness by the change agents to stay with the process, learn by doing, be

flexible with objectives (including acceptance that objectives may change during the process), and most importantly, to always cultivate a long-term view of development gains?

Clearly, more debate is needed regarding whether or not NGO intervention has become, or should become a **structurally permanent feature** of Africa's development process. Post-1980 rhetoric by donors, development agencies and NGO practitioners tends to assume this to be already the case. But why it should be so is hardly explained.

Another background contradiction conditioning African NGOs' 'context of being' is an ideological kind. The pace and objectives of post-1980 NGO expansion in Africa have largely been shaped by development concerns articulated in the North. While this reality is in itself problematic, it also implies an almost impossible challenge for African NGOs, in terms of perceptions of the success or failure of their mission. For while the expansion and impact of the NGO sector in the North occurred within the context of a largely favourable, post-1945 Keynesian policy consensus, the African NGOs' experience since the 1980s has been the opposite.

NGO sector expansion and impact in the North were no doubt facilitated by an ideological environment which featured **state-led empathy and social welfare assistance** to the poor and marginalised. Macro-policy response to the 1930s depression cohered largely with American voluntary sector efforts. Similarly, a 'large-hearted' Keynesian macro-policy environment in post-war Europe was boosted by Marshall Aid, resulting in significant coherence between NGO mission and government social policy. Post-1980 African NGO expansion, on the contrary, has been occurring within an ideologically and socially mean-spirited policy environment. The North-sponsored adjustment policies imposed by the World Bank and IMF on today's debt-paying African economies, constitute nothing short of an **'enemy position'** to that of NGOs.

While the state is urged to cut education spending, NGOs are funded to promote literacy and functional education; while the state drastically cuts health spending in areas that most benefit the poorest, NGOs are supported to promote primary health care and fight the spread of AIDS; while government initiates policies that create and deepen unemployment, NGOs are supposed to implement employment-creation projects; while the state is restricting expenditure for infrastructure development and maintenance, NGOs struggle to promote an integrated rural development which requires support infrastructure on a scale which only the state can provide. It is a depressingly long list of policy contradictions, which does very little to enhance the NGO mission. This background policy problem for NGOs cannot be overstated, especially because the African state, in spite of post-1980 rhetoric, remains the largest actor and source of impact on all other actors in the continent's development process. In many countries, African NGOs are by and large development 'midgets' pushing up an impossibly steep hill to mitigate the impact of the policies and actions of Africa's development 'giants'.

This problem is also linked to the sheer scale of expectation with which the African voluntary sector is saddled by the international aid community. Compared to all other development actors - the state, the formal private and the informal business sectors - NGOs constitute the smallest development sector in virtually all African countries. Yet, the highest and most ambitious expectations in sustainable development are attached to them. The frustration resulting from this mismatch naturally fuels the ever-increasing and seemingly intractable challenge of NGO capacity and institutional development in the region.

The Model Dilemma: From 'Development' to 'Sustainable Development'

A reasonable degree of consensus exists among development practitioners and agencies on sustainable development, as the current development model is considered to be no longer compatible with the integrity of the earth's ecosystem. In international aid circles, NGOs are increasingly viewed as the uncontested moral spearhead of sustainable development. In Africa, they are the supposed change agents who will deploy advocacy (with government, donors and business) and programme support (with the poor, marginalised etc) to spread the sustainable development message and facilitate its acceptance. But this position assumes away the need to clarify the conditions under which NGOs will accomplish the task. The need for such clarification is compelling, given general acknowledgement that sustainable development is a complex, dynamic, multi-dimensional, locally-shaped and conflictual process. Some dilemmas underline the NGO challenge in this regard.

The first concerns the demonstration-effect of the currently dominant modernisation model. Because the mainstream development policies and actions of the state and business in Africa are overwhelmingly geared in pursuit of the unsustainable but much admired modernisation benefits enjoyed in the North, African NGOs do not operate within a genuine, national sustainable development strategy, which can promote their sustainable development efforts among grassroot populations. Most African governments are still working towards the 'old' model, the compliant official rhetorics in favour of sustainable development notwithstanding.

Secondly, NGOs face the agency dilemma. The attraction of, and desire for the symbols and tangible benefits of the existing modernisation model are very powerful factors in the perception of development by the overwhelming majority of Africans, especially the educated classes, including NGO practitioners. This fact is underlined by the status, high esteem and the pressures/demands of the 'economy of affection' attached by kin, clan, neighbours, and the extended family to individuals who have 'succeeded' in terms of the dominant modernisation model.

As change agents of sustainable development, NGO practitioners face an implicit difficulty in this regard. For how will they, whose modern consumption patterns, cars, overseas

travels, socio-economic and material advantages, command admiration and represent a symbol of success among the poor, persuade the same admiring poor about the great virtues of a new and different model, based on low-input, low energy consumption, recycling, cycling and walking? Far from being admired for cultivating a sustainable development lifestyle, an African freshly graduated with a Ph.d, or returned from 'overseas', for example, would be considered an unmitigated failure by kin, friends and foes alike, if he chooses to cycle to work, recycles all items around the house, wears decent but very simple clothing, and generally shuns the over-consumption of the 'big man's' lifestyle. The Yorubas of southwestern Nigeria have a name for such 'deviants': *alakori akada... o s'aju koi-koi* (a mean and worthless intellectual, with a rather unfriendly mien). For even when enthusiasm is expressed by the poor for the low-key objectives of sustainable development, it is often more a matter of necessity than of choice. Any notion that Africa's poor and marginalised do not particularly care about many of the material benefits of modernisation, and would be largely satisfied with an appropriate and well-designed 'grassroot development' is a highly questionable one.

Because NGO advocacy of sustainable development appears rather like a great cause without practising adherents - even among its professional promoters - a key challenge is posed: can African NGOs demonstrate to Africa's poor the benefits of sustainable development through the example of their own sustainable living, work and consumption patterns? The same question will of course be relevant in certain aspects of North-South relations.

Thirdly, African NGOs face a 'philosophical dilemma' in reconciling themselves with two supposed moral enemies of people-centred, development voluntarism - politics and profit. While it is largely meaningless to claim, as do some NGOs, that they are 'non-political', NGOs' self description as 'not-for-profit' poses quite a different and serious dilemma, not least for the sector's capacity to meet expectations (or rhetoric?) that it should become a mainstream actor in Africa's development. With the addition of more demanding and macro-politically bolder items like democratisation, human rights, policy advocacy, environmental protection, good governance, gender, rights of the girl-child, and equity to NGOs' portfolio of concerns, their requirements in resource (especially financial), managerial and institutional capacity have increased.

But far from growing with these new commitments, Northern funding flows to African NGOs have tended to decline in the 1990s. Barring government and formal business sector funds, what should NGOs do, having come to depend almost totally on Northern funding? To what extent can they undertake local income-generation without succumbing to the imperatives of mainstream profit-making? More importantly, what should be the balance of relationship between altruism and profit-making in contemporary times? Although a substantial financial cushion and independence among pioneer voluntary agencies made profit-seeking largely unnecessary for them, does and should this principle still hold in today's Africa, where the voluntary sector's portfolio of societal concerns has greatly expanded?

Needless to say, activities like sale of NGO newsletters, charity walk, charity marathon race, charity football matches, conference admission fees, etc, can make a modest contribution to an NGO's monetary base at the organisation level. But in the face of the sector's expanded agenda, these efforts constitute no more than tokenism. For without the huge levels of disposable, independent resources that enabled the pioneer voluntary agencies to achieve very modest, poverty alleviation objectives among pockets of marginalised communities, how can today's NGOs, almost totally dependent on external handouts for even recurrent budgets, meet the financial challenges of a more comprehensive, sustainable development agenda?

A fourth difficulty for African NGO role relates to the objective of **capacity and institutional development**. Given the increasing scope of their development intervention, the validity of the NGO capacity and institutional strengthening objective can hardly be in question. However, they face several dilemmas regarding the kind of capacity and institution building sought, how best to accomplish it, and who finances the objective.

What kind of capacity building? Since NGO involvement in development is thought and expected to be going 'professional', just what type of preparation, or on-the-job training do practitioners need? Can/should NGO training involve the same critical mass of specialised, coherent and professionally focussed training that one gets to become, for example, a professional in banking, in telecommunications technology, law or medicine?; or should the strength of the NGO sector be precisely that it could pool together properly-trained professionals from a variety of other sectors to create a unique, inter-disciplinary orchestra to meet the diverse, dynamic and complex challenges of sustainable development? If, as seems the case, donor and aid agencies are committed to NGO capacity and institution building as an important objective, then what should be the content and context of the process? If sustainable development is a new agenda requiring a re-orientation of virtually all existing (old model) ways of doing things, of managing equity, of consuming, and of relating to other resources in the earth's ecosystem, then what minimum specialised knowledge base does a person require to become a professional in this sector, which is claimed to be the frontline promoter of a new agenda?

How best to develop NGOs and the capacity they require?

In the overwhelming number of cases, the approach to NGO capacity building is characterised by tokenism, fragmentation and inconsistency, as well as by the lack of a systematised focus. Most importantly, it is an approach fuelled by short-termism, best described as 'the three-day workshop syndrome'.

NGO professionalism is unique in this respect. Because people can secure employment in the sector *without* a prior need to subject themselves (either out of interest, love or need) to a systematised regime of specialised training as an entry requirement, they often have no incentive to stay in the sector when and if better-paid jobs come along in other professions.

In Africa, where many educated people are structurally adjusted out of employment for long periods, entry to NGO work - which thrives on donor funding even in these hard times - is increasingly becoming a 'rootless' affair. Many (not all) African NGO staff (and even some leaders) are transit employees in the sector, fired neither by interest nor by love of the job.

This limitation is partly fuelled by an ad-hoc and 'short-termist' approach to NGO human resource development, which in turn produces a lack of professional commitment in the sector. Not only is high staff turn-over a problem for many NGOs, quality replacement is also difficult, as the many NGOs have to compete fiercely for the committed and competent few. It is particularly wasteful of NGO time and resources when staff who have received some training leave the sector as soon as better-paid employment appears elsewhere.

Is capacity building in the bits-and-pieces form of 3-day workshops really adequate for African NGOs to meet their human resource challenge? The central question is whether or not African NGO practitioners require - as in other sectors - exposure to capacity building over a sustained length of time to achieve basic professional competence, which can be enhanced in the course of practice? Put crudely, why is the '3-day workshop' approach adequate for professional and institutional development in the NGO sector and not in the legal or medical professions, for example? Are NGO capacity building needs (aimed to facilitate sustainable development) less important than those of these other professions? And if the sector's contribution is considered a necessary element for the attainment of sustainable development in Africa, is some standardised critical mass of minimum knowledge not required by the agents of change?

Who funds capacity building for sustainable development, and how?

Enthusiasm for funding NGO capacity development is hardly matched by the great interest expressed in this objective by donors and development agencies. A key problem appears to be the emergency character of the 1980s' NGO boom in Africa. In addition to the anti-state ideological outlook of the period, famines, drought, civil wars and refugees constituted the great engine propelling the 1980s' NGO expansion. As only immediate and at most, medium-term responses were designed to these problems, NGOs, a key agent in the emergency response, have tended to be funded to achieve rapid and concrete benefits for the victims of Africa's crises. 'Action', 'concrete results' and 'the short-term' consequently became the driving principles for much NGO funding in that period. The need for broader and longer-term NGO development objectives began to be seriously acknowledged as a major concern only from the late 1980s.

But faced with a relentless increase in poverty, inequity and continuing environmental degradation in the continent, many donors have persisted, in funding practice, to stick largely to the emergency spirit, in spite of greatly increased rhetoric about a commitment to NGO capacity building, and to a long-term objective of self-transformation and sustainable development in Africa.

The now endemic NGO attachment to the 3-day workshop culture, is structurally linked to donors' reluctance to commit resources to a long-term process of coherent and comprehensive NGO capacity building. Seriously lacking critical mass, existing NGO capacity building efforts, much like NGO development operations, appear able only to **finker with the problem**. Far from any malicious intent, this hesitant funding attitude largely reflects misplaced altruism: Many donors genuinely but wrongly believe that when NGO capacity-building commitments go beyond a few days, the urgent field work required to achieve **concrete results** among the poor and marginalised will be left undone. This attitude, combined with political pressures, tax-payer concerns, and 'donor fatigue' among the Northern public, has created a trend whereby the aid community finds it increasingly easier to fund African NGOs to **act**, and increasingly difficult to fund them to **think and acquire coherent knowledge** about how, and in what context they act.

Perhaps the traditional donor sources will never be able to rise substantially above funding three day workshops. Might it be useful for NGOs to explore the formal business sector for support in this crucial objective? Or even African governments and their multilateral and national agencies? But dilemmas are posed in exploring these potential avenues. NGOs will require modified, even new approaches, and increased professionalism to work effectively with the formal business sector. As for governments and their agencies, how can they fund NGO capacity and institutional development, when structural adjustment largely requires a cutback in state outlays on social sectors like education and training, which are crucial NGO objectives? Moreover, if the intending collaborator happens to be 'non-governmental', in a conflictual spirit, an understandable ego problem arises for the government. So, to what extent can NGOs collaborate with government and still maintain their autonomy?

NGOs and which 'Civil Society'?

A current area of interest for development agencies and donors is the strengthening of 'Civil Society', which aims to facilitate good governance for sustainable development. There is, however, only a vague or approximate idea of precisely what constitutes 'civil society' within the polity. It tends to be described as everything and every other interest group in society apart from the state. It is sometimes also considered to be the third element of a three-dimensional social formation, the other two being the state and the market. Some have even claimed that civil society comprises only the NGOs, grassroot groups, people's organisations, the poor and the marginalised.

Although notions of the exact constitutive elements of civil society remain imprecise, most development professionals and agencies feel little discomfort in declaring NGOs as its key agent and advocate. While this claim no doubt facilitates the adoption of NGOs as an operational platform through which development agencies and donors can execute their 'civil society programmes', it nevertheless leaves unanswered many substantive questions

regarding the character of NGO relations with, and advocacy on behalf of the other recognised elements and actors in African civil society.

If civil society covers the 'space' existing outside the state, there is little evidence on the ground that African NGOs loom sufficiently large in that space to be declared its most significant advocate. As indicated above, in virtually all of Africa, the voluntary sector comes a distant fourth in order of development impact, behind the state, formal business and the informal economic sector. It is clear that Africa's service NGOs currently lack the capacity and influence to represent, advocate for, or effectively engage with the formal private sector, the organised professional classes, or the informal sector.

At another level, it is difficult to understand how in practice the NGO sector is linked with business and especially the informal sector to form the supposed anchor of private initiative, which is expected to fuel a market and civil society-driven sustainable development. African NGOs maintain little relationship or functional links with the formal business sector. Also, there is virtually no NGO engagement with Africa's huge informal economic sector, which employs many, provides a wide range of services and significantly affects the lives and livelihoods of the majority of the continent's poor and marginalised. No African NGO strategy is currently known to exist for building a long overdue developmental solidarity with this important sector.

But most importantly, the foundations of the informal sector's development action are distinctly different from those of the voluntary sector. For while the daily efforts of the 'Mama-put' (road side food sellers), and 'Danfos' (mini-bus transporters) of Lagos, Nairobi's 'Matatus' (mass transporters) and 'Jua-kalis' (roadside mechanics/technicians), or Cotonou's 'Ze-mi-jan' (urban motorcycle transporters) are driven by a commercial motivation for profit, African NGOs operate under an increasingly problematic and improperly articulated ethic of altruism and voluntarism. Not for the donor-dependent NGO the hard-nosed calculations of profit and loss, input-cost and sale price that exercise the entrepreneurial mind of the 'Mama put' or 'Matatu' on a daily basis.

Implicit, ideology-driven assumptions linking NGOs with business as a civil society alternative to the state raises further complications. While popular perceptions of the intrinsic principles of 'civil society' are generally 'soft', those associated with the market or business are very different. For example, an important civil society aim is to defend 'consumer rights' against 'big business'. Also, an emphasis on group or community action, equity, collaboration and social bridge-building, differences in social status, material means, level of formal education, power relations between individuals etc - makes the civil society the ultimate arena for promoting the rights and liberties of the many, against the constant possibility of abuse by powerful minority interests like the state and multinationals.

Apart from these contradictions, the 'progressive' and 'modernising' character of NGO action in civil society can sometimes create irreconcilable differences between them and other elements even within their favoured grassroot constituency. Policy and world-view

differences may pitch some NGOs against religion-based development agencies, who sometimes hinge their action on controversial doctrinal perceptions. Or against traditional authorities upholding female genital mutilation, or the highly exploitative village or community money-lenders, whose activities perpetuate dependency and powerlessness among the ultra poor.

The above points underline some of the difficulties of assuming too much NGO catalytic potential in a non-state partnership, aimed at a market-driven civil society dynamism in Africa. Arguably, African governments recognise this misreading of NGO potential, often playing along with donors and international agencies, in the hope that the rhetoric can be sufficiently mistaken for the reality, without a significant disturbance of the status-quo. In fact, a cynical view is expressed by some African development analysts to the effect that the 'civil society' agenda is no more than another passing, developmental fashion, created and promoted by the aid business and the World Bank. The underlying hope, it is argued, is that Africa's 'civil society' (i.e people's organisations, communities and business) will help mop up the impact of the socio-economic tension, human suffering and developmental crisis unleashed on the continent by a North-enforced regime of debt payment and structural adjustment. If successful, this will remove the need for any significant softening of the rigid stance of the London and Paris Clubs, the World Bank and IMF on the crippling conditionalities of structural adjustment.

To fulfill expectations of an active NGO role in strengthening civil society, African NGOs need to articulate and implement strategies for their own self-development as a sector, and to define more clearly the nature of their actual and potential collaboration with all important actors in African development. Key questions will include:

- what aspects of development is the state best positioned to undertake alone?; and what background strategies might different civil society elements use in influencing such state-dominated functions in sustainable directions?
- what aspects of sustainable development are best undertaken in collaboration between the state and other actors, especially the NGOs?
- what development roles can best be left to the private business sector, with only minimum regulatory functions by the state?
- how can NGOs effectively influence the pervasive hand of the state, and the enormous market power of the business sector towards redistributive and equity-enhancing goals, which are supportive of the self-transforming efforts of the poor and marginalised, and which promote sound environmental practices?

Unless and until African NGOs better understand and exploit the possibilities of interface across these different discretionary levels and roles in the development process, their potential to contribute to Africa's transformation will remain negligible.

Inside the NGO: dilemmas of their 'way of doing'

To appreciate the internal workings of an African NGO, it is useful to look separately at its three constituent elements - the people (leaders and staff) who operate it; the issues around which they work, including the funding implications; and the employment environment.

The staff

Three categories of personnel can be found in the employ of a typical African NGO. The first is the founder/chief executive. Different routes and motivations can lead to that status. Some African NGOs have been established out of a genuine altruistic urge, even where little or no initial financial resource has been available. In other cases, the motivation is mixed. Some educated individual, a government official for example, having attended a local or international development event (e.g. a 3-day workshop or an international NGO conference), might later conclude that s/he could contribute to sustainable development by starting an NGO, focussing especially on the issue addressed at the event. But the choice of sectoral focus is invariably influenced by the degree of interest expressed by participating donors and agencies in the subject, which gave encouraging signals about potential future support. Expectation of robust financial support encourages a hazy wish to 'help the poor', or respond to some development objectives. For some others unfortunately, the only motivation appears to be straightforwardly pecuniary, an opportunism nurtured by the emergency-driven funding unleashed on African NGOs in the 1980s, often by genuinely motivated donors.

NGO leadership is sometimes group-based, comprising two or more persons brought together by some, or a full combination of the motivations already cited. North-originated NGOs, Church or other religious voluntary groups operating in Africa do not conform to the above leadership categorisation.

The second category is comprised of the middle-level personnel - programme and other technical staff like finance, administration and information officers. Like the founder/chief executive, these usually have higher-level education, with middle class orientation. A usually small number of such staff might be motivated by an interest in the NGO mission. But the majority are straightforward employment seekers. Generally lacking specialised training and sensitivity for voluntary sector work, they have found themselves in an NGO after having unsuccessfully sought employment with the most promising mainstream employers.

The third level of staff comprises the support staff - secretaries, clerks, and other general service employees. With the minimal acceptable education, these persons have sought and got an employment, or have been offered one by the founder or other senior staff, without a basic knowledge of, or particular interest in development, issues.

The interplay of these three types and levels of expectation, motivation and knowledge base inside the NGO, as well as the employment dynamics shaping that interplay, will be discussed below.

The issues tackled, and resources deployed

Typically, Africa's communities comprise groups, people's organisations and individuals striving to meet a variety of livelihood needs and challenges, including unquantifiable but crucial social, psychological and cultural ones. These local efforts are subject to intra-community and wider societal pressures and factors, such as ethnic rivalries and impact of government policies. Most importantly, the communities' life rhythm is underpinned by norms and perceptions of reality, which are couched in familiar local issues and expressed in local language.

It is in this active socio-economic, cultural and psychological space that an NGO intervenes with development support, a contact which by and large brings together two differently-driven attitudes to situation analysis and problem solving. In the all too real world of the poor, a variety of simultaneously-posed challenges have to be addressed together: post harvest loss, erosion, poor health resulting from poor nutritional conditions, lack of responsiveness of local government officials and access to credit. New skills and infrastructure may also be required to enhance local efforts. But the average service NGO, immersed in the shifty, one-issue topicality of the donor and aid process, is often only able to come up with support in one area of seasonal big idea - **capacity-building, OR adult literacy, OR environmental education, OR rights of the girl-child, OR micro-credit**. Once initiated, the sustainability of NGO support to local groups on such topical big issues is often dependent on continued donor interest.

If, as often happens, donor interest in the big idea should wane, not only is the possibility diminished for NGO intervention to enhance **existing** local coping mechanisms, the overwhelming influence of the donor-sponsored big issue and funds accompanying NGO support, often undermines local, pre-intervention strategies and flexibility.

Many African NGO managers recognise the importance of local norms, perceptions and language in defining issues and in managing the development programmes that seek to respond to them. But the influence on them of the overpowering process of Northern agenda-setting and development phrase-making results in attempts to apply pre-packaged 'global' (i.e. Northern) language of currency to define the nuances and complexity of local issues.

It was interesting, for example, to observe how many new African 'environmental NGOs' were formed shortly before, and particularly after the Rio Earth Summit. Even many existing NGOs were moving to de-emphasise 'old' issues around which their core activity had been based before Rio, in favour of 'environmental problems'. A clearly over-excited (sometimes even worrying) tendency emerged at the time which treated Agenda 21 as a new talisman,

with which to define and solve all sustainable development problems. The most discerning of African NGO leaders had quite a hard time reminding donors and fellow practitioners how much existing efforts of Africa's grassroot communities already contained substantial elements of what was newly christened 'Agenda 21', cautioning that it would be a great pity if globally packaged phrase-making was allowed to crowd out the existing language and perceptions of locals on familiar, micro-level reality.

African NGOs also have to live with a tension between the local and the global on another front. Some development issues command fairly easy and straightforward local-global consensus, both in terms of perception and problem definition. Making an issue of extreme poverty, AIDS, immunisation, and food security, for example, is in large part unproblematic. Some others are more complex and potentially conflictual. When African NGOs secure donor funding to tackle issues like reproductive health or sex education, child labour, children's rights, gender, equality of rights across age-groups, intra-community equality and rights of expression, they often realise that the degree of programme success or failure in the field depends significantly on the sensitivity and skill they can bring to bear in managing the tension between local and global perceptions of these issues.

This dilemma is sometimes aggravated by NGO presumptions of a modernising dimension to their mission. The average NGO practitioner or project leader, being educated, middle class, and self-consciously representative of trends in the 'global village', has a self-perception as an agent of the new, poised to develop the old, away from a backward and traditional mode to a modern mind-set. This attitude is partly evident in the fact that the word 'local' (in most English-speaking African countries) is used in a condescending context of cosmopolitan arrogance by educated, middle-class people. It generally refers to the crude, the unsophisticated, unpolished, rural, and needless to say, un-Westernised. The framers of 'Think globally, Act locally' no doubt have genuine intentions, but Africa's NGO field managers know they face a tough battle reconciling the overpowering language and imperatives of 'global' agenda-setting with the requirements of locally-driven, sustainable development among their own people.

The consequences of a 'beggar-provider' relationship pose an intractable problem in this regard. Because African NGOs trail their fund-providers like heat-seeking missiles desperately trailing heat-emitting jets, they are generally unable to commit themselves to significant action to challenge the agenda-setting status quo, even when glaring shortcomings are evident in local application. This frustrating state of affairs has ossified into a permanent (some think far too repetitive) regime of donor-bashing at African NGO gatherings. A love-hate relationship (love the money NOW, hate the LONG-TERM dependency it fosters) has for over a decade characterised African NGO relationship with their Northern supporters.

The critical questions to consider are: can a strategic, Africa-led and serious-minded revival of the decade-old objectives of 'local income generation' and 'dependency reduction' be put in motion? To what extent, and how can the international aid community

be brought to genuinely commit itself to facilitating the attainment of this crucial African development objective?

Employees, not altruistic volunteers

In formal business and other non-voluntary sectors, the rules and principles of employment are clear and straightforward. Not so in the African NGO sector. The sector has been unable clearly to define how much of its employees' work is voluntary, and what is the nature of employment in an NGO. 'Bread and butter' interests like overtime payment, maternity leave, staff pension schemes, promotion and upward professional mobility, on-the-job training, and other critical personnel concerns are at best treated as residual matters to be handled on a case-by-case basis, as, when and if they arise. In many cases, there are no policies on these important personnel matters.

This hazy personnel culture is underlined by an equally hazy employment culture. While an implicit attitude exists that employees are supposed to exhibit a 'voluntary spirit' in NGO employment, staff attitude and expectations are largely those associated with mainstream employment. Many middle-level and general support staff come to NGOs because they are perceived relatively as a boom sector even in the harsh employment climate of structural adjustment. The uncertain and restrictive personnel conditions are hardly ever explained clearly and unequivocally to new entrants.

The uncertainty and shifting topicality of donor funding means that NGO leaders cannot realistically commit themselves to the full range of benefits and conditions operating in mainstream employment sectors. But the most fundamental problem regarding the stability of the NGO employment culture involves a dilemma that both the African NGOs and their Northern financial supporters still need to address head-on: has the NGO sector in Africa come to stay as a fully-fledged profession in development, or is it only a 'surgical' intervention?

All these uncertainties add up to an unstable employment environment, in which the feeling is rife among staff that only the founder or chief executive and a few close lieutenants derive worthwhile professional benefits from NGO work. The material and psychological gains associated with overseas travel, consultancies and participation at conferences are considered very real by those who do not enjoy them. Some NGOs are notorious for being represented exclusively at international seminars and conferences by the same individual, or a small group of senior staff, to the great frustration, not to say envy, of middle level and support staff. In particular, the sense of frustration and denied opportunity among project officers can be great when NGO Directors, not them, attend international conferences at which issues they (project officers) regularly deal with in the field are discussed.

This employment environment is aggravated by the fact that founders/chief executives tend to stay on indefinitely. Where, as it increasingly happens, the NGO has been established

as a personal retirement project by an ex-senior government official, then a kind of NGO life-presidency is inevitable, with all its implication for receptivity to criticism, innovation or new ideas at the top. Not a few observers of African development notice the irony in the fact that some officials leaving the much criticised state agencies are increasingly re-appearing as NGO leaders, and are thereby able to enjoy continued access to the same donor funds denied them within the context of restricted development aid to governmental agencies!

NGO staff with less encouraging opportunities have no choice but to leave and start their own NGOs - where they too can stay on top indefinitely -, or seek employment in better-paying voluntary organisations, usually Africa-based, but Northern-owned and directed NGOs. Sometimes, staff simply leave the uncertain personnel environment of the NGO world for the clearer, non-altruistic conditions of formal private sector employment. The high staff turnover that NGOs complain about appears to be an in-built, systemic limitation.

Any questions about the future of employment and personnel conditions in Africa's NGO sector should necessarily be linked to a question about the nature and future of voluntarism as an anchor principle of the sector. If capacity and institution building leads to more professionalism, and African NGOs still remain attached to a voluntaristic philosophy, might a fully fledged transition to using real volunteers on a large and permanent scale be the way of the future? And if so, how will this army of development volunteers acquire the appropriate skills and capacity to perform efficiently and effectively?

Between NGOs: challenge of networking and coalition-building

Networking and coalition building have long been recognised by NGO practitioners and donors alike as an important tool for creating and deploying scale and critical-mass for maximising NGO capacity and resource. Networks are especially crucial for NGOs' sectoral or institutional problem-solving because many operational and policy problems faced by individual NGOs are only amenable to collective, inter-organisational solutions. Typically, NGO networks are issue-based, focussing on one or more sectoral concerns. Ideally, the network is a resource-pooling and sharing process. It should enable individual member-groups to contribute information, resource and action into a network 'centre' or pool, which, through coordination, then disseminates back a much greater level of resource and information to each network member than they have contributed to the pool.

The network hub is expected to be able to create a 'whole', or critical mass of useful resource and information which is much larger than each of its constituent parts, from which members could draw benefits for increased capacity and effectiveness in their work. In addition to direct socio-economic and ecological issues, networks are mobilised around policy, protest,

negotiation and other advocacy activities, all geared to enhancing the pursuit of NGOs' mission.

But there are enormous constraints to achieving this networking ideal. Some are structural dilemmas, going right to the heart of African NGOs' way of being and of doing. The very methodology or approach to NGO networking can pose quite a problem. What type of networking arrangement is suitable for a given objective, for example? A permanently and physically institutionalised network, or a network built on a consensus to mobilise members as and when the need arises? Either approach throws up different types of administrative, logistical, human-resource, cost and time implications.

The former will impose substantial initial requirements of energy, time, resource, planning and other institutionalisation input. And for these to add up to a sustainable institutional capacity enabling the network to truly benefit its members, a daunting governance challenge is posed. Who pays the costs of the network's operations and staff? Whose organisational time will be devoted to the logistical footwork, sometimes undertaken across different countries, if the network is regional, for example? How to build consensus among the various member-groups about the location of the network hub, since many potential participants may perceive an advantage in having it close to their base? What operational and monitoring arrangements will be most suitable to maximise network efficiency and benefits, and to ensure adequate membership participation in its governance?

For the latter, 'mobilise-as-and-when-necessary' option, the first critical challenge is deciding on an appropriate 'trigger mechanism' for rapidly building consensus and organising human and logistical resource for effective action when issues requiring network response arise. Moreover, different actors, in different district or national contexts, with perhaps nuanced differences in attitude to a particular issue, crisis or policy, can be extremely difficult to manage and mobilise behind a coherent and quick NGO response, where a physically institutionalised network structure is absent. Managing a network's 'implementation environment' can thus pose particularly daunting constraints.

For both types of network, the most critical long-term dilemma is really the donor-dependent nature African NGOs. Because the start-off fund and often the idea itself have originated from an external source, each participating group tends to look up to the donor or assisting Northern agency as the implementer of the network. Also, because many NGOs tend to exist in some kind of 'survival prison', which demands almost total attention to their individual organisation's activities and multiple donor deadlines, very little room exists for them to actively contribute to, and honour collaborative, inter-organisational commitments within a network context. This malaise is often reinforced by the 'support input' provided by the outside donor or agency, understandably concerned that its network partnership should not be allowed to fail. But the more the outside collaborator 'helps' the network, the more individual NGO members concentrate their 'networking' interest vertically towards the Northern institutional 'partner', and the less horizontal linkages occur locally.

In terms of the rhetoric, a development network provides the classic opportunity for development experimentation, learning and process flexibility. Hardly any practitioners or donors deny the importance of these factors for sustainable, human-centred change and popular empowerment of grassroots communities. However, the international aid process which underwrites the networks' existence, requires measurements and quantitative valuation of success, all within a generally fixed evaluation and reporting timeframe, which inevitably discourages a slow, learning and flexible networking process. This in turn fosters a temptation to network upwards, towards the skills, infrastructural, logistical and output requirements of donors and information technology, rather than towards the local needs of the communities and people's organisations, in whose interests NGO networking is undertaken.

Even the need to 'succeed' by meeting donors' time-table and reporting requirements is itself often a source of tension in intra-network relations among NGOs. The power of Northern funders is not simply obvious in the character and rhythm of much African NGO networking, it is overwhelmingly so. As long as the real engine driving NGO work is the race to justify current donor funding and secure the next, African NGOs face a fundamental and intractable problem of 'structural ineffectiveness'.

The big challenge is whether African NGOs can secure a credible degree of dependency-reduction and operational autonomy to freely ponder, plan, modify or change objectives, in order to articulate visions and programmes aimed principally at their true constituency. Without the possibility to ignore donor topicalities and evolve long-term strategies relevant to the needs of Africa's grassroots communities, African NGOs may well remain trapped in a permanent process of development tinkering. But the challenge and dilemma are daunting.

NGOs, communities and people's organisations: an uneasy but potentially useful relationship?

NGOs owned and run by Africans remain by far the most potentially qualified agency for locally meaningful support to the self-transforming efforts of Africa's communities and people's organisations. Because they understand the local traditions better, they are more suited than most outsiders to mediate and facilitate the various challenges of a locally-driven, but globally influenced development among Africa's grassroots people. But this local qualification is by no means automatic, as has been borne out by the very limited record of African NGO achievement during two decades of more expanded, well funded and widely celebrated intervention in the continent's development.

The reality on the ground is of local communities and people's organisations bubbling with associative initiatives of various kinds. From producer groups who pool labour and

resources, to women's groups who organise to market products and services, to **esusu** (or **susu**) groups who engage in mutual support through micro-credit, to youth protest-groups who act to press for community rights and benefits, Africa's grassroot populations are increasingly engaged in self-improvement efforts. While these associative initiatives are not always spectacular socio-economic successes, fatalistic inaction is far from the norm. Some people's organisations and producer groups are in fact becoming juggernauts of the associative economy, marshalling the labour, energies and resources of thousands of ordinary members, in a beneficial orchestra of socio-economic self-empowerment.

The challenge of NGO support and partnership in this grassroot self-improvement process is posed at three levels. Firstly, can NGOs become a **value-adding technical resource** for the work of people's organisations? This implies a quality of assistance and input that enhances the efficiency and institutional framework of grassroot development activities. Secondly, can African NGOs become initiators and facilitators of locally-driven processes for **managing** the intra-community stress, conflicts and attitude-change that will inevitably accompany the **transformative and sustainable** development of grassroot communities? Thirdly, can NGOs, working closely with people's organisations, seize the initiative in agenda-setting and advocacy for sustainable development at three important platforms: the international aid/donor system, national policy process, and community or local level governance structures.

The challenge, at the level of the international aid system, would be for African NGOs to engage more vigorously and knowledgeably with advocacy NGOs and South-oriented development lobbyists, consciously **de-emphasising** any fund-seeking tendency in such an alliance. Positive and conscious engagement can be undertaken with international initiatives like **The Fair Trade Movement**, which acts to minimise the inequity in the prices paid to poor Southern producers of food products and crafts. Or, **The Heritage Seed Scheme**, which advocates for preservation of the bio-diversity of food species, against the threat of over-standardised agricultural technologies. International coalition-building of this kind can be a useful strategy for African NGOs to reclaim some of the agenda-setting initiative on African development. Similar engagement with **The Debt Crisis Network**, **The Other Economic Summit (TOES)** and other genuinely South-oriented movements in the North could be explored.

Effectively managed, such strategies will enable African NGOs to contribute in **localising** the agenda-setting process for Africa, and then to **influence how** it is articulated globally. Regarding national policy, the challenge will involve exploring possibilities of greater engagement and bridge building with government and governmental structures. A process of two-way transparency, which builds trust and respectability for NGO opinion, without undermining the sector's independence will be crucial. Needless to say, NGO hopes of influencing state policy and development programmes in people-centred and equity-driven directions can more realistically be built around a home-grown spirit of 'government **AND** NGOs' rather than a 'globally' inspired attitude of 'non-governmental versus govern-

mental'. Useful NGO-government rapprochement can be facilitated by a recognition of the undeniable centrality of the state process in influencing the orientation of development in Africa.

But Africa's local communities remain the ultimate arena of challenge in NGO sector efforts to contribute to real sustainable development. Precisely because NGOs and people's organisations have to work side by side with local governance structures at this level, the challenges posed are perhaps more daunting than those of national policy advocacy. Can NGOs effectively engage with, and make local government more responsive to community needs? Can they be a resource for enhancing communities' capacity to gain access and effectively relate to local government agencies? Can NGOs position themselves within the stirrings of local government politics, to become the trusted 'eyes and ears' of grassroots communities and organisations? Can they help to create conditions that make it increasingly difficult for local government to ride roughshod over the interests of the poor and marginalised?

NGO response to these questions calls for a fundamental rethink of the assumptions of the sector's implicit role as the new purveyors of the imperatives of modernisation. It requires NGO acceptance of an inevitable re-working of existing orientation and practice of development assistance, which tends to imply a duty by the outsider to 'develop' the poor. Since it is increasingly clear that grassroots communities and people *do* want and *do* strive to develop themselves and transform their conditions, the character and orientation of any future NGO contribution to this process are not too hard to appreciate. In particular, a new and different notion of NGO accountability, which is oriented towards grassroots constituencies rather than towards donors will be critical to a 'structural adjustment' of relations between NGOs and local groups.

If current trends in grassroots associative action continue, much future outsider assistance, whether by African or international NGOs, will most likely evolve in a context whereby NGO services can literally be 'hired and fired' by communities and people's organisations, to whom the former would (should) relate mainly as an advocacy and technical assistance appendage. All NGOs, irrespective of focus or type of work, will ultimately gain more relevance through genuine accountability to local constituencies. Apart from full-time research NGOs, who will continue to have a role in identifying and articulating issues in Africa's sustainable development, viable service NGOs of the future may well be those who have accepted to be largely dependent on grassroots patronage, approval and custom for their organisational survival.

In concluding

All this implies a critical self-assessment by African NGOs, especially in regard to whether and how they achieve the institutional capacity, preparedness and strategy for the inevitable transition. Will transition requirements render many African NGOs unviable?

Will strategic alliances rather than individual organisational survival be the NGO norm in future? In a new dispensation, what will be the role and place of the altruism and voluntarism associated with the NGO mission? How will the character of NGO capacity building and professionalism be affected?

These dilemmas call for an up-front self appraisal by African NGOs, sooner rather than later. Rather than bemoan the current downturn in donor funding, they should seize it as an opportunity to rethink their 'way of being and doing'. The most immediate challenge appears to be how, in concert with other actors in African development, they will contribute towards creating an enabling environment for the associative enterprise and other self-transforming processes of grassroot people and groups. It means giving the right kind of assistance, where and when it most matters, and with an intensity and engagement which not only produce results in the short to medium term, but also enhance the long-term potential for self-empowerment by the people.



African NGO
Networks

African NGO Networks Programme

The **African NGO Networks Programme** of **IIED** supports capacity development of NGO networks, grassroots associations and federations in Africa. The programme strategy involves undertaking collaborative initiatives with local, national and regional network structures. Where it does not exist, the programme encourages coalition-building among individual groups and networks, thereby facilitating a collective, institutional response to common challenges. The underlying aim is to enhance NGO relevance and 'client-responsiveness' to communities, people's organisations and grassroots development efforts.

The programme aims to assist in enhancing NGO knowledge of sustainable development issues and challenges, and strengthen their institutional capacity to respond. It also works to facilitate a positive NGO engagement and influence with governments and other key actors in African development.

Currently based in Cotonou, Republic of Benin, in West Africa, the programme also provides **occasional** support services to NGOs, networks and grassroots associations in a number of operational areas. These include documentational support (small-scale publication of basic working materials, French to English translation of programme documents, brochures, small reports, etc), review of, and input to NGO programme designs and strategies, project and programme evaluations. When feasible, it helps to facilitate NGO workshops and seminars.

International Institute for
Environment and Development
3 Endsleigh Street
London
WC1H 0DD

Tel: (+44 171) 388 2117
Fax: (+44 171) 388 2826
E-mail: mailbox@iied.org