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Rodger Wegner*

The Role of NGOs in Development Cooperation

Some Notes on Empirical Research Findings

There has been an impressive proliferation of non-governmental organizations in development cooperation in the last two decades. The main reason for this has been the belief – among both experts and the public at large – that NGOs have a number of advantages over the state sector when it comes to aid efficiency. The following article examines these apparent advantages and concludes that NGOs are often not nearly as effective in practice as the theory purports.

In response to the poor performance of state-centred development models and to the spreading phenomenon of aid-pessimism, development policy institutions now find themselves under increasing pressure to present strategies and programmes which offer some prospect of success. The main measure of such success is whether or not support measures manage to reach poor sections of the population, to strengthen their capacity to help themselves and hence to improve their living conditions not just sporadically but on a sustained basis. In the wake of reform efforts, then, the instruments of development policy have been undergoing a radical review in recent years, in terms of their objectives, the measures taken and the cooperating partners used.

Whereas the prevailing view for decades was that modernization processes needed to be induced and guided from above – i.e. by governments – the neo-liberal approach which is now visibly in the ascendancy assumes that development can only be self-sustaining if it comes from below, from the grass roots of society itself. The practical consequence of this shift is that the role of third world states is being trimmed back to the basic tasks of creating an adequate framework for development in terms of law and order, an efficient administration and sound macroeconomic management, and of catering for social welfare, with particularly pronounced cutbacks occurring in the overblown economic interventionism practised by many governments. At the same time, the role of the private sector is being enhanced, i.e. the role both of private businesses and of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), making up what is also known as

the third sector. NGOs in particular would appear to suggest themselves as an alternative way forward for aid which has the intent of allowing increasing socio-economic and political participation by broad sections of the population in processes of decision-making and income and wealth distribution.

No universally accepted definition of a non-governmental organization or precise delimitation from other organizational forms has yet become established. The category currently includes anything from grass-roots initiatives with just a few members via self-help promotion organizations, farmers' associations, cooperatives, civil rights movements, more or less elitist civic clubs, academic think-tanks all the way across the spectrum to donor organizations from industrial countries which may have budgets running into hundreds of millions of dollars. All the "NGO" catch-all tag says about an organization is precisely that it is "non-governmental", but that does not give any indication of the characteristics which give it its real identity. In spite of differing definitional approaches, the NGOs operating in the development field do nevertheless have one common denominator, namely that their chief purpose consists in enabling poor population groups to meet their "basic needs" (food, clean water, housing, clothing and the provision of basic social services) plus their politico-cultural "basic human needs" (respect for human dignity and human rights, conservation of the ecological habitat, education, political participation, cultural identity) on a higher level than has previously been the case. Such improvements may be achieved by way of people's organizations (POs), via external support given by intermediary NGOs in the developing countries concerned (which can be grouped together with the POs to

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be defined as the southern NGOs), or via support provided by the northern NGOs in the industrial countries, which also carry out an intermediary function. Indeed, all of these organizations mediate in a number of different ways, acting as a bridge between donors and the ultimate target groups of development aid, while also conducting liaison on the political stage, whether between the state and society at large, between different social groups or else, at an international level, between different societies altogether.

The Mushrooming of Southern NGOs

The amount of attention now being paid to the NGO phenomenon primarily reflects the rapid growth in the foundation of new organizations which, commencing in the 1970s but becoming more intense in the 1980s, has now embraced most developing countries with the exception of certain socialist countries (e.g. the People's Republic of China, North Korea) and of the Arabian region. In Latin America and in South and South-East Asia in particular, NGOs have multiplied at a tremendous pace, many countries showing growth rates of 200% to 400% within just three to four years.¹ In Africa, where there are several tens of thousands of self-help groups of a mainly traditional character, indigenous NGOs fulfilling intermediary functions have been relatively late in forming. They are still relatively few in number today, and they hold less autonomous positions relative to national governments and foreign donors than is the case in many Asian or Latin American countries. Nevertheless, even the African countries have begun to experience considerable NGO growth in recent years, and it has reached almost explosive proportions in some of them such as Zimbabwe or Kenya. According to estimates made by the Club of Rome, in the mid-1980s approximately 100 million people around the world were involved in some way with the work done by NGOs, of whom 60 million live in South and South-East Asia alone.²

The impressive proliferation of NGOs is chiefly a reaction to the continuing lack of economic growth in many countries, to the resulting mass poverty and to the inability of governmental decision-makers to provide satisfactory answers to the major questions of social survival. This has been added to in many places by political causes such as the suppression of ethnic or religious minorities, the systematic disregard of human and civil rights, and the obstruction and banning of opposition parties, which have forced many reforming intellectuals to seek alternative forms of social protest and political participation.

Another quite substantial factor contributing to NGO growth has been the considerable broadening of social involvement by religious organizations, especially

Christian churches. Influenced by the reformed social doctrines following the 2nd Vatican Council (1962-1965) and by liberation theology, Catholic institutions in particular have acted as a focal point for NGO movements in many countries, and have undergone a transformation from defenders of the *status quo* into protagonists of social change and opponents of authoritarian regimes.

In addition to these internal factors, a major portion of the accelerated development of the "third sector" may also be attributed to "supply-led" growth as various sections of the intelligentsia in developing countries have responded flexibly to expansion in the North-South flow of aid. The NGO sector has opened up opportunities for some of the middle classes with academic backgrounds, especially in the social sciences, to develop new job opportunities over and above the insufficient demand created by the state and the private sector by setting up organizational structures of their own. While the aid supplied by Northern NGOs (from OECD countries) was approximately \$1.9 billion in 1976, by 1988 the total had reached \$6.5 billion, or approximately 12% of all development aid.³ This increase in private-sector assistance was generated both by an increase in the funds and donations received from Northern NGOs and, more importantly, by above-average growth in government cofinancing of private-sector development projects, in which about a third of Northern NGO support funds was involved in the 1980s. An additional funding source for Southern NGOs which increased rapidly in its significance in the last decade was direct support from bilateral and multilateral donors which were seeking closer contact to the grass roots and greater emphasis upon promoting self-help when allocating their financial backing.

Intermediary Organisations

One of the key features of the boom in newly founded organizations has been an extraordinary rate of growth in intermediary service organizations. These include ecclesiastical establishments, umbrella organizations for farmers and cooperatives, academic sponsoring institutions, or organizations run by the private business sector which provide various forms of services to poor sections of the population, though the officials and employees working for such organizations will normally belong to other social groups. The organizations are frequently founded by leading personalities with a strong

¹ K. Sinaga: An Assessment of the Role and Development of NGOs in Indonesia: Aiding Poor People's Movements or Becoming the 'Long Arm' of the Powerful?, Bielefeld 1993, p. 2.

² B. Schneider et al.: Die Revolution der Barfüßigen. Ein Bericht an den Club of Rome, Vienna 1986, p. 21.

³ OECD: Development Cooperation, Paris, various years.

social and political commitment, some of them charismatic figures, mainly from academic or church backgrounds, though local politicians and bureaucrats have also been playing an increasing role in recent years. Their staff do not usually consist of unpaid volunteers but primarily of fully-paid, regular employees, many of whom have academic educations and, once again, come mainly from the urban middle classes. Like the activities of their target groups, these intermediary organizations are largely funded from external, foreign sources, but also to a very limited extent from private and public funds mobilized in the developing countries themselves.

The growth of these intermediary organizations in the developing countries has fundamentally changed the international division of labour in the private development aid sector. Southern NGOs have now largely taken over the part formerly played by Northern NGOs in executing projects on the ground and providing services to the poor. They are responsible for developing and implementing programmes and projects with social objectives or designed to raise incomes, and the main beneficiaries are not normally members of the organizations concerned. The service NGOs fulfil a wide variety of functions, including the design and execution of social and economic projects, non-formal educational measures, agricultural extension and legal advisory services, health seminars, organizational assistance, arranging loans and, above all, mobilizing financial resources from abroad.

Capital City Networks

In a further stage which has been in progress for some years, especially in a large number of Asian countries, more detailed differentiation has tended to occur, with a great deal of impetus being put into developing all manner of specialist establishments and networks in the capital cities. These have only indirect contact with the poor, and concentrate their activities on research, documentation, legal services, publishing, female emancipation issues, ecological aspects, developing social utopias etc., and they act as brokers between local NGOs and foreign donor organizations. They also work as paid contractors on the latter's behalf in recommending and evaluating projects, and as such are often difficult to distinguish from private consultancy firms.

The service organizations working at the grass roots level often simultaneously serve a number of different people's organizations, but generally confine their activities to a small number of villages. The vast majority of them fall into the LINGO (little NGO) and MINGO (mid-sized NGO) categories, with a staff of between 10 and 50 and an annual budget roughly in the range of \$50,000-200,000. BINGOs (big NGOs) with hundreds or even

thousands of employees and nationwide operations tend to be the exception, although some of these mammoth organizations have attained central importance in certain countries, such as the Grameen Bank and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee in Bangladesh or the Sarvodaya Movement in Sri Lanka. In Asia at least, regardless of their numerical importance, the larger NGOs and networks based in capital cities occupy a key position in non-governmental development cooperation by virtue of their intermediary role between donors and local service organizations. Particularly now that responsibilities have been delegated into the countries concerned in the fields of project selection, evaluation and monitoring, these "new middlemen" have seen a considerable increase in their power. In many regions, the smaller, local NGOs are becoming more and more disconcerted by this trend as they face the prospect of becoming increasingly dependent upon such organizations. The implication is that the "middle metropolitan class"⁴ will have the opportunity to determine the focal points of support and, above all, to practise favouritism and discrimination vis-à-vis individual NGO segments.

Comparative Advantages of NGOs

The basis of the present NGO euphoria and the resulting partial redirection of aid flows is the fact that both experts and the public at large take a much more favourable view of assistance provided by NGOs than of its governmental equivalent. That assessment is based on a number of apparent comparative advantages on the NGOs' part.⁵ Their main advantage seems to be their orientation to poverty and basic needs. NGO support measures are especially intended to take in the needs of particularly disadvantaged sections of the population – preferably those defined as the poorest of the poor – and to be beneficial to the groups which official donor agencies are normally unable to reach, partly by circumventing the corrupt, bureaucratic governing classes.

The general view is that NGOs are more effectively and more efficiently administered. They are perceived to generate lower administrative and project implementation costs because of their supposedly less formalized and

⁴ M. Johnson: Non-Government Organisations at the Crossroads in Indonesia, in: R. C. Rice (ed.): Indonesian Economic Development: Approaches, Technology, Small-Scale Textiles, Urban Infrastructure and NGOs, Clayton 1990, pp. 77-92.

⁵ For a representative selection, see G. B. Baldwin: Nongovernmental Organisations and African Development: An Inquiry. World Bank Background Papers (Vol. 3: The Longterm Perspective/ Study of Sub-Saharan Africa), Washington D.C. 1990; World Bank: Collaboration with Non-Governmental Organizations, Washington D.C. 1988; M. J. Esman, N. T. Uphoff: Local Organizations: Intermediaries in Rural Development, Ithaca N.Y. 1984; OECD: Voluntary Aid for Development. The Role of Non-Governmental Organizations, Paris 1988.

less bureaucratic structures, because their workers are believed to be paid relatively little yet to be above-averagely motivated, because their chief concerns are held to be with values rather than material riches, and because they are thought to be not as severely susceptible to corruption as government agencies. On the strength of their decentralized decision-making structures, of the fact that they are usually small and of the rapid feedback obtained from projects, the NGOs are also said to be able to respond more flexibly and thus to act more quickly to counter mistakes or adverse developments.

Private-sector development cooperation is also believed to be more competent than average in the field of self-help promotion. Many service organizations have undergone a learning process which has led them away from the classic activities of emergency aid, welfare work and community development schemes towards a new understanding of development which focuses on community organization and on mobilizing target groups. That means the weight of emphasis in NGO support measures is believed not to be on the supply and absorption of external funds, but on the "empowerment" of the poor, i.e. on motivating them to define their own development opportunities for themselves, to develop their own self-sustaining organizational structures, to mobilize internal resources and to act collectively in the economic and political spheres.

The hope which is also placed in the "people's organizations" is thus that marginalized population groups could, in the long term, themselves become the central vehicle for processes of social change. In an ideal-typical perspective, the POs consist of self-administered, membership-based organizations involving poor sections of the population, and allowing them to solve their economic, social and political problems autonomously by building up their own solidarity. The immediate aim of such organizations is to improve the living conditions of their members. That means overcoming everyday problems such as inadequate nutrition and healthcare, low agricultural productivity or a lack of income-earning and employment opportunities. Their prime emphasis is therefore placed on economic and social activities such as introducing higher-yielding but appropriate cultivation methods, promoting small businesses, developing producer and marketing cooperatives, small livestock and fish farms or establishing basic health services. Although short-term material improvements for the target groups are indeed a central aim of reformist support organizations, the prime focus of attention is nevertheless intended to be upon the socio-psychological dimension which is crucial in order to pave the way for a long-term self-development process. In parallel with the

implementation of an initial set of common projects, the idea is that joint, concrete actions and the gaining of a new awareness of their own situation and their capacity to change it on a collective basis, should initiate a process among the POs' members which will reciprocally strengthen itself and which will lead to a decline in patterns of thinking and behaviour which are inimical to development (fatalism, individualism, apathy, parochialism, feelings of inferiority and powerlessness) and to the internalization of new values (a positive attitude to collective action, participation, group identification, enhanced self-respect).

Although a clear accent is placed on informal educational work and consciousness-raising, and in spite of the sometimes scathing criticism of externally funded projects liable to increase dependence, there are nevertheless hardly any support organizations which have concentrated entirely on this mobilization approach. Most of them combine their work of organization, mobilization and information with the provision of project funds and other material services. However, such assistance is now supposed to be provided in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity, and only given in situations in which target groups' own efforts are no longer sufficient.

Role in Democratization

In the political sphere, too, NGOs are increasingly being accorded a key role in national democratization processes and in the development of civil society.⁶ Countless civil rights organizations, farmers' associations, trade unions and self-help promotion organizations are now endeavouring, by claiming the guarantees of liberty associated with the modern constitutional state (human rights above all), to contain the arbitrariness of state powers and hence to expand the political scope available to different groups in society. In this sense, NGOs often seek to promote a positive understanding of democracy not only in matters of state but also in society at large, by campaigning for the recognition of constitutionally secured procedural rules, democratic forms of interaction, and the virtues of good citizenship. Intermediary NGOs regard their key political function as that of a form of transmission system between the state and the public. They primarily aim to devote their efforts to articulating the interests of groups which would otherwise be excluded and to bring those interests into the political process.

⁶ Cf., e.g., S. Linberg: *Civil Society against the State? Farmers' Agitation and New Social Movements in India*, Lund 1990; A. Gregorio-Medel: *Development Non-Governmental Organizations and the Democratization of Philippine Society*, Bielefeld 1992; M. Bratton: *Beyond the States. Civil Society and Associational Life in Africa*, in: *Transnational Associations*, Brussels 1991, Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 130-140.

In concrete terms, a direct implication of this is that intermediary NGOs put the case for social and political reforms to a country's executive and legislative powers on behalf of the poor sections of the population. Of course, the lower social strata's weakness in asserting their position against the prevailing interests of élites cannot be completely counteracted, no matter how actively their urban champions become involved. Because the essential reason for that weakness is that the mass of the rural population has been virtually unorganized in the past and thus incapable of succeeding in any conflict, a large number of reformist or indeed social-revolutionary self-help promotion agencies have set about trying to overcome the political marginalization of these people. By means of political education, consciousness-raising, the communication of knowledge on how the socio-political system operates, by organization and finally mobilization for self-determined activities, the NGOs' programmes aim to enhance the lower strata's ability to take action and to assert themselves, thus translating their strength in numbers into true political strength.

Effectiveness of Operations

Though at the theoretical and normative level it may appear to be the obvious course to strengthen the poor population strata's ability to help themselves and to support the development of politically aware groups capable of organizing and articulating themselves and of taking autonomous action, the fact is that social research to date has had relatively little to say about the effectiveness of non-governmental development aid and hence about the extent to which these theoretical concepts really work in practice.

The organizations one would most expect to have an interest in appraising the effectiveness of their operations in this way are the Northern NGOs. After all, they ought to want to ensure that their decisions on what support to provide are taken on a firm foundation of knowledge as to the societies and projects they are dealing with, and also that the standard of their operations can be raised with the help of experience, criticism and corrective action. Yet monitoring and evaluation is one of the least-developed instruments in the self-help promotion approach.⁷ The Northern organizations tend to rely chiefly on the financial and project progress reports submitted (usually semi-annually) by project executing organizations, plus one or two short field visits by the desk officers responsible, which are increasingly being called into question by the Southern NGOs as superfluous "rural tourism".⁸ On the other hand, because of the relatively high costs involved and the heavy workload their staff already have to bear, donors generally only carry out external assessments and "joint

evaluations" on a selective or randomly sampled basis. Ultimately then, administrative efficiency – defined in terms of low operating costs and a smooth flow of funds – tends to be maximized at the expense of minimized expert knowledge relating to the projects as such. Furthermore, many Southern NGOs have a growing tendency to reject evaluations conducted by "experts" from the donor countries who in their view are not – and perhaps truly are not – fully aware of national and local conditions, on the grounds that they represent a form of interference irreconcilable with the partnership concepts propagated.

Self-evaluation vs. External Experts

Consequently, in the case of European donor organizations in particular the predominant pattern of reporting is now self-evaluation by the Southern NGOs which implement the projects. For all that such reports can act as a valuable instrument of fault-finding and project improvement for executing agencies – especially when they conduct them on their own initiative and when the target groups are actively involved in discourse and analysis – they nevertheless cannot usually provide any objective evaluation of the effects of support for the purposes of the donor organization. The problem is a particularly telling one in cases where there is a vast gulf between objectives and what is actually achieved, giving the self-evaluation the tendency to conceal the true situation. However, given that their chief interest will inevitably be to ensure continuing support for their own projects, even responsible partner organizations often show little inclination to enter into an open dialogue with donors, and to sit down together with them to critically review failures and adverse developments. As one Filipino NGO fieldworker put it, when forced into a conflict between the roles of policing activities on the donor's behalf or mothering the self-help groups it is supporting, a project executing agency is most likely to plump for the latter, protective role.

⁷ B. Smith: *More than Altruism. The Politics of Private Foreign Aid*, Princeton N.J. 1990; K. Verhagen: *Self-Help Promotion. A Challenge to the NGO Community*, Royal Tropical Institute, CEBEMO, Dordrecht 1987; R. Wegner: *Nicht-Regierungsorganisationen als entwicklungspolitische Hoffnungsträger? Eine Studie zur Wirksamkeit privater Entwicklungshilfe auf den Philippinen*, Hamburg 1993; M. P. van Dijk: *The Effectiveness of NGOs: Insights from the Danish, British and Dutch Impact Studies*, Discussion Paper for the conference on "NGOs als entwicklungspolitische Hoffnungsträger?", Development Policy and Development Theory Section, staged by DVPW and the German Overseas Institute in Hamburg, 3rd-5th June 1993; J. Tandler: *Turning Private Voluntary Organisations into Development Agencies: Questions for Evaluation*, AID Program Evaluation Discussion Paper No. 12, Washington D.C. 1982.

⁸ S. Nyoni: *Indigenous NGOs: Liberation, Self-Reliance, and Development*, in: A. G. Drabek (ed.): *Development Alternatives: The Challenges for NGOs*, World Development, supplement to Vol. 15, Oxford, Autumn 1987, pp. 51-56; cf. also R. David: *The Role of International Development Agencies*, in: Kasarian, Manila 1988, Vol. 4, No. 2, pp. 21-24.

On the other hand, even external evaluations commissioned by donors from experts from the universities or the private sector – normally in the recipient country – frequently only bring to light a limited, distorted picture of the project in reality. The main reason is that the data are normally collected during an extremely short visit to the project of two to four weeks' duration, or indeed sometimes just in a matter of days. Experts with little time available frequently confine their enquiries to talks with the staff of the service organizations executing the project and to the material they provide, and neglect to spend time speaking to the actual target groups. Independent experts operating in their own commercial interests are also subject to a certain amount of pressure to take a "softly, softly" approach to addressing the problems associated with development support, to avoid harming the interests of the organizations involved. The problem applies especially to experts from the recipient country in as far as there tend to be far-reaching institutional and personal interdependencies, hardly possible for outsiders to appreciate, between the academic world, consulting businesses and the NGO sector. Yet even experts from other countries are quite likely to have to deal with strong expectations on the part of their client organization. After all, charities rely on a continuing flow of donations, so even they often have relatively little interest in too critical an analysis of the results of their support.

In short, there is at least cause for some doubt as to the scientific value of much of the evaluation work carried out. Furthermore, these reports cannot in any case generally be used for an effectiveness analysis of non-governmental development aid as they are normally treated in confidence, with most organizations making a point of prohibiting access to them by any outsiders, and only selectively publishing a very small number of them. However, in response to the evidence now available of the deficiencies of the past, and partly also due to government pressures, a number of donor organizations are now clearly beginning to change their approach and giving consideration to more systematic, more effective monitoring procedures.⁹

Problematic Tendencies

In view of the underdevelopment of monitoring and evaluation systems, it is surprising that such premature, sweeping attributions of the qualities discussed above have been made to the NGOs, and that they have been put forward as better qualified agencies to cater for development aid. All the more so in that studies conducted by independent social scientists do not provide any firm bed of evidence for that view. For three decades, social scientists paid little attention to the effectiveness of non-governmental development aid. Only from the late 1980s

onwards have efforts been made in a number of Western industrial countries to discuss the issue at least more intensively, even if not substantially more systematically. To summarize the knowledge currently available, the findings of enquiries suggest that a more differentiated and more sceptical view ought to be taken of the effectiveness of non-governmental development aid than has generally been supposed.¹⁰ Although the outcomes and problems naturally vary from one cultural context to another and also, depending on how far the NGO movement has developed, from country to country, sector to sector and organization to organization, there are nevertheless a number of problematic tendencies which can be highlighted against the background of a major diversion of support funds towards NGOs and self-help projects. These include:

□ *Limited trickle-down effects and the bureaucratization tendency.* In non-governmental development work, too, support measures still only reach the bottom strata of society, particularly the poorest of the poor, to a limited extent. This is partly a result of internal stratification among the poor, which means that the leading figures in a village tend to gain disproportionately while those whose need is greatest, who virtually lack any resources at all and have a low level of education, are frequently barely reached. The main problem, however, is the tendency for resources to be creamed off in the intermediary areas. Apart from public-spirited, altruistic motives, institutional and personal interests of their founders and staff are also brought to bear in the operations of service organizations. A prime reason for this is that their lack of any occupational foundations outside their own organization often makes them materially dependent on the resources flowing in from abroad.

Such creaming-off tendencies are particularly prevalent in Latin America and Asia. Characteristic outward signs are the development of overblown

⁹ Cf. M. Dütting et al.: *Evaluierung in der kirchlichen Entwicklungszusammenarbeit. Ein Arbeitsbuch.* Misereor/AGKED, Aachen 1992; D. Marsden, P. Oakley (eds.): *Evaluating Social Development Projects*, OXFAM, Oxford 1990; L. Zivetz: *Appraisal, Monitoring and Evaluations: The NGO Approach*, Australian Council for Overseas Aid, Canberra 1988.

¹⁰ For surveys of the latest research position, see OECD, op. cit., pp. 102-115, and M. P. van Dijk, op. cit. Noteworthy specific studies include A. Fowler: *Non-Governmental Organisations in Africa. Achieving Comparative Advantage in Relief and Micro-Development.* Institute of Development Studies, Discussion Paper 249, Brighton 1988; and the following country studies published by the Overseas Development Institute: M. A. Robinson: *Evaluating the Impact of NGOs in Rural Poverty Alleviation.* Indian Country Study, ODI, London 1991; S. C. White: *Evaluating the Impact of NGOs in Rural Poverty Alleviation.* Bangladesh Country Study, ODI, London 1991; J. DeConinck: *Evaluating the Impact of NGOs in Rural Poverty Alleviation.* Uganda Country Study, ODI, London 1992; A. Muir, R. C. Riddell: *Evaluating the Impact of NGOs in Rural Poverty Alleviation.* Zimbabwe Country Study, ODI, London 1992.

bureaucratic structures, mainly among the NGOs in the capital cities, and the sometimes considerable lengthening of the chain of aid provision as an increasing number of intermediary organizations begin to participate in the transfer of funds. Within individual intermediary NGOs, there is an observed trend for a rising supply of resources to be accompanied by growing internal distinctions as complex, bureaucratic organizational structures grow piece by piece. An organization's traditional functions such as self-help promotion, consciousness-raising and mobilizing ordinary people are then added to by new fields of activity aloof from the grass roots, such as documentation, research, preparing publications or staging conferences – all with their own specialized departments – and there often remains only a remote connection between these activities and the needs of the target groups.

At the same time, increasing discrepancies tend to develop in the distribution of resources within the organization. Whereas headquarters offices in the capital cities have a fine supply of staff and materials, the field offices often have to go without the most elementary aids, and above all often do not have enough social workers going out into the villages.¹¹ Apart from that, corruption, nepotism and other ideosyncratic forms of action are evidently not rare enough for them to be neglected as marginal pathological phenomena. Private-sector development aid runs the risk at times of turning into a "help-yourself" stall for middle-class academics while the fundamental principles of poverty orientation, proximity to the grass roots and reduced administrative costs finally amount to little more than lip service. A major factor encouraging these creaming-off mechanisms is the fact that intermediary NGOs are hardly subject to any pressure to justify their credentials, either internally or externally. Although, according to their own principles, service organizations ought to be answerable within their own societies to their target groups, in practice the latter's dependence on the funds they receive from support organizations, the general absence of checks and balances and the lack of means for people at the grass roots to apply sanctions all tend to result in the principles being observed in letter alone. To make matters worse, the underdeveloped monitoring and evaluation systems of foreign donors mean that service organizations frequently are not subject to effective external control.

Top-down Approach

□ *The paternalistic, top-down approach and superiority of material inputs.* NGO projects are not necessarily more participatory than governmental rural development

activities, nor more liable to activate the self-help capacities of their target groups on a sustained basis. Here too, project ideas are often prescribed from above, and lines of communication run in only one direction, from the top down. In spite of all the rhetoric about the grass roots and emancipation, the internal structure of NGOs is in fact often hierarchic and centralistic, and authoritarian management styles and limited codetermination by the workers on the ground are also quite common features. As for the target groups, their main interest is in the material services provided by support organizations while, certainly initially, they usually have considerably less interest in the educational measures undertaken simultaneously, which in fact are vital to the changes in consciousness and values upon which a lasting process of self-sustained development depends. If this socio-psychological dimension is neglected, as occurs especially among organizations which succumb to the aim of rapidly expanding their grass-roots groups and programmes in order to justify their own positions vis-à-vis foreign donors, the members of such grass-roots groups do not normally develop any deeper sense of association with the externally induced people's organizations, thus also failing to recognize the opportunity they offer to solve problems chiefly through one's own efforts. Inevitably, many of these POs collapse quite soon after foreign financial support is withdrawn. Thus instead of support measures acting to encourage the self-reliance of the group, what often happens is that the project-centred or recipient mentality already existing in many societies is reinforced by a process in which existing patronage networks maintained by local politicians, large landowners or money-lenders simply have a further dimension of dependence added to them. As they always have been, the strengths and creativity of the target groups are directed towards finding the most beneficial position within "clientelistic" structures rather than towards organizing themselves and making efforts on their own behalf.¹²

A potential source of considerable problems in this regard could be the massive increase in funds supplied by bilateral and multilateral donors for self-help activities in particular, as in some countries more resources are made available by the donors than the grass-roots structures can reasonably absorb. The relatively easy access to aid funds in those countries means there is a tendency for the quality of individual projects to fall off, especially when there is already intense rivalry between rapidly multiplying Southern NGOs to take on responsibility for organizing

¹¹ For a detailed treatment, see K. Sinaga, op. cit., and R. Wegner, op. cit.

¹² A. Möller: Basisorganisationen und internationaler Klientelismus, in: Nord-Süd aktuell, Hamburg 1992, No. 1, pp. 65-71.

target groups. Questions such as the stage of development attained by POs, the autonomous efforts made by groups themselves or the sustainability of support measures then take a back seat relative to the ideosyncratic interests of individual service organizations in trying to prevent their grass-roots structures turning to others for support. The prospects of reaching beyond immediate boosts to the living conditions of target groups to initiate and establish self-help processes which will be effective over the long term are therefore worsening. At the same time, there is a growing danger that even self-help approaches which offer a lot of promise may be destroyed by the sheer force of aid inflows. As an additional problem, NGOs are often inadequately prepared, in terms of management capacities and staff qualification, for successfully planning and implementing income generating projects. A lack of expert personnel with training in business administration or in technical and scientific fields is a serious constraint upon project success, and at the same time is a reflection of the more social-science-oriented background to the foundation of many Southern NGOs. The consequence is that many of them are not in a position to make an appropriate assessment of the economic environment in which they and their projects are operating.

Political Dimension

□ *Political empowerment of the poor?* There is little evidence so far to support the hypothesis that NGOs, by way of the political organization and mobilization of sections of the population which have been marginalized, might really achieve any sustained changes in the power structures of the societies in which they operate. It is true, on the one hand, that NGOs support the liberalization and democratization of political systems, in as far as they are the most obvious manifestation of a considerably expanded urban middle class which has been partly politically mobilized and which has been the main proponent of pluralism. There are quite a number of countries in which NGOs, by bundling social criticism and civil protest or by acting as independent observers of elections, have made no small contribution towards laying military regimes and patrimonial presidential dictatorships to rest. Yet on the other hand, it would be a total overestimation of their capabilities to assume that they could demolish the undemocratic foundations and institutions of their societies on their own account, by means of cumulative pressure from below. Indeed, in the medium term there will most likely be little NGOs can do about the political marginalization of the rural poor, i.e. of the broad mass of the population. Politically instilled, conflict-oriented actions on the part of rural lower strata are rare and exceptional, and in many countries there is

only minimal scope for self-help activities which have an explicitly political dimension. Even if the minimum requirement for this is met in formal terms in the shape of state guarantees of the freedoms of assembly and association plus a measure of legal security, élites whose claim to a monopoly on real power is challenged possess a broad spectrum of instruments of surveillance and repression. Hardly surprisingly considering this overall environment, the vast majority of POs are interested in maintaining harmonious relations with local élites. As a rule, their group activities are limited to measures to improve incomes or saving and credit programmes, or in other words to areas which are not too sensitive as far as the local distribution of power is concerned. Even the intermediary NGOs themselves – in spite of their often pronounced claim to want to push for structural change – would appear to have little interest in fighting out these issues, for in order to get on with their work relatively undisturbed they too rely on the armed forces, police and local politicians being kindly disposed towards them. Thus the increase in the number of farmers' federations, POs' umbrella organizations and other "mass" organizations, given their limited ability to mobilize people in a true sense, is not so much a sign of increased political clout on the part of the lower classes but one of intermediary organizations' efforts to improve their own credentials with governments and donors as a supposedly authentic voice of the people.

Conclusions

As the foregoing comments will have shown, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that NGOs' activities in practice have relatively little in common with the advantages attributed to them, thus making it necessary to come to a more realistic comprehension of the part they play in development processes. The point is that NGOs *per se* do not constitute more effective, more efficient executing agencies for development aid, with comparative advantages simply falling into their laps. On the contrary, such advantages need to be built up by hard work, and there are vast differences in the degree to which NGOs succeed in this. One therefore has to warn against idealizing them and overestimating their capabilities or their absorptive capacities. In this light, the general current trend towards increasing aid funds granted to private-sector agencies, which takes insufficient account of how heterogeneous national NGO movements can be, gives cause for concern rather than appreciation. All the more so given that private-sector development aid is threatening to create "another bureaucratic monster" which will lead it into a legitimation crisis similar to the one government aid has already had to weather – and that would be fateful as regards the longer-term justification for aid of whatever kind.