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THE ROLE OF NONGOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN AFRICAN PUBLIC POLICY

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of nongovernmental organizations over the past three decades has been a positive addition to the political mix and public policy processes in Africa. Indeed, the proliferation of NGOs relationship with states in Africa can pave the way for increased governmental responsiveness and accountability. The analysis suggests that NGOs can be more effective in influencing public policy if they become aware of the policy environment and move away from a project orientation to a mobilization of other policy actors. Also, they must go beyond individual agendas and long-established roles to identify some emerging approaches to local development and resource management, which will increase their capacities for innovative political action favorable for participatory development.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) over the past three decades has been a positive addition to the political landscape and public policy processes in Africa. Indeed, the proliferation of NGOs relationship with countries in Africa is not only paving the way for increased governmental responsiveness and accountability, but it is enhancing the capacity of institutions of civil society that intervene between the government and its citizens, both on their own and in association with governments.

Also, this relationship creates a new opportunity for NGOs to move from a doing to an influencing role and it comes from the fact these organizations have proved more effective in reducing human suffering and development than their state counterparts. At the local level, African citizens are organized in this century than they have been since European colonization disorganized their traditional societies in earlier centuries.

The term “non-governmental organization” includes a wide range of non-profit seeking organizations with various activities, among them, trade unions, credit unions, religious organizations, cooperatives, womens groups, environmental groups, peasant groups, foundations, and community groups.
Most of these organizations were known as public associations, voluntary associations, social welfare organizations, charities, and missions during the colonial period. The United Nations first used the term in 1949, and since then the terms used to identify these organizations have varied from grassroots organizations, voluntary organizations, indigenous nongovernmental organizations to international nongovernmental organizations, among others. In recent years, however, non-governmental activities have increased significantly, particularly through new arrangements for public funding, contributions, or media-related events such as BANDAID for Africa (Thomas-Slayer, 1992; Streeten, 1997; Fernando & Heston, 1998).

What accounts for the increasing interest in the activities of NGOs? There are two possible answers for the growing interest. First, according to Fernando and Heston (1997), NGOs emerged as a response to attempts by social groups to secure social, economic, and political equality; a sustainable environment; and peaceful ethnic, religious, or national relations and as a resistance against all forms of exploitation and domination. The second reason for the increasing interest in these organizations is the result of disillusionment with government coupled with the reluctance to hand over all activities to private sector companies. In many African countries, the problems of indebtedness are apparent and the political systems are unstable. The results are not only staggering economies and unstable governments, but also substantial migration and refugee problems. As noted by Dornbos (1990), the rapid emergence and proliferation of numerous non-governmental organizations has come at a time of increasing internal and external stress for the African states. As a result, both indigenous and international NGOs are now being engaged in development efforts designed to increase the productivity and the welfare of the African people.

This article sheds light upon the growing political and technical capacities of NGOs and their relationships with governments. Specifically, the analysis examines the role of NGOs in influencing public policy in Africa. This role will depend extensively on how well the NGOs help in strengthening civil society and their ability, in interacting with governments, to contribute to increasing public responsiveness and accountability at all levels of government.

THE ROLE OF NGOs IN CIVIL SOCIETY

People generally look for the emergence of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) within society in countries where there has been history of repressive and interventionist governments. This proliferation of NGOs throughout the globe has attracted interest in what Walzer (1991, 293) referred to as "the space of uncoerced human association and ... the set of relational networks."
The Role of Nongovernmental Organizations in African Public Policy

During the 1980s, the term "civil society" appeared in African development literature. For example, popular mobilizations were crucial in forced elections in some African nations and challenged the demise of one-party state in others countries.

In certain African countries, Waltzs (1995) study of six human rights groups in Morocco, Tunisia, and Algeria shows that some human rights NGOs had a disproportionate influence on the national debate, if not democratization. In fact, Waltz arguably maintained that by challenging the rules of the political games in North Africa, few of these organizations are already performing a "metropolitical" as opposed to a "relational" function. During the Bourguiba regime in Tunisia, for example, the League of Human Rights was the first politically independent organization allowed to function, and its exemplary behavior was a dilemma for the government. The idea of human rights has not entirely disappeared from political discourse even in Algeria, where the human rights movement has been largely silenced by the violence and chaos that have gripped the nation since 1992.

By the tail end of the 1980s, NGOs and other grassroots economic networks provided a "recruiting ground" for protest against postcolonial autocracies. Sometimes, NGOs are somewhat conscious of this political role. For example, NGOs in Kenya do not see themselves as enhancing democracy, instead, they acknowledge the fact that democracy would enable them to function without much government interference (Ndegwa, 1996).

The increased interest in democracy and human rights in Africa is simultaneously working at the international level. For example, Fisher (1998) maintains that the GERDESS network in West Africa includes election monitoring. The African partners of IRED (Development Innovations and Networks, located in Geneva) are also active politically. In March 1995, a regional conference of fifty IRED partners was held in Burkina Faso to strengthen ties among grassroots NGOs, human rights organizations and governments.

Another way by which NGOs strengthen civil society is by focusing on bottom-up democratization. Ndegwas (1996) Kenyan study of civil society reveals that the Undugu Society helps empower local communities and allows grassroots clients to confront the government, even though Undugu itself avoids the types of protests over political repression carried out by other Kenyan NGOs such as the Greenbelt Movement. Other human rights organizations have begun to work jointly with NGOs by expanding or acquiring their own grassroots support. In Nigeria, for example, both human rights and legal groups have successfully challenged the authority of prison administrators opposed to reforms (Nwankwo, 1992). Also in Nigeria, the government-organized Center for Democratic Studies provided a haven for...
intellectuals, helped several human rights organizations develop, and took the lead in monitoring the aborted 1993 presidential elections before falling from government favor (Welch, 1995).

The role of NGOs is not limited to political or human rights activities, in many parts of Africa, there are not only vast inequalities in social and economic resources and power, but there is no commitment to the idea of social rights of citizenship. When the poor mobilize themselves, they are certainly concerned with political rights. Nonetheless, they are often anxious to ensure that the government grants, and then, protects, social rights. In fact, the prevailing pattern is for the government to retreat. In some countries, structural adjustment programs (SAPs) have eliminated public programs for the poor such as food subsidies, which had existed previously. In situations like this, poverty-focused NGOs also work to promote credit and technical assistance for micro-enterprises and informal economic activity. In Nigeria, South Africa, and elsewhere, the business sector has provided both financial and technical assistance to NGOs. As Pearce (1997) correctly noted, neo-liberal policies (like SAPs) would exacerbate existing inequalities, even if they bring about sustainable economic growth. This observation calls for a more increasing NGOs participation in not only strengthening civil society, but in constructing an environment that will protect society from a return to a repressive regime.

RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN NGOs AND GOVERNMENTS: CONFRONTATIONS OR COLLABORATIONS?

In most democracies, NGOs are usually critical and distrustful of governments and skeptical of even forming close contacts. These sentiments, as described by Clark (1991), are often somewhat reciprocal. In some instances, friendly coexistence between an NGO and a government occurs when the NGO only requires protection from the government in implementing its functions. Conversely, a government may feel at ease with an NGO when its authority is neither threatened nor challenged and when the NGOs programs are not incompatible with its own policies.

In his analysis, Clark (1991) observed that the worst tension arises when an NGO subscribes to a development theory different from that of the government. This is especially the case with NGOs who emphasize citizen participation, empowerment and democracy. Since this approach attracts barriers from government official structures, some NGOs may opt to either oppose the government out right or to retreat from the government. While the government may not appreciate such NGOs, it may still recognize the economic value of their projects. In modern times, many NGOs are now beginning
The Role of Nongovernmental Organizations in African Public Policy

to change their strategy for relating to government, though not a symptom of weakness, but of strength. Thus enabling the NGOs to see how different policies of the state directly or indirectly conflict with or facilitate their own development agendas.

Opposing the state would mean using whatever avenues are available to frustrate government plan that may be detrimental to the poor. In Kenya, for example, NGOs harassment may coexist with cooperative policies, such as those that connect the Ministry of Health to other grassroots NGOs throughout the nation. Also, repressive governments may retain persons with more positive attitudes toward NGOs. Fisher (1998) notes that although the Mengistu Haile Mariam government in Ethiopia was remarkably successful in controlling NGOs, one commissioner strayed from his leash and developed more positive relationships. This development supports Brattons (1994, 54) assertion that “The degree to which national NGOs are able to have policy influence depends greatly on the nature of their relationship with government.”

Complementing the state would entail evolving its own program so that it fills the gaps in the public services to make those services appeal to the citizens and more subject to democratic influences. This was the approach implemented in Zambia where new village nutrition groups imposed accountability as well as reoriented the priorities of the government Primary Health Care (PHC) service so that it responded more faithfully to the citizen demands. Also, they have, in doing so, motivated the PHC staff members who were initially isolated from their communities (Clark, 1991).

The proliferation of NGOs coupled with their increasingly political participation has compelled governments not to ignore them. For example, the Malian government, which was initially permissive toward NGOs, later tightened its policies through such measures as delays in tax exemptions. In some countries, ignoring NGOs is often less a deliberate policy than a symptom of what Gunnar Myrdal (1970) called the soft state, incapable of carrying out any type of substantive public policy. In Uganda, for example, all NGOs are required not only to register with the Prime Ministers office, present their proposals, but also to receive an official endorsement for their correspondence with foreign donors. Ironically, the NGOs office located in the Prime Ministers office has only two employees and few resources to enforce this policy (Gariyo, 1996, 163).

Despite problems in NGOs and government relationships, NGOs can play an important role in the information component of any governments capacity. In fact, it is a reality that NGOs are creators of information because their field and community experience provide them with important data required in aiding public policymakers in enhancing their decision-
making abilities. In Emergency Drought Recovery in Kenya, Oxfam has become a respected adviser to the government on community management of water and pastures in arid areas. Earlier examples of where appropriate or intermediate technology was promoted by overseas charities are plentiful. For instance, Hailey (1999) observed that various nongovernmental welfare initiatives in some parts of rural Africa can be traced to missionary work. Many missionaries played useful and relevant role in promoting local development either by providing support during times of emergency or through their involvement in local education. A good case in point here is a project developed by the Reverend John Faye of the Anglican Missionary Society in the Kantora District in Gambia in response to the 1942-44 famine. This project provided much emergency relief, introduced new production processes and technical practices, which were adapted to local community needs (Little, 1949). Similarly a report by the African Studies Branch (1952) described the role of missionaries in promoting education in eastern Nigeria. This report was influential in a government committees proposal that maintained that, while local government should take responsibility for primary education, voluntary organizations and missionaries should continue to be active participants in the management of these schools. Also, the Catholic Church in the Congo was part of the colonial power structure that later provided an education that was used later as an instrument of political struggle (see Lumumba-Kasongo, 1998, for a detailed discussion).

Moreover, when considering NGO effects on African countries in the area of political mobilization, one can say that NGOs have the potential to affect political mobilization, at least to a certain degree. Since some NGOs claim to have close ties to the community, and, historically, some have done both political and development mobilization, one can posit that grassroots NGOs can mobilize local people very readily. This could be even easier in places where the government does not already have a presence through its party offices or in opposition to any established political party.

It is instructive to note here that how NGOs affect the abilities of the states to extract resources is also an important factor in understanding the impacts of NGOs on governments capacities for the mobilization of resources as well as people. In countries where government officials and corporate elites are highly intertwined, as in Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo) or Nigeria, foreign financing by international NGOs enables public officials and their corporate partners to secure funds. Between 1995 and 1997, Zaire had an external debt in billions of U.S. dollars but the International Monetary Fund and World Bank continued to loan to President Mobutu Sese Sekou despite a report in 1978 by one of its representative that he was personalizing Zaires central bank transactions. Mobutu and his generals did not differentiate between private and
The Role of Nongovernmental Organizations in African Public Policy

public financial resources (Adu-Asare, 2001). How much of these funds are retained by the state varies according to the local practices within any given country. The ability of the international NGO to influence public policies, or affect whether the corporate or state actor receives more resources, depends on the access of the state officials. This access to state officials further depends on whether or not the NGOs have established ties with political actors in a tangled web of a zero sum game.

The reality here, however, is that international NGOs influence on how resources are spent, and by whom, tends to depend largely on the transparency of government accounts. In fact, all international donor agencies now support an open-door policy towards NGOs, that is, a shift from project to process empowerment. A process that is difficult to implement given the impact of structural adjustment program (SDP) on national economic policymaking, and, therefore supports Ndegwas (1996) argument that project-based external dependency is the greatest threat to organizational sustainability and the pluralization of civil society in Africa. Other scholars have documented that the most notable outcomes of SDP have been widespread “adjustment fatigue,” antipathy toward IMF, and domestic political turmoil (Fantu, 1987; Callaghy, 1988). In the case of Nigeria, IMF and other external creditors demanded that the government open it doors to further penetration of foreign capital especially transnational agribusiness corporations. At the same time, the World Bank supplied Nigeria with loans designed to “stimulate growth of the private industry,” but it indirectly promoted inappropriate and discredited agricultural production. Economists from Washington, D.C. virtually managed Nigeria’s Central Bank and finance ministry during the Babangida regime’s implementation of SDP (Koehn, 1990; Turner, 1986). In other cases, such as Zaire, the IMF and World Bank went as far as placing their own employees into the Central Bank, the finance and planning ministries, and the custom office (Callaghy, 1987). Conversely, when both local NGOs and international NGOs are linked to international donors, both types of NGOs are better able to influence governments and the donors themselves. Ndegwa (1996) has documented how political pressure from international donors in Kenya has strengthened NGO and political party protests against government repression.

Despite the fact that structural adjustment programs have placed heavy burdens on the continent, African nations are still being encouraged by international donors like the IMF and the World Bank to make their financial records more transparent. Doing this, it is believed, helps deter corruption and makes planning easier. It also encourages additional external funding when the transparent documents show efficient use and good absorption ability by the government (Sandberg, 1994).
NGOs AND THEIR NETWORKS

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are not simply involved in social service provision and self-help community projects, as is the case in Africa, they are a major instrument in sustainable development and social policy (Durning, 1989). They are more credible witnesses to government claims about the socioeconomic needs of the citizens and in seeking external help from international NGOs. Most governments in Africa and elsewhere in developing countries could not achieve much in the cause of social policy and sustainable economic development without the help of the NGOs. A pertinent question here is: Does this deny the capacity of governments to carryout their juridical functions? The obvious answer is yes to a certain degree. To be sure, the state authority can be assumed to have collapsed when it cannot provide adequate services such as healthcare, education, and agricultural extension services. The drop in the Kenyan governments expenditure in both education and healthcare has compelled both international and national NGOs to enter these fields and become key players in these areas of public policy (Ndegwa, 1996).

There are various organization types and forms and degrees of inter-organizational links and relationships among African NGOs. Some are mainly indigenous such as the Undugu Society of Kenya, the Nigerian government-organized Center for Democratic Studies, the National Farmers Association of Zimbabwe, while others are solely international organizations like the World Vision, Catholic Relief Services, Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, and Cooperatives for American Relief Everywhere, to mention but a few. Also, there are organizations formed as local chapters of an international group or network such as churches and service clubs, and local organizations with multifaceted links with foreign benefactors, which may or may not utilize them as their agents. These organizations often build extensive networks and alliances at regional and international levels.

In Africa, NGOs and church organizations operating both in urban and rural areas use the services of social workers wherever they can find them. They utilize these social workers not only as program officials or field workers, but also to philosophically promote sustainable economic development as opposed to mainly clinical social work. Thus, social workers engaged by various NGOs can be credited to a certain degree for the success of community development activities in urban and rural areas (Mupedziswa, 1998).

Moreover, regional NGO networks link local organizations in three various ways. First are the formal umbrella networks that link individual NGOs such as cooperatives (both interest associations and local development associations). Second are the informal economic networks connected together
The Role of Non-governmental Organizations in African Public Policy

by barter arrangements that can widen local markets and build a vested interest in regional agreement and collaboration, and third are the amorphous grassroots social movements that increasingly focus on environmental issues. In some situations, NGO networks become self-supporting and create local organizations for the advancement of their objectives. For example, the Committee for Development Action, a regional training center in Senegal, West Africa, links three different ethnic groups and sixteen villages and is funded by a percentage of profits from a communal venture (Pradervand, 1990; Fisher, 1998). Fisher (1998) maintains that networks combining vertical and horizontal ties among NGOs are among the most effective relationships for achieving sustainable development. Available evidence shows that NGOs with their own mass base or strong ties to local NGOs have greater autonomy and policy influence than either international NGOs or national NGOs working alone. For example, the National Farmers Association of Zimbabwe, with over 200,000 members, persuaded the government to exempt agricultural inputs from the sales tax in 1976 and, in 1978, helped repeal taxes on crop and livestock sales by small farmers. Similarly, concessions gained from a repressive government in Kenya by the NGO movement since 1990s have been facilitated by grassroots organizing (Fisher, 1998, 85).

The most apparent long-term implication of this phenomenon is that it increases the number of NGOs of all kinds and magnitude in Africa. Networks at both the grassroots and grassroots support levels not only enhance the sustainability of individual organizations, but also help to address the daunting task of scaling out the reach of sustainable economic development. In fact, networking as a form of a linkage between the NGOs is fast spreading in Africa. For example, the Six S Association, originally formed in Burkina Faso, is promoting indigenous networks reaching more than half a million people in Chad, the Gambia, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, and Togo (Fisher, 1998).

CONCLUSION

This article has examined the role of non-governmental organizations in public policy in Africa. International and national-based NGOs do influence public policy more when they work jointly than when they each work alone. A recent survey of sixteen African nations concluded that having a coordinated body has helped create a healthier environment for NGOs in those nations where NGO-government relationships are unfriendly. While relationships are friendlier where African consortia are having a policy impact. The government of Zanzibar is known for
consulting the country's newly organized Association of NGOs of Zanzibar (ANGOZA) on issues of women, poverty and the environment (Fisher, 1998). One major lesson learned from this analysis is that African NGOs will be required more than ever before to play a greater role not only in sustainable development and social policy, but in fostering a public policy environment that may be conducive to participatory development. The ability of NGOs to meet this challenge will depend to a certain degree on their willingness to form alliances and networks across ethnic, class, regional and even national or international boundaries.

In sum, since African NGOs are heavily dependent upon donated funds, it becomes doubly essential that the leaders of these organizations must innovate better ways of domestically generating their operating revenues. Since cultural practices and tax laws in most African nations do not encourage corporate giving, these organizations must rely on their linkages to clients groups. Moreover, they need to go beyond their respective agendas and long-established roles to identify some new approaches to local development and resource management, which will enhance their capacities for creative political action in the public policy processes of their respective jurisdictions in Africa.

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