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People, Politics and Profit:
Managing the tension between the
philosophy of NGO mission and the
reality of NGO operations

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ERRATA

The name of the third author is Kole Ade-Odotola, as appearing on inside cover page. The spelling error (*Ade-Otudola*) on the cover is highly regretted.

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Introduction

The concentration of capital and other means of production in a few hands is undoubtedly the dominant mode of socio-economic power in contemporary international system. Those who seek to create an alternative system to, or within this dominant one, must make a conscious effort to construct and nurture new values and worldviews which are underpinned both by a material and mental rationale. As the present dominant ideology has strong psychological, cultural and technological underpinnings, so must any alternative ideology have its self-perpetuating values. The NGO movement world-wide, which advocates a sustainable, human-centred, equitable and materially-inclusive mode of societal life, can be said to be very much engaged in the struggle to fashion out its peculiar values and cardinal philosophy of operation.

Against the fore-going observation, it is surprising that the NGO movement should practice so little coordinated planning. The dependence on project funds for their survival partly explains this situation, the reality being that once the running cost of a project has been exhausted, there is very little else for personnel, administrative and other institutional development costs. A key challenge for NGOs remains how they can effectively operate in a corporate world without a financial fall-back plan, and a corresponding advocacy or self-promotion strategy. There is no doubt that they need these assets both to ensure their organisational sustenance and autonomy, and to educate their various publics about their mission/vision. A related question is how the idea of profitable fund investment can be a part of NGO ethics without compromising the 'not-for-profit' doctrine of the movement. Indeed, is there anything immoral in becoming a part of the exploitative logic of market economics, including the interest rate regimes of financial institutions?

Looked at from another angle, should NGOs prepare feasibility studies of their initial take-off and offer shares for sale, just like businesses do? Or, will this be going too far? Can the end justify the means or not, in so far as NGOs are concerned? Whatever answers we come up with, these questions still loom rather large in NGO reality. For the real dilemma is whether NGOs could ever help to create a just society by being a part of the socio-economic order they wish to change? If the mainstream politics and profit motivation in the current world system are too far removed from the projected ethos of NGOs, can the movement fashion new ways or new

moralties to back up its vision and mission? For example, can they learn anything from religious organisations, who work to facilitate development for the poor by collecting tithes and the 'widow's mite' from their community of faithfuls? In Lagos, Nigeria, for example, a Pentecostal church runs a community bank, through which some form of economic investment is undertaken for the benefit of its membership. Members and new branches can obtain loans for social and welfare activities without the pressure associated with such facilities in conventional banks. For such a 'bank', the rules of operation are not dictated by the prevailing market reality in Nigeria's financial sector. Of course, it is true that this kind of religion-driven 'NGO' is able to invoke the 'divine prerogative' to secure the binding commitment of large sections of the people. But it is worth pondering whether NGOs can mobilise a similar kind of binding faith to link their mission with the livelihood pursuits of those they profess to serve. To some extent, it could be argued that by undertaking this initiative, the church in question has made some attempt to create a socio-economic and moral alternative to the logic of the market. It has thereby reduced the link between the economic possibilities of its members and the realities dictated by mainstream market and banking logic.

Another issue of importance in the interface between the philosophy of NGO mission and their operational reality is that of language. Western languages, especially English, are the dominant linguistic media through which the discourse and 'profession' of development are conducted. Steve Biko, the late South African anti-apartheid student leader, once opined that the most potent weapon that any oppressor possessed was the mind of the oppressed. Domination through language is no doubt crucial to the 'mind-control' aspect of the colonial experience. The ability to think, speak and write in a language different from that which the majority of people in a dominated geo-political space speak and understand, can confer on the few, visible speakers, the ability to represent, articulate and promote the dominant worldview of the owners of the foreign language. NGOs, whose work involves communicating scientific ideas to grassroots audiences who are unfamiliar with Western technical terms and concepts, would readily recognise this reality.

Finding appropriate cultural codes and symbols for communicating development ideas can be problematic and sometimes frustrating. How, for example, does an NGO field staff effectively explain the interconnection of human activities in deforestation and climate change, when conveying the effects of global warming to rural folks whose educational and technical horizon is geared towards basic production for

consumption. At what point will pressing an issue of global concern like the above begin to appear like propagating a donor-imposed agenda at the expense of the needs for survival?

Moreover, the location and role of 'development experts', who constantly have to occupy the communication bridge between the people and international agencies, have proved hardly an adequate response to these challenges. It is indeed an enduring paradox of international aid and the NGO 'profession' that it is largely the articulate and educated elite, who share none of the direct encounters of poverty and socio-economic marginalisation, that have had to perpetually bear the burden of the formal struggle for change. Yet, in spite of efforts spanning several decades, NGO and development professionalism have secured hardly any worthwhile change on behalf of the poor beneficiaries targeted by their work. Given the ever-worsening condition of the poor in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world, it is perhaps necessary to ponder the possibilities of politically mobilising the masses, when designing poverty alleviation programs and projects aimed at them. But this will clearly be 'politics', and considering their core values, can NGOs play the game? This essay seeks to explore the complex interfaces when NGOs work for the poor and marginalised people, in political environments which are anti-people, or indifferent to concerns about morality and equity, and where the imperatives of material and market power predominate.

Section One

The Challenge of Mission Adherence

In considering the issues encapsulated in our title, we will attempt to paint a picture of reality against the background of current economic experience. In so doing, we hope to expose the true situations encountered as NGOs seek alternative possibilities that can ameliorate (or even eliminate) anti-development conditions like gender injustice, economic dis-empowerment of people and over-exploitation of natural resources. We are mindful of the almost impossible demands and distractions that arise for change-oriented NGO practitioners in the process of working with the people.

To enhance clarity and comprehension of the issues examined in this essay, an attempt is made below to clarify some concepts and categories which routinely feature in discussing NGO work. Some questions that arise in this regard are:

- Which type or groups of people constitute our focus in this discourse?
- Politics at what level falls within our sphere of concern? and,
- Profit from which kind of enterprise, and to what extent?

Who and Where are the 'People'?

In development language, the word 'people' is hardly ever used without nuances or qualification. We read about people who are marginalised, poor, unemployed and powerless. One hardly ever gets much explanation as to why the 'people' are permanently pushed to the margins of society, or why conditions at the societal margin require so much funds and energy for integration within the mainstream. No doubt, some people in society are at the core of socio-economic and political opportunities and possibilities, while the other set of 'people', who are the target of development aid and NGO work, are located at the periphery, far removed from developmental opportunities and possibilities. What more, they oftentimes service the exploitative machinery of power and opportunities enjoyed by those at society's core. It is therefore not surprising that development intervention by governments, local and international agencies is never far reaching enough to fundamentally transform the material condition of the people.

Usually, the people who are, and have always been, the real creators of wealth are referred to as 'the masses', whose identity is lost and whose voices are never to be found where matters that concern them are discussed. In the context of this reflection on practice, we know that the

people are diverse, - farmers, fisher-folks, the drawers of water and hewers of wood? They are the toiling women and mothers who constantly add value to farm produce and engage in 'petty-trading'. Many experienced NGO practitioners would in fact argue that it is around these creative and resilient people that the multibillion-dollar 'development industry' revolves. It is their impoverished condition and life situation that have also given birth to the multitude of international and local NGOs the world over.

In an effort to better understand the self-perception of the 'people' in Africa, many development analysts have pointed to the factor of 'sense of identity' in shaping their response to development aid interventions. Because of the perplexing effects of the colonial experience among Africans, especially those at grassroots level, the self-perception problem among the poor is necessarily an impediment to easy resolution of the present developmental crisis. All NGOs who work directly with people on the field know that while programmes and projects multiply, it is increasingly difficult to meet the people's expectations in a sustainable way. This fact often proves rather disorientating for NGO and aid managers.

The problem of self-perception in development among grassroots populations is ultimately the problem of Africa itself in the global system. The majority of African peoples, often poor and struggling for survival at the socio-economic and power margins of their various countries, are victims of double marginalisation. The so-called independent countries of Africa, are themselves inconsequential players at the margins of a larger North-dominated global system. Africa's poor are thus the marginalised and dis-empowered in societies that are themselves marginalised and powerless in the world. Africa's poor people suffer partly from the effects of the neo-colonial comportment of their local (national) leaders, just as they also suffer from the effects of their countries being themselves victims of the lopsided power reality in the international system. Not even the various populist slogans and phrases like 'popular participation' and 'empowerment' have made a significant difference to the powerlessness of the people.

Indeed, the introduction of the concept of 'popular participation' was, in its original form, meant to partially address the lack of self-critical analysis among development aid professionals, including NGOs. For example, a leading Nigerian grassroots development activist and analyst, Seinde Arigbede, has argued that the concept of popular participation took its

origin from the counter-cultural determination of the mid-70s to challenge the hegemony of elitist concepts of social organisation and development. Unfortunately however, he points out, what has followed the lofty concept is a largely symbolic gesture, undertaken within the same fundamentally inequitable societal arrangements. Based on this reality, it is increasingly clear to most development workers that structural and fundamental changes are hardly possible within the present donor-recipient relationship.

As indicated above, some of the problems on the continent are externally driven. The main developmental pathways have not been decided upon by the people, or their leaders, but by those who live outside the daily experiences of the continent. Julius Nyerere, late Tanzanian President, once argued that any new African government, no sooner it settles down to work in pursuit of any significant transformatory or people-focussed ambitions, would come face-to-face with the reality of neo-colonial boundaries to its powers. He claimed further that the longer such a people-focussed government lasted, the more it would discover that there was no such thing as a 'national economy'. It would realise that within its country existed many economic activities directed mainly at external needs, with policies run essentially in the interest of external economic powers. This, to a large extent, also encapsulates the dilemma of NGOs and the people they work with in the present dispensation. NGO operations are largely regulated by their funders, because the latter are the ones who generally determine the issues, the methodology and, in some cases, the segment of the people where funded work should be done. How do we as development agents resolve this dilemma without losing focus and relevance?

What nature of politics?

One of the most obvious identity features of the NGO movement is the emphasis on what it is not, and the little consensus around what it is, should be, or wants to become. Unlike politicians, who endeavour to clearly state their identity and manifesto, NGOs assume that the people whom they wish to assist, have an idea of their (NGO) identity, based on the work they do with and for them. It is therefore expected that the latter would understand (and indeed identify with) the texture and orientation of NGO politics, or political intentions. Most NGOs state in their constitutions that they are non-political groups. The implication of this is that they are not (and should not be) involved in partisan politics, this being understood as a fierce competition for power, and by extension, the privileges of formal state power. This position then throws up a number

series of questions:

- What is the main purpose of NGO intervention, if not power?
- Can NGOs facilitate transformative changes without seeking to control political power?
- Should being 'non-political' necessarily mean being 'apolitical'?

Politics is commonly regarded as a process of power, in which the core rationale revolves around the question of who gets what, when, and how. A critical look at this definition reveals some convergence between the politics of development aid and NGOs, on the one hand, and the conventional, partisan and rancorous politics of power. The former tends to make the development and enhancement of the human condition its main focus. The latter is pre-occupied with the search for, and control of power, in the declared objective of building or maintaining a nation within some context of socio-economic and political harmony. Ordinarily, both tasks should be mutually reinforcing, especially if the stated objectives of NGOs and politicians are faithfully pursued. But the evidence, in most African countries, is that most NGOs operate in political environments that put them in opposition to the ruling elite. Yet, historical circumstances do arise that make an association between NGOs and political parties necessary. For instance, during the apartheid era, most peoples' organisations in South Africa had to work closely with the political groupings and movements to fight the system. But with the anti-apartheid political parties now in power, NGOs have felt a need to redefine their relationship with the political parties especially those controlling state power.

Another illustrative evidence comes from Nigeria, where the long-drawn instability in the political environment does not only make long term strategic planning difficult for NGOs, but also shrinks the political space available for constructive intervention by the sector. The critical dilemma for much of the NGO movement in Africa, apart from that of organisational survival, is how to secure an appropriate political space within which it can intervene in the development process, without becoming what some development analysts have termed 'post-governmental organisations'. Such commentators argue that NGOs are generally being drawn into taking over certain developmental tasks that are traditionally the domain of the state. Indeed, an observable context exists for such overlap. The extent to which NGOs can pursue their mission in a given country, will largely be a function of the kind of politics prevalent in that society. Though not necessarily or often partisan, there can be no

doubt that the NGO and development aid process (or enterprise, as some would argue) is very political. Yet, they do not have or seek the kind of power which is considered inevitable for mainstream political movements.

The NGO movement will need to deal with this contradiction as it expands the scope of its intervention and political ambitions. Otherwise, it will continue to act at the margins of Africa's development process, able only to advocate for sustainable development, while the political parties who seek and gain state power, will continue to determine the content and context of national development, which may not necessarily conform with NGOs' development philosophy and politics. A future challenge for NGOs may therefore be how to make a non-disruptive transition from their present apolitical status, to one in which they may seek and hold power in trust for the people. Of course, certain quarters advocate a contrary view, wishing for NGOs simply to remain as instruments of modest change and conduits of service and support to marginalised and vulnerable people and groups in the periphery of African countries. The underlying argument is that it will be near impossible for NGOs to play the full power politics of mainstream political parties, without a corresponding change in their fundamental philosophy, objectives and culture.

There is also a donor dimension to the problematique of NGOs and politics. In many ways, the donor-recipient relationship conceals the real location of power, by portraying a situation of partnership and equality where all are free to participate in aspects of the decision making process. The subtle persistence of this concealed control has the effect of obstructing the self-reliance capability of African NGOs and community groups working with donor support. It will be an important challenge of the politics of African NGOs and grassroots groups to struggle to shake off what an ILO programme document on participatory development once called 'the attitude of mental dependence' on outsiders.

Fortunately, African NGO practitioners have made some effort in this direction. For example, in the early 1990s, a group of NGO leaders got together to address the politics and inherent dependency problems in the donor system, as they affect the African NGO sector. They came up with an institutional arrangement — the African NGO Self-reliance and Development Advocacy Group (ASDAG). The group set itself the task of formulating 'A Draft Code of Practice for African NGOs,' aimed at reinforcing their objective of self-reliance and providing (to quote the document) 'a framework for better relations among them on one hand, and between them and their non-African collaborators on the other'.

Unfortunately it was not possible to sustain the initial energy that brought the group together, because the contradiction of the founding and funding became their undoing. ASDAG as a group may be moribund, but the ideas it spun during those years are still as valid today as they were when they were first formulated. We believe the objectives of self-reliance, within a framework of appropriate NGO-donor relations in Africa, will be greatly served if the continent's NGO leaders and representatives revisit the issues raised in the various publications by ASDAG.

A move of this kind was made recently when, under the aegis of the 'Forum of NGOs', some NGOs in Lagos started to discuss the need to negotiate a code of ethics for the sector. Expectedly, the move threw up fears in some quarters, on the grounds that up-coming and cash-strapped NGOs might be regulated out of the NGO space. It was also argued that NGO regulations should not unwittingly alienate the rights to organise and associate with persons of one's choice, in pursuit of shared beliefs, as guaranteed by the democratic norms of Nigeria's new political dispensation.

The Profit Dimension and the NGO Mission

NGOs usually refer to themselves as 'not-for-profit' organisations, but in practice, they can be very profitable ventures. The definition of profit in this sense does not only include that derivable from monetary transactions and accumulation of surplus income from operational activities. There is no doubt that some NGOs make profit from their projects and programmes. It is now an accepted practice for NGOs to demand a certain percentage for administrative purposes, to enable them to meet some of their non-project costs. Such extra funds can represent a kind of 'unrestricted income', which can be deployed with relative freedom for the good of the organization. In some cases, NGOs have been known to invest donor funds as a means of earning extra income for the organization. The difference, however, between NGOs and the corporate world is that profit is not shared at the end of each business-year. Whatever excess funds are realised at the end of each project are meant to be ploughed back towards the organization's objectives, or returned to the donors, where donor support might have been secured on the basis of the 'use it or lose it' accounting regulation of many funding agencies. This 'use it or lose it' principle is one area of donor-NGO relationship that needs a review and rethink. Perhaps new guidelines should be explored to enable grant-receiving NGOs, subject to agreed guarantees, to use left-over funds for

their broader, self-chosen organisational or institutional development purposes.

Of course, the issue of profit and profitability within NGOs will remain contentious for long, to the extent that the underlying philosophy is that profits (defined in the mainstream commercial sense) are generally not part of the rationale of NGO operations. This tension is not made easier by the presence within the NGO fold of many practitioners who may be motivated more by profit as private pecuniary gain, than by profit as an objective of institutional or operational enhancement. However, for many other workers and leaders in the sector who have come in for largely altruistic reasons, the real profit does not even come from the salaries or emoluments. It is comprised of the spiritual (philosophical) fulfillment of being able to implement some mission which affects the development of people, or the preservation of the environment, for example. For such NGO personnel, the opportunities of social interaction, networking, information-sharing, cross-fertilisation of knowledge, even the camaraderie shared with like-minded people from across the world, provides satisfaction of inestimable value. But this is not a value-orientation that is easily spread among the generality of NGO practitioners. One of the challenges of the African NGO mission will be how to approximate this altruistic individual morality into a wider group morality within and between development groups and networks at grassroots level. Though a non-tangible, and non-monetised resource, it is no doubt a good background factor in enhancing the practical, organisational and institutional objectives of NGO work.

Broadly, it is now felt across a wide spectrum of opinion that the idea of 'profit' as it relates to NGOs should be seen more in terms of *how* the profit is dispensed, rather than whether profit-making should be anathema to the philosophy and mission of NGOs. In Africa, where the sourcing of grant and other development aid support by NGOs can attract significant complications relating to dependency and external control, perhaps it is time to undertake a comprehensive review of the 'not-for-profit' philosophy. It may be important to articulate a set of new principles and practical guidelines which will help NGOs to include clearly defined forms of profit seeking and profit making as a future strategy. This should preferably be less externally-driven, and more grassroots-focussed. Indeed, some move may have already begun in this direction, albeit by default. With the gradual increase in donor requirement for NGOs to operate largely around private business accounting and efficiency principles and procedures, an incipient urge to transform NGOs into the spirit and culture

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of formal business seems to be already in place.

How soon and how deeply this trend will also include the profit phenomenon may well be a matter of time. In any case, given the self-perception of NGOs as a sector with an agenda of social transformation, perhaps using profits as a tactical tool in their altruistic ambition need not be considered such a 'counter-cultural sin'. Maybe the guiding principle will be to seek and use avenues permitting NGO services to be offered to marginalised people at 'near market prices', which are not the same as 'non-profitable' prices. An organisational effect of such an operating mode may be that NGOs will accept the need to keep their overhead costs to the barest possible minimum, at a level which does not impede operational or personnel objectives. While this 'sub-market' approach may be no more than a short to medium term strategy for NGOs, it could prove a necessary entry point into the business world of profit making. Hopefully, over the long-term, and as the marginalised targets of NGO intervention become more integrated into the mainstream society, the need for NGOs to operate within a logic of sub-market profits will have diminished or disappeared.

Section Two

Working for People, Politics and Profit: Observations from the Nigerian NGO Sector's Experience

Any discussion of the tensions experienced by NGOs as they operate in the Nigerian environment must address two interfaced realities: the first concerns the internal contradictions, complexities, and power struggles within local NGOs, with all that they imply for the articulation and interpretation of their mission; the second reality concerns the externalities which influence NGOs' practical operations, as they concern their objectives of supporting grassroots communities and groups to empower themselves and meet basic livelihood needs. Overlapping with this dual challenge is the lack of clarity and consensus within the sector over how to deal with political complexities and take policy positions, in a polity transiting from an undemocratic state of flux, to a still largely uncertain future under civil rule. The major effect of this situation is that there exists within the NGO community in Nigeria a multiplicity of voices, interests and an unequal distribution of resources and capacity. Based on the testimonies of key leaders and supporting staff in Nigeria's NGO sector, it is fairly easy to conclude that perceptions about why particular NGOs are established, and the interests they seek to promote, would depend on several factors. Understanding many Nigerian NGOs depends on who you speak to within the organisation. It also depends on how its mission and actions are interpreted. Furthermore, the assessment of the relevance of action to stated mission will equally depend on who provides such opinion - whether it is the leader or founder, or whether an employee or a close collaborator of the founder/leader.

In the aggregate, although phrases like 'humanitarian', 'not for profit', 'not part of government' 'promoting self-empowerment', 'supporting participatory action', and 'advocacy' are commonly used by NGO practitioners to describe the work they do, a detailed probe of how each of these attributes is crystallised in the organisations' daily operational life, reveals a wide range of nuances, qualifications and even contradictions. For example, the founder/leader of an NGO views its mission, policies and ways of working differently from his associates who joined the organisation later on, or were employed by him. The founder-employee dichotomy can be a fundamental source of tension in in-house workings of the organisation. It also creates a lack of harmony in the relations of the organisation with its various external audiences and constituencies. This tension manifests in different ways around the different issues of

organisational identity, operations and external relations. For example, if the mission statement had been single-handedly formulated and adopted by the founder at the onset, collaborators who join the NGO later can expect to experience great difficulty trying to initiate ideas that contradict the founder's interpretation of the mission. This is because the initial mission statement might have been cast in a way that is meant to, at all times, secure the supremacy and other critical interests of the founder. If, as is sometimes the case, the unstated intention behind the articulation of the mission includes using the NGO as a platform from which to promote recognition of the founder, or seek government patronage, or even to position the founder for pecuniary advantage as donor funds roll in, then other influential actors at the management level will often find themselves at loggerheads when they wish to articulate new visions or operational principles for the organisation.

There are other possible areas of tension in the internal processes and workings of many Nigerian NGOs. If, for example, an NGO was founded by a group of persons, the individual members of the founding group may find little to worry about in the spirit and letter of the mission as originally stated. But this uncritical consensus will often change and may constitute a source of intra-organisational tension later on, especially as donor reality interfaces with operational funding to produce a conflict-prone programme orientation, and choice of activities. The experience from a number of key NGOs in Nigeria is that as the top leadership disagree over the nuances of donor, programme and administrative interfaces, so do the middle level officers factionalise according to which of the leaders is supported by different members of staff. Even some of the commonly touted procedural tools for efficient NGO work - e.g. participation - can be a source of dysfunctional internal processes. The experience reported by some NGO leaders is that their attempt to run a participatory, transparent and open in-house administration, has sometimes been seized as an opportunity by lower level staff to abuse privileged information, undermine the organisation's plans and generally manipulate 'inside knowledge' for their own personal ambitions. Worryingly, it has been claimed that in some cases, subtle donor encouragement, through secret, unofficial dealings (information gathering) with personnel below management level, have sometimes tended to fuel this phenomenon. It will be an academic guess determining the extent to which the fear of being undermined in this way has constrained Nigerian NGO leadership interest in participation, transparency and inclusiveness in the management of their organisations.

The truth is that the Nigerian NGO scene tends to parade dominant leaders that appear to be the embodiment of their organisation's values and practice. The presence of these kinds of individuals, particularly in membership organisations, can manifest both strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes, members, for different reasons, complain about the manner in which organisational goals are set, and how leaders' actions have failed to reflect the stated mission. There are also complaints about observable inconsistencies between the stated organisational objectives and the issues and actions of focus, especially with respect to the interest of the grassroots constituency, claimed to be the motivation for the NGOs' existence. A case in point is the experience of a radical Nigerian women's organisation, which has become embroiled in a crisis rooted partly in the seeming abandonment of its mission, or shift from its original vision. Against the background of the protestations by many of its members, it is clear that the reason for the continued dispute is not with the stated mission, but in the interpretative practice and schemes of different leaders over time. This is a fairly common experience with high-profile Nigerian NGOs, where tensions often arise between those who direct the organisations and those that work in or identify with them.

Such tension can sometimes be aggravated by contradictions in the 'professional' knowledge or skills base of the different actors within an NGO. Where the founding of an NGO had initially been motivated by an opportunistic advantage (e.g. privileged information on the prospects of funding for a specific issue), the leader may not be sufficiently knowledgeable about, or even committed to the implementation of the stated mission and the mandate for which it has received funding. In such a situation, 'learning on the job' at the top may become a clog in the operational wheel, to the frustration of more knowledgeable and competent support staff, who are employed by the founder.

In some cases, where NGO founders or leaders do not possess sufficient skill and background for effective leadership, and if they feel entitled to enjoy the benefits of their position with minimal challenge, they may deliberately seek to employ people of even lower capabilities than themselves. This unstated agenda will, from the onset, determine the quality, depth and orientation of key institutional tools like participation, control and organizational development. Although the lacunae in the foundations of this kind of NGO may not be evident at the beginning, especially before the funds come in, they will soon manifest as the organisation settles down to apply human resource (staff), donor funds and its stated objectives together into a work programme. The contradictions

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and resulting tension will only intensify as projects begin to be implemented as a day-to-day fact of organisational life. To minimise problems of this kind and maximise focus on the needs of NGOs' relevant constituencies, leaders and other categories of personnel in the sector should be jointly involved in defining their in-house principles of administration and operation, as well as the modality of engaging with different kinds of external audiences, partners and interests.

No doubt, non-leadership personnel of many Nigerian NGOs are still generally excluded from the decision-making processes; NGO leaders often express a desire to allow a lot more discretion and opportunities for their programme staff to make an input into the running of both the in-house and programme mechanisms of the groups. But there are contradictory nuances to this prospect, not least associated with the issue of funding. For example, some NGO directors claim, from experience, to observe that other staff are quite happy to recognise their leadership and concede all discretion during the often arduous and frustrating process of proposal writing, negotiating with and persuading donors, and the eventual fund-raising. Might this be a reason why many NGO leaders tend to assume sole discretion and monopolise decisions about the application of funds once secured? On the other hand, non-management and programme staff sometimes also contend that the loyalty, patience and the sense of altruism displayed by them while their organisations were poor, tend to be ignored when NGO leaders eventually secure funding. It is argued that with significant fund injection, organisational priorities of the leaders tend to change, sometimes with little notice to other erstwhile persevering staff. Staff may be re-deployed away from functions or posts where new opportunities might arise, to the advantage of freshly-recruited or favoured staff, who thereby become better positioned to benefit from the improved funding situation. Moreover, staff who had persevered in an NGO through the lean times, may come to see the improved fund status as an opportunity to earn more emoluments and secure other long-demanded working benefits. But the management may have other ideas, wishing instead - perhaps as a result of agreed donor conditions - to use any surplus funds to increase administrative or logistical capacity in the non-personnel areas, e.g. purchase of new computers or a vehicle.

But non-monetary aspects of the NGO reality can present equally daunting challenges. An example is the impact on NGO cohesiveness of the recent transition to civil rule in Nigeria. Attempts by the human rights and pro-democracy NGOs to form new networks and coalitions to re-define the NGO space under the new political dispensation have thrown up a number

of interesting developments. One such factor is the lack of consensus among the pro-democracy groups on a clear and rallying mission, including a strategy to underpin their intervention and role in Nigeria's new political experience. What has emerged instead is a multiplicity of platforms, which has thrown the human-rights and pro-democracy NGO community in openly contradictory and conflictual positions on some political issues. Indeed, currently, the leading pro-democracy and human rights leaders have taken different sides, and openly exchanged accusations and recriminations in a crisis of perjury and forgery, involving the newly elected governor of Lagos State, which happens to be the richest and most important of all the thirty-six states of the nation. Interestingly, apart from the political, legal and constitutional issues raised, the single most important platform of counter-accusations has been that of the handling of donor funds. The human rights groups' bickering has been a painful spectacle for those who put a lot of hope on the role of NGOs in fine-tuning the new democratic experiment, and, needless to say, a source of great amusement and relief for the political and establishment elite.

Episodic crises such as the above are not the only source of tension in NGO relational politics in Nigeria's new, civilian-led polity. For instance, disagreements exist over whether or not to collaborate with the new civil government, and the extent of any cooperative gestures. It is argued in some quarters that some NGOs have already deemed it necessary to cooperate with the new government, while those who would prefer a 'wait and see' attitude are condemning such cooperation as an opportunistic sell-out. Some NGOs who have all along been opposed to the military-initiated transition and politics that produced the new civilian dispensation still remain hostile, and are calling for an entire review of the basis of the nation's existence as a political entity. Similar dichotomies existed in the pro-democracy and human rights NGO community during military rule, when some NGOs and their leaders were openly associating with the programmes and agenda of the junta's government.

It will be fairly accurate to suggest that many NGO leaders in Nigeria are yet to acquire the strategies or techniques for group negotiation, trust and consensus building and group harmonisation. A critical aspect of this challenge relates to the ability to creatively coordinate or facilitate their internal or organisational objectives and disagreements without allowing the politics of difference to consume their collective vision and mission. Furthermore, the capacity to generate and to effectively respond to major macro-policy development remains rather limited or weak in the Nigerian NGO community. High-profile populist causes tend to remain the only

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all military contingents are notified as an operational crew, police take areas where individual NGO leaders - especially the human rights leaders - make some impression. But much confusion still exists in the management and cohesion of NGO response even in this area. The rhythm and pace of response to macro-issues also tend to divide the NGO family, with some known to practice instantaneous - and sometimes ill-judged - response, while others favour a middle-of-the-road or wait-and-see approach. In spite of its potential merits, the wait-and-see approach too, can sometimes appear like an excuse to swim along with the government tide by not rocking the boat, possibly (some argue) with unstated expectations of future government favours.

What the foregoing observations indicate is the need for the Nigerian NGO community to mobilise more consciously and with greater political savvy to fashion modalities of effectively interfacing their personal and organisational ambitions on the one hand, with their wider or macro-economic and political objectives on the other. Strategies are needed that are clear and focussed enough to respond to immediate issues of policy, political and grassroots interest, while being sufficiently flexible and durable to respond to the dynamics of a polity in transition. For instance, the initial success and later problems associated with recent initiatives on political transition monitoring eloquently argue the need for greater group concert in NGO intervention. At the early stages of the military-conducted transition, what was needed was a critical mass of monitoring activism that could react at short notice to any attempts to manipulate the process by drawing public attention to the junta's sincerity and transparency in the conduct of the exercise. NGOs were largely successful in this monitoring task. This was however not the situation soon after the transition. While the exigency of the moment masked many of the contradictions, inequalities and lack of trust and consensus among the coalition partners, these differences began easily to manifest on all sides after the elections. The politics of the Nigerian NGO sector still gravely suffers from the lack of a flexible staying power, a key ingredient for effective and relevant action in a multi-crisis society in transition, such as Nigeria.

How are Nigerian NGOs coping with the new challenges of civil rule, now that they are not confronted with the human rights and environmental problems, or the arbitrariness of state power that characterised military rule? The first attempt was aimed at strengthening the organisational identification, as well as the institutional and collaborative foundations of the NGO community. A new framework was needed by the coalition to accommodate, or arrest an emerging trend towards polarization. Registration requirements for NGO network membership, which did not

exist earlier, were introduced, as a condition for recognition within the NGO community. But this was openly criticized and resisted in some quarters as a ploy to undermine certain interests. However, self-organising efforts such as this demonstrate that there is awareness among NGO leaders of a need to strengthen themselves as a sector, if they wish to influence the political and policy environment in the country, and truly represent the developmentally marginalised and voiceless people. Moreover, how can NGOs mobilise their objectives, agenda and constituents into purposive or issue-driven social movements? These are no doubt, some of the potential challenges which the sector must resolve in order to respond effectively to the opportunity presented by the transition to civil rule in Nigeria.

At another level, the challenge of planning and structuring by NGOs at organisational and inter-organisational level inevitably implies a number of cross-cutting issues. It also has cost and ideological ramifications. In exploring funding sources, for instance, the ideological outlook or worldview of the prospective donor, is as important for an NGO as issues of human resource competence and skills. So is the question of sectoral programme priority. Does what a prospective donor consider funding priority correspond with the reality of local needs and type of support pledged by the NGO in its stated mission? But again, if an NGO is cash-strapped and at the point of administrative collapse, to what extent can the imperatives of ideology and stated mission be a factor in considering donor conditions? Is it better to temporarily ignore ideology and mission for the sake of immediate organisational survival and hope to refocus later on? If such a course is followed, to what extent can it mean a terminal departure from stated priorities of the NGO in question? Or perhaps, would NGOs begin to consider sufficiently loose and flexible ideological and mission frameworks, permitting them to relate to, and seek support across a wide range of donor orientations, to implement a wider range of programmes, as long as the fundamental interests of the poor and marginalised are directly or indirectly served?

The key lesson of this knotty challenge about mission, ideology and orientation is that the ability to respond effectively to the tensions experienced by NGOs in the course of their operations, depends on the position taken by the various actors involved. This includes the relational powers and context between NGOs and their various audiences and partners, and the ability to act decisively on principles, especially when such principles are sufficiently clear, and based on a solid consensus. For while planning, consultation and articulation of the mission of an

organization are essential steps in NGO and network formation, these do not necessarily guarantee a healthy NGO practice, operation and institutional cohesion. There is no doubt that if NGOs are to achieve their goal or significantly influence development, they should themselves project a picture of strong organisation, high skills and knowledge base, and effective institutional capacity. NGOs require high standards of work, and an operational culture which, compared to state and private business actors, is both more efficient and effective at reaching the poor. It is in this way that their potential as a key catalyst for sustainable development can be realised.

At a broader level of Nigerian NGO institution building, steps should be taken to provide an avenue for pre-engagement training that prepares people for work in the sector. For, while on-the-job training will continue to be an important factor, entry into NGO development work by a large number of people without some form of focused and structured knowledge of key issues in sustainable development, will continue to be a source of institutional weakness. In fact, the presence of NGO workers and practitioners with a structured, background knowledge of development issues will make on-the-job training a less haphazard process than currently obtains. Also, staff returning to NGOs after a period of outside training can be more harmoniously integrated back into the work and programme rhythm of their organisations, without their new ideas being perceived as a threat to the status quo.

Another practical problem of capacity affecting the realisation of NGO mission is the logistical and infrastructural status of many organisations. Many Nigerian NGOs face limitations in executing their stated mission because of the low quantity and quality of their in-house infrastructure. The example of an NGO based in Jos, in Nigeria's middle-belt region, illustrates this limitation. Having brought in volunteer expatriate doctors, the NGO lacked the relevant health care facilities and environment to effectively utilise the doctors' skills and free service. In a context such as this, not even the zeal of Christian charity and the expertise of the doctors could add value to the receiving NGO's capacity or the implementation of its mission. An enabling and properly tooled implementation environment is as necessary as the quality of human resource in an NGO. But an enabling work environment cannot only mean the provision of adequate logistical and infrastructural means for mission implementation. It must realistically also include employee incentives, to strengthen staff loyalty and commitment base of NGOs.

As reflected in Volume 1 of this essay series, many people who now choose to work in NGOs are motivated more by the basic objectives of normal employment than by any other consideration. Indeed, real and imagined opportunities and privileges, such as overseas travels, access to foreign currencies, prospects of a decent salary and ultimately a job in international development agencies, would appear to rank higher than voluntarism or altruism in the calculation of many an NGO employee in Nigeria, as in the rest of Africa. Elaborate statements of philosophy and altruistic mission will continue to be mere procedure unless the NGO sector evolves a widely accepted and widely practised work culture, that provides a defined minimum of employment incentives, and at the same time matches NGO claims of a special commitment to sustainable development and the poor.

The widespread perception of Nigerians, over the past decade, as highly prone to corruption and fraud has further complicated the relational aspects of Nigerian NGOs' institutional development. It is a fairly common practice for international development agencies and NGOs operating in Nigeria to directly administer the funding of their programmes from their overseas base. Coupled with this is the extremely limited support that Nigerian NGOs receive for non-project aspects of their work. Lack of donor support for organisational, inter-organisational and other forms of institution-building objectives serves to further weaken NGO capacity, thereby making a faithful adherence to mission statements, participatory in-house management and altruistic principle less likely. It is unfortunate that many NGOs who feel they must find the resources for organisational strengthening and survival, often have recourse to a phenomenon commonly referred to as 'creative accounting'. Might donors' overzealous desire to fund only activities that directly impact on the poor be unwittingly fuelling lack of financial accountability and dishonourable conduct in the ranks of Nigerian and indeed African NGOs generally?

But not all Nigerian and African NGOs subscribe to 'creative accounting'. Some NGO leaders have not only questioned the practice, but have also challenged other leaders in the NGO community to rise to the challenge posed by donor tendency to under-fund NGO capacity and institutional development. One way to do this may be to re-visit their own modalities of operation and fund-raising, including the 'not-for-profit' principle. This line of argument also urges African NGOs to also look inward and devise imaginative mechanisms to raise some of the funds they need for institutional development from within the continent. There are indeed peculiarly Nigerian reasons why the country's NGOs should re-think and

reform their financial and institutional status. In recent years, as more of the international oil companies intensify their involvement in community and environmental development programmes, development NGOs are becoming victims of a trend towards staff 'poaching' by the better paying multinationals. Sometimes, in a most organisationally disorientating encounter, a well-established NGO would lose many of its best trained and experienced human resource to an oil-producing company in one fell swoop, further complicating the NGO's efforts to effectively implement its vision and mission.

Another major constraint to the pursuit of NGO mission in Nigeria relates to the general lack of capacity to operate independently of donor priorities. If donors in the country do not consider a particular area of work as priority in a given period, working in that area can be next to impossible, even if the NGOs committed to such issues are convinced that they represent priority needs among their grassroots constituents. On the contrary, NGOs who choose to ignore their mission and constituency objectives and comply with current donor project preference, will stand a better chance of securing funds to advance their work and increase their project implementation record. A typical example is the experience of NGOs who tenaciously pursue women empowerment, especially when they aim at critically radical reforms. What such groups have generally experienced is a glaring reluctance on the part of the both local and foreign donors. So it remains relatively difficult for NGOs to work towards a mission that clearly sets out to change the status quo on gender reality. What women's groups have often discovered is that the international agenda is not very different from the local (Nigerian), whereby women's needs are made to be dependent upon those of men. In this aspect, NGOs with a strong commitment to changes in gender relations continue to find that the limitation they face in mission implementation is well beyond their national borders.

In concluding this section, it is useful to also comment on the 'leadership transition' aspect of the NGO mission-operation dilemma. For many NGOs, a time comes when one leadership gives way to another, very often as a result of internal crisis, but in very rare instances, from normal leadership 'retirement', brought about either by a move to new jobs or responsibilities by the existing leadership. Whatever the cause of a leadership transition, virtually all new NGO leaderships feel compelled to initiate new and sometimes radical changes in both their administrative, organisational and programme orientations. Such changes will often lead to some degree of drift from the stated mission itself, as well as the

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mission implementation modalities inherited from the departing leadership.

Many different issues are raised by this kind of leadership transition scenario. For, instance, is it, or should it be part of the remit of a new leadership to alter the existing NGO mission? At another level, if the reason for leadership change was a threat to the very survival of the organisation, partly due to the previous leadership's rigid adherence to mission philosophy, will it be wise for a new leadership to maintain the same stance, especially if a change of direction is a prescribed condition of support by prospective donors? In any case, should NGO missions be dynamic and subject to modifications as they go along? What should be the primary motivations for NGO mission reviews - donor conditions and funding prospects, the real and expressed needs of grassroots beneficiaries, or a sense by the NGO that the international aid community have identified new priority issues, and that sensible or dynamic organisations should go along? If the problems or issues that led to the adoption of the existing mission remained unresolved among the target communities and people, will it be right for the supporting NGOs to change track to new issues, or should it rigidly adhere to the existing mission? Should donors henceforth take their cue in setting funding priorities from practitioners who operate at the 'point of direct encounter' among the people? But who can persuade donors to tread this new path if it becomes an important objective of African NGOs? Indeed, are mission statements and their accompanying value projections really a critical necessity for successful work with the poor and marginalised, or might the pre-occupation with mission just be much ado about nothing? Answers to these questions can only be found at a level of concerted inter-organisational thinking and action. But a consensus built around clarity of NGO identity, institutional strategies, culture, mode of relation with other actors in development, articulation and prioritisation of fundamental interests, remain a pre-requisite for responding to, and effectively managing these tensions.

Section Three

Towards Managing NGO Mission-Operation Tensions

Tensions among human beings and organisations are not always easy to manage. Resolving human and organisational tensions can be complicated by the multi-dimensionality of their causes. May be it is important to accept that certain tensions defy solutions, that some can only be transcended over time, while others can only be managed in a way to minimise their adverse effects.

There are no ready-made solutions to the tensions experienced in the operational life of NGOs. Often, however, most NGOs deal with crises as they arise, the response largely determined by the nature of the issue or crisis at hand. Most Nigerians and African NGOs can be described as 'muddling through' when confronted by operational tensions. Perhaps, this can only be so, as the 'realpolitik' of NGO operational existence involves tensions and dilemmas that are often varied and un-patterned. We can summarise the various issues of tension raised above under a number of broad sub-headings:

- i) conceptualising, understanding and implementing mission;
- ii) independence;
- iii) funding, accountability and transparency;
- iv) human resource management and capacity building; and
- v) politics of competition and networking.

NGO Identity

The tensions arising from NGO crisis of identity are multi-dimensional, as pointed out in the first section of this volume. If NGOs are non-political and non-governmental, they are also expected to be non-partisan in the context of democratic party politics of the state. Without the instrumentality of political power, what is the extent of their effectiveness, especially in respect of the capacity to intervene in, and influence national policy and development processes? As implied by their mission, NGOs are not supposed to be competing with political parties for the acquisition and utilisation of power. They are only committed to facilitate or act as a catalyst for development as shaped and directed by other actors, namely government, the formal and informal business sectors. In addition, to be able to influence governmental policy and effectively mobilise support across political boundaries, NGOs would normally find it expedient to transcend party politics, by demonstrating overt neutrality in competitive politics. But this may not necessarily mean that they would or should have no subtle or covert

ideological or policy preferences in relation to the different political forces or groups in their society. Especially on policies that touch directly on the issues and programmes of interest to NGO work and constituents, absolute ideological or political neutrality is both impossible and ultimately unrealistic. One cardinal way therefore, of reducing tensions among members of an NGO, and among NGOs in a network, in Nigeria as in other African countries, is to have very strongly articulated, knowledge and researched-based, and popularly-endorsed policy platforms. These should be on key areas of policy and governance that relate to sustainable human and environmental development, and they must have a demonstrable capacity to mobilise the affected grassroots constituents behind such platforms. To the extent that popularly-endorsed issues of relevance to sustainable development constitute NGOs' main entry point into policy, and the cause overlaps with mainstream politics, the pursuit of their mission would appear more justified and morally defensible, especially in a fully democratic, or even partially democratic polity like Nigeria.

Apart from the tension associated with formally neutral political identity, NGOs also have to deal with the fact that much of their mission philosophy implies a transformative underpinning, which sometimes seeks changes in long-standing socio-political and cultural norms of society. Some of the changes sought by NGOs may not even involve the need for formal control of political power. They may be attitudinal or structural changes which run against the grain of established and popularly accepted practices. As an illustration, NGO action and advocacy against clitorisdectomy (female circumcision) may extract flacks from traditionalists, the majority of whom would often be powerful and respectable among NGOs' grassroots constituencies. Similarly, an NGO which mobilises women to come out en masse to vote may run into stormy weather. If the NGO is run and directed by locals, but funded by foreign aid, this kind of crisis may well create an identity and operational tension. A subtle educational or enlightenment campaign, especially if linked with projects directly relevant to the beneficiaries' livelihood needs, can help NGOs better manage the difficulty associated with implementing this kind of transformational mission objective. The prospects are better still, if the project beneficiaries have been involved from the outset in the construction of the project, and have acquired a true sense of ownership during its execution. Thus, genuine participation and ownership of transformational projects are an important element in constructing the identity of the project and that of the supporting NGO. Ultimately, no NGO can defend a sensitive and difficult transformational project as well the direct beneficiaries.

Invariably, NGOs must acquire keen sensitivity to the environment in which they operate, and learn how effectively to mobilise support for unpopular but important causes. The language used, the contacts made locally, the mobilisational techniques deployed, as well as the demonstrative behaviour of the initiators of change, are critical factors in reducing the tension arising from opposition. Generally, deployment of good public relations in the course of project implementation, may even win over those who had initially been hostile.

Mission Dimensions

No doubt, the perception and interpretation of the stated mission of an NGO by its in-house staff and leadership are bound to generate some tension. Also, the understanding of the mission by the external audiences or actors relating with the NGOs will sometimes be subject to nuances that produce operational difficulty. We would argue that the most daunting tension NGOs may face regarding perceptions of their stated mission is the possibility of a limited or sometimes simplistic understanding on their part of their target groups or communities. Some Nigerian NGOs tend to advance the pursuit of their mission among their grassroots constituents from a Western perspective, using mainly Western values, language and techniques. For example, while land is regarded strictly as an economic item - a property - in the Western perception, the traditional African perception of land, even in its evolving forms, remains a multi-dimensional resource, involving spiritual and non-measurable values, in addition to its use and economic values. For an African NGO undertaking a project involving land use, it will be missing many important points and nuances, and may alienate the target community, to regard land in the Western sense. The socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions must be fully studied and understood along with the economic factors before intervention. Such a sensitive approach is likely to help minimise the process of marginalisation of the people, discussed in the earlier part of this essay.

In addition, the language of communication is important, especially at the grassroots level. NGOs need to develop the capacity for translation of Western ideas and scientific terms to local languages, where these apply. In addition, in communicating with target communities, the impression should not be erroneously given that these communities should be westernised in order to enjoy the benefits of social change. The essence is to improve the general quality of life of the people, without necessarily transforming them into Europeanised or Americanised Africans. Their dignity as Africans can be still enhanced even within the context of an evolving socio-cultural and

economic transformation process.

Another dimension of the challenge of NGO mission implementation is the interface of funding pressures with those of programme effectiveness and, especially, organisational survival. Perhaps one way of coping with this tension is for African NGOs to work with their constituents to develop a **yearly proposal of priority activities**, along with a modality of execution, all based on the NGO mission, as jointly perceived and understood by them and their target groups. Of course, there may not be funds for all the proposed activities, but there should, at least, be an agreement on some basic activities. Whether or not any project or activity proposed outside the above will qualify for implementation, will be determined within the context of the priority programme and NGO mission, as stated above. This approach has already been of great help in keeping some Nigerian NGOs on the mission track. There is a well reported instance of a Nigerian NGO which had turned down a donor project because it did not fall within its mission. The same NGO is known to have turned down a project offer on grounds of non-relevance to mission, unsuitably short implementation time-frame proposed by donor, and disapproval of proposed methodology of fieldwork and analysis. It is hoped that many African NGOs can be inspired by this kind of organisational attitude, especially as the NGO in question has so far not been known to suffer any setback in its ability to collaborate with, and carry out programmes with other donors. But NGOs that aspire to this level of organisational principle must demonstrate consistent **credibility** and a **record of performance**. This must be a life-long objective for NGOs.

The external politics of adhering to an NGO's mission is very important, especially as many donor agencies and international NGOs not only pre-determine their own missions, but also the programmes, time frames and preferred implementation modalities. Often NGOs only serve as agents to carry out projects for the donor agencies with little identification with the project, in terms of a sense of local ownership. In fact, some Nigerian NGOs have reported cases of donor agencies insisting that all baseline data collected should be shipped along with the report to them. Faced with circumstances such as these, it is little wonder that many African NGOs can easily infer the existence of a hidden agenda on the part of their funding partners. But African NGOs are themselves hardly blameless in this process. It is important for them to learn to insist on co-sponsorship with their funding partners, even when the latter provide all or most of the needed funds. Local NGOs should learn to secure more bargaining mileage from their local expertise, and the legitimacy they bring to the project execution as a result of having the trust and participation of their local constituents. In

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addition, local NGOs should endeavour to clearly spell out their mission and mandate, as locally evolved with the target groups. The absence of a clear mission can sometimes make an NGO vulnerable to manipulation by external donors, as well as by cynically ambitious local staff or members, who may see the organisation only as a transit point to other objectives.

Independence

NGOs generally like to keep an image of themselves as independent of the state, political parties, and donors. In Nigeria, many NGOs proliferated under military rule, particularly under the last regime of General Abacha. It was observed that many of the new, 'bread and butter' NGOs emerging in that period severely compromised their independence, having hardly any mission and philosophical orientation beyond support for government and its programmes. Internally, the independence of an NGO could be compromised by a dominant leader, who in the context of local party politics, is not neutral. It is important for African NGO leaders to make a distinction between their personal interests and those of the organisations they lead. One way to give sound leadership is for them to de-emphasise their personal urges from the officially stipulated workings of the organisation. Over-bearing leaders tend to crowd out the sense of belonging and commitment of other members of staff, thereby undermining the achievement of the organisation's mission. The critical requirement for continuity and effectiveness of African NGOs is institutionalisation of the internal procedures, norms and relational aspects of their operational life. Ultimately, NGO independence presupposes that the character, mission and identity of the organisation are clearly identifiable in practice, especially among the communities in which they operate.

Funds, Accountability and Transparency

As this volume has clearly shown, one of the greatest sources of tension for NGO operations in Africa concerns finance or funds. Their limited capacity for self-funding or to do development work with their own local resources, makes NGOs heavily dependent on external donor agencies who, as indicated above, also have their own agenda and priorities. Organisational independence, with its implication for mission objectives, often gets undermined. Given the poor status of African economies and societies, local NGOs will always face this particular limitation, unless and until their dependence on external funding is redressed. The present situation is skewing local priorities, and may sometimes contribute to opportunities for foreign espionage activities, undertaken under the guise of humanitarian assistance in the continent.

As Nigeria goes democratic and the polity opens up, avenues for collaborating with state and federal governments have increased. If NGO public relations are good, government, especially at state level, has many problems about which they would only be too glad to seek and use NGO skills and resources. In 1998, for example, three state governments, along with a Nigerian and a foreign NGO, collaborated in sponsoring a training workshop for government and NGO professionals on 'Revenue Generation, Financial Management, Accountability and Transparency'. Similarly, a state government recently contracted a local NGO to organise a training workshop for its legislators and civil servants, including those at local government level. Such collaborative interventions which interface NGOs and government at local level, can be explored by Nigerian NGOs, both as a local fund mobilisation strategy, and as a means of intervening in, and influencing official policies and programmes that are targetted at NGO constituents and other marginalised or vulnerable groups. Furthermore, through publications, research, consultancy and advisory services on government projects, NGOs should be able to enhance their ability to reduce dependence on foreign donors. In essence, NGOs must actively explore more independent and multiple avenues of funding for their work, especially their overhead and personnel costs. None of these moves will significantly reduce the altruistic mission of NGOs.

The ultimate test of transparency for any NGO is its own self-imposed standards and sense of mission. There are already a number of highly credible NGOs in Nigeria, though they may still be small in relation to the size of the sector. Through an effective nation-wide networking, such NGOs must strive to set the standards of probity and transparency for the majority. For while it may be true that the Nigerian NGO scene can boast of 'non-governmental families' (NGFs), non-governmental enterprises (NGEs) and non-governmental individuals (NGIs), these types have fortunately not succeeded in making any in-roads on the national stage.

Human Resource Management and Capacity Building

Coping with the challenges of administrative, personnel and programme management in the face of constantly inadequate resources, remains a key tension in the organisational life of NGOs. As already indicated above, fund limitation makes it difficult for NGOs to retain quality staff, and to effectively upgrade the skills and competence of personnel. In such circumstance, pursuit of mission objective is invariably hampered. Several avenues have been explored by NGOs to respond to their capacity building and institutional development needs. Some of the more cost-effective ones

have involved donor agencies agreeing to sponsor the training of some NGO staff on an on-going basis for a period of years. In this scenario, NGOs are generally able to keep the affected staff's salary running, it being usually understood that the staff would then be bonded to work for the NGO for a specific period of time after acquiring such training. The newly trained staff is also obliged to spread the benefits of their upgraded skill by providing in-house training to other staff. By so doing, NGOs can increase overall knowledge base and capacity of personnel without too much disruption to their financial situation. But African NGOs must eventually face up to the need to package their own locally-initiated training programmes, which would operate like periodic 'schools' for development studies. Such periodic 'schools' should provide an avenue to introduce both prospective and already engaged NGO staff to key issues, debates and analytical and project management skills in the policy, planning and implementation of sustainable development. This is a particular challenge for national NGO networks throughout Africa, and indeed for donors and international NGOs who genuinely wish to see a qualitative increase in the capacity and institutional strength of Africa's NGO sector. Because of the 'scale economy' of such development training programmes, individual NGOs can benefit by training and re-training more staff at a reduced cost.

Another strategy for training has been tried out in some locations in Nigeria. This involves a consortium of NGOs within a location or region, pooling their resources together, and then inviting resource persons to train their staff for a week or two. Such training has included skills in negotiation, confidence-building, group and network harmonisation, in-house resource management, mediation skills, leadership-staff relations and a variety of field operations skills. A critical factor in the success of these capacity building ambitions relates to the leadership, who should be seen to demonstrate the 'political' will to explore and implement new ideas for the organisation, even if these come from lower level staff.

The Politics of Competition and Networking

Networking can be a useful and beneficial tool of capacity building and institutional strengthening for NGOs. In an atmosphere of positive and mutually-supportive inter-organisational collaboration among NGOs, the value of networking information can be enormous for every participating entity. However, as indicated above, the politics of NGO networking is often reflective of competition among them for scarce funds. Some NGOs participate in a network as a one-way street, sucking information and any other possible benefits without a commitment to contribute. For such NGOs,

network participation represents no more than an opportunity to poach ideas from others. Even more discouraging experiences abound in the process of competing for funds. This ranges from the peddling of negative rumours about 'rival' NGO or other colleagues in the sector, to outright malicious condemnation of the efforts of another NGO which appears to be doing well, and has won noticeable donor support. Donors and international NGOs who operate among African NGOs can help to attenuate this tension by being more open-minded and learning about local NGO reality through intimate and long observation. Some foreign donors show an inclination to cultivate their own circle of NGO friends among the local practitioners and leaders. Indeed, international collaborators or donors should as much as possible encourage, and, if necessary and locally demanded, fund NGOs to pool resources and network around key issues of national or regional policy, in order to make greater and positive impact on the lives and interests of their grassroots constituencies. On the part of local NGOs and leaders in the sector, there is greater need to seek out and strengthen those aspects of the competitive spirit which enhance the aggregate capacity of all actors. This is partly a moral challenge, which goes right to the heart of the philosophy and mission espoused by NGOs. Indeed, some have advocated for the establishment of some sort of mechanism dubbed 'integrity alert', which could help to monitor the conduct of NGO leaders and practitioners on matters of inter-organisational cohesion. Perhaps this echoes the idea of a code of conduct, dealt with earlier in this essay.

Will African NGOs ever fully resolve or perfectly manage the philosophical tensions arising from the operational pressures of their work? Probably not. But they can increase the effectiveness and impact of their work by strengthening the tools and ideas underpinning their 'trade'. This involves greater focus on institutional self-definition, inter-organisational action, clarity and realism of operational objectives, and flexibility in the pursuit of their stated mission. Ultimately, the yardstick for measuring the success of these ambitions will be the people who inhabit the periphery of socio-economic and power reality in African countries. In Nigeria, the NGO sector is already hoping that the new millennium will witness a more active and committed intervention on its part in the service of the people, the environment and sustainable development. The same is hoped for all NGOs active in Africa.

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