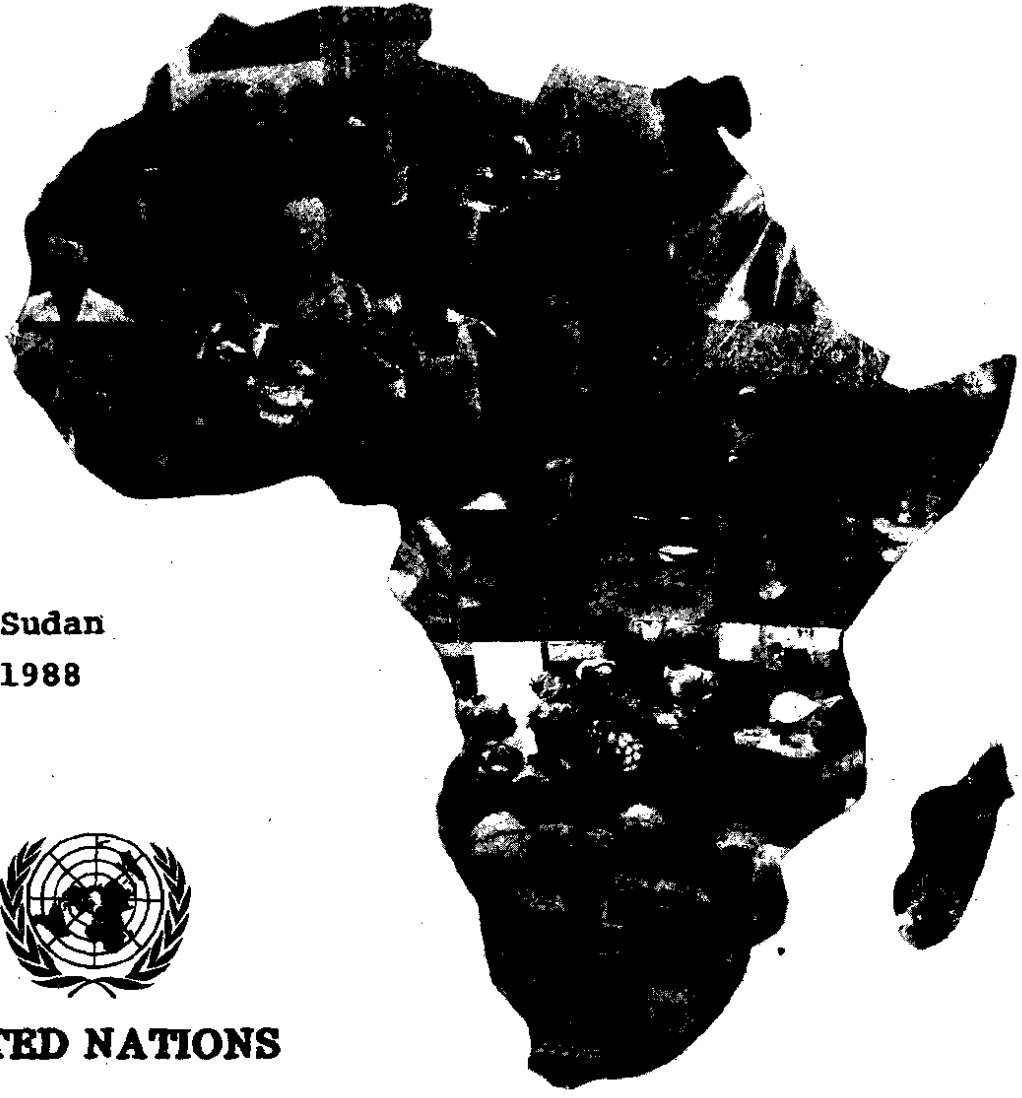


INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE HUMAN DIMENSION OF AFRICA'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT

FROM AID TO SOLIDARITY

The past and future role of overseas NGOs in
promoting the development of human resources in Africa
by
International Council of Voluntary Agencies



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NOTE

This report has been prepared for the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) by Robin Sharp of the International Institute for Environment and Development, London. It constitutes ICVA's submission to the International Conference on the Human Dimension of Africa's Economic Recovery and Development, to be held in Khartoum, Sudan, from 5 to March 1988. The opinions expressed within do not necessarily represent the views of ICVA or any of its member agencies.

Note on terminology

Nomenclature for different categories of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) varies widely. 'Overseas' and 'foreign' are terms used to describe all non-African NGOs, whether from the North or other regions of the South. 'International' is used for this same category by some sources, whereas others apply it more narrowly to organizations with an international membership or constitution. Where there is no serious ambiguity, this paper follows the usage in source materials.

A. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

1. The late twentieth century has witnessed a remarkable upsurge of social movements and institutions pledged to break the shackles of world poverty. Moved by a new sense of international justice, and angry or ashamed at the deepening gulf between rich and poor, a significant cross-section of people in the industrialized countries has over the past 30 years rallied to offer help and human solidarity.

2. In the process, they have brought into existence hundreds of new organizations to work for peace, justice and the satisfaction of basic human needs. These new development agencies, building on the long experience of missionary groups in Africa and other regions of the South, brought a new dimension of social concern to the problems of the post-colonial world.

3. Historically, the first interest of Westerners in the human development of the people of Africa may be dated from the advent of European missionaries in the fifteenth century. The earliest arrivals, in the wake of their merchant explorers, were the Portuguese, soon followed by the French, the Dutch, the British and the Germans. Though their impact on the continent for the next 300 years was small, nevertheless it was their churches which, with varying degrees of conviction, condemned the slave trade as it developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On the other hand, there is a body of African opinion today which believes the missionaries had prejudices similar to those of the colonialists and in many cases actively supported them.

4. With the partition of the continent by the colonial powers in the nineteenth century came a rapid growth in mission schools. Despite frequent hostility from the colonial authorities, these schools gave Africans access to vocational, secondary and in some cases higher education. By the year 1900, there were 8,000 schools in Nigeria alone.

5. Over the following half century, Europe turned inwards, wracked by two devastating wars. But World War II and the subsequent period of economic reconstruction in Europe saw the emergence on both sides of the Atlantic of a new breed of voluntary organizations: groups of citizens concerned to mobilize public help for the hungry, the homeless and the war refugees.

6. By the 1950s, though still small in number and resources, these new and independent organizations were turning their attention further afield. At the end of the decade, the leading British agency was already allocating one-third of its growing budget to welfare and relief projects in Africa, including health programmes, feeding schemes, assistance to refugees and famine relief.

7. The year 1960, marking the watershed of political independence for much of Africa, was also a turning-point in the Northern countries' perception of Africa's development needs. It brought the start of the United Nations first Development Decade and of the hugely influential Freedom From Hunger Campaign (FFHC) and of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations. Several national committees of the FFHC in due course became full-fledged non-governmental organizations (NGO), and the Campaign was important in establishing a basis for collaboration between governments and independent aid agencies.

8. Recognition of the development needs of the new nations, especially in Africa, provided an impetus for the formation of many new NGOs over the next 20 years. In Canada, for example, the number of such organizations rose from 26 to 127 over this period.

9. As remarkable as the proliferation of development NGOs since 1960 has been, in many cases, a rapid evolution in their thinking about the purposes of development assistance (now called co-operation) and the appropriate means of achieving them has occurred. From an early focus on relief and welfare - assisting the victims of conflict and natural disasters with food aid, medicines and blankets - the emphasis shifted to longer-term but 'directed' development... and then, more recently, to new forms of partnership with indigenous groups stressing endogenous growth and sustainability. In the same period, as development indicators have shown the sub-Saharan countries facing the most serious spiral of decline, non-governmental agencies have transferred the main thrust of their aid programmes from Asia to the countries of Africa.

10. The special skills of NGOs - to mobilize people and resources quickly, to take risks with innovative schemes, and above all to reach directly to those most in need - were demonstrated in full measure during the African drought emergency of 1984-1986. Capturing the concern of millions of people in the North and converting it into life-support programmes for the most seriously affected countries, the NGOs' operation was on an unprecedented scale. Though not concealing their limitations and some notable defects, it highlighted many of their real strengths as partners in promoting human welfare in Africa.

11. As the immediate crisis receded in 1986, this experience contributed to a new debate between African and overseas NGOs on the realignment of their respective roles and future development needs. While generalizations are risky, given the diversity of non-governmental institutions involved and widely varying country situations, there are signs of a recognition on both sides that African NGOs must progressively become the prime movers of grass-roots development in their own countries and that, in order to make room for them, their Northern counterparts will need to reappraise several aspects of the role they now play.

12. Working out the modalities of such a new relationship will require tolerance and vision. No one should expect it to be easy. But NGOs today are at the leading edge of the development debate: they are aware that structures and systems must continue to change and that the challenge is to manage this change creatively in ways that will be of most benefit to human development and well-being.

13. Section B of this paper offers a brief profile of overseas NGOs engaged in Africa, their objectives, growth in numbers, and the evolution of their thinking and their programmes over the past 25 years. The operational methods of the NGOs are considered in Section C, along with the variety of projects they support and a number of the most commonly cited strengths and weaknesses of their modus operandi. Section D then examines issues which could have a determining influence on the future role of overseas NGOs in Africa and concludes by outlining areas of work where they might best collaborate in developing human resources and improving conditions of life for Africa's people.

B. ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION

The diversity of the species

14. Even limiting the term "non-governmental organization" to groups active in development, there is no such thing as a typical NGO. Independent overseas groups promoting development in Africa come in every imaginable shape and size, and with just as wide a variety of intellectual or ideological baggage.

15. In the first generation of African statehood they have multiplied from a handful to a force of hundreds. At the present time, they are pumping something like \$US one billion a year into thousands of individual projects and providing most of the resources to sustain Africa's own development NGOs. There are parts of the continent where one cannot travel any distance without passing vehicles painted with the names or insignia of foreign NGOs. In communities where they are active, Africans will speak of "the project" as a taken-for-granted part of life.

16. Private North American agencies with programmes or projects in Africa are estimated to number between 300 and 400, while Europe probably has somewhat more. The longest established, in most cases, are missionary organizations and other church-related groups, which today make up about 40 per cent of the largest NGOs on both sides of the Atlantic. The most recent of them tend to be those serving specific sectors or population groups: the needs of women, environmental protection, the promotion of small enterprises or appropriate technology. In between, there is a stratum of broadly based agencies committed to an integrated approach and able to respond, at the level of community needs, to most requirements.

17. This pluralism is combined - at least more often than in official aid programmes - with a readiness to listen to what the people themselves want; and it has enabled the independent sector to address important aspects of human development left out of account by the rigidly sectoral programmes of government departments and international agencies.

From relief to development

18. During the first United Nations Development Decade, coinciding with the first decade of freedom from colonial rule in much of Africa, the exposure of Northern project staff to the realities of life in rural Africa brought about a rapid evolution in their perception of their own role. Analyses such as René Dumont's False Start in Africa 1/ also had a seminal influence. The more percipient NGOs were quick to realize that emergency relief for refugees or famine victims was alleviating only the symptoms, not the causes of poverty. A serious response to Africa's needs required longer-term programmes to help people become self-supporting.

19. While funding for short-term relief remained almost static in some agency budgets, support for development projects rose dramatically through the 1960s. This trend, in fact, was emphasizing 'help for the poorest of the poor' long before governments and international agencies chimed in with 'poverty-focused strategies' after Robert McNamara's 1973 report to the World Bank meeting in Nairobi.

20. By and large, Northern NGOs accomplished the relief-to-development transition without undue stress. For those directly involved, the logic was clear, it required no fundamental change of purpose, and the donor's overall control of the selection and management of projects - albeit in consultation with the recipients - was not for the time being at issue.

21. The NGO development community had come a long way by the early years of the second Development Decade (DD2); but there were bigger changes ahead. When the first Lome Convention was being negotiated in 1973 to bring the whole of sub-Saharan Africa into association with the enlarged European Community, European NGOs still saw their role as essentially apolitical. Few took a critical interest in the issues at stake. Soon afterwards, however, a number of factors combined to move them into the area of research and campaigning on official development policies. Among these were:

(a) A recognition that the potential benefits of their programmes in Africa and other parts of the South were frequently being negated by their own governments' restrictive policies on aid and trade;

(b) A broader realization that the combined policies of OECD countries, if not directly impoverishing the third world, were a principal constraint on the South's efforts to break out of the poverty trap;

(c) Disillusion with the DD2 strategy and with its criteria for development based on GNP and sectoral growth targets. At this point it became clear to many that the aims of the NGO community and those of their governments, while compatible in specific cases, were most often asymmetrical and in some instances mutually antagonistic.

New alliances, new values

22. For some of the same reasons, development researchers who had previously tended to see their work exclusively as an input to official policy-making began to look for new alliances. Thus there emerged in the mid-70s a 'development alternatives' movement exploring a radically different paradigm - one founded on principles of self-reliant, autocentric and ecologically sound development, directed first and foremost to meeting human needs.

23. A new set of values began to permeate the work of some Northern NGOs, reflecting the ideas of thinkers such as Palolo Freire, Ivan Illich and E.F. Schumacher. Liberation theology, conscientization and economics-as-if-people-mattered opened new conceptual doors for dealing with the structural injustices of human need.

24. Development, still defined by many official bilateral and multilateral agencies as the linear growth of GNP, was coming to be defined by the best NGOs in terms of human/community development and solidarity. On the ground in Africa, some groups were by now providing humanitarian aid - medical supplies and the like - to areas held by liberation movements. In Europe, they formed the International Coalition for Development Action (ICDA) as a fighting front on third world trade issues, and they were somewhat better prepared for the 1977 renegotiation of the Lome Convention.

25. Euro Action-ACORD, a consortium of 18 European and Canadian NGOs working in Africa, commissioned a detailed critique of the terms proposed by the European Community for renewing the treaty, as a guide for its member agencies and others in lobbying their governments and the Brussels Commission. ^{2/} This and other NGO initiatives urging Europe to concede a more equal partnership with the ACP States may have had little perceptible impact on the treaty terms. They nevertheless served notice on Commission officials that there was now an articulate lobby - representing a sizeable bloc of public opinion in the member States - ready to speak up for the interests of the African, Caribbean and Pacific countries.

26. The Liaison Committee of Development NGOs to the European Communities was formally established in 1979 and has since spawned a number of standing specialist committees: education, food and emergencies, volunteers and co-financing. It has brought a more consistent monitoring of EEC policies towards Africa and the rest of the third world. The Liaison Committee considers that during the negotiations for Lome III in 1983/84 it played "an important role in informing public opinion in Europe and may even have played a small part in the negotiations themselves".

27. Looking now to an expansion of EEC-NGO co-operation, the European NGOs believe that one important aim would be to achieve "greater complementarity in joint actions". Some among them, however, are worried that closer collaboration with official EEC programmes could prove to be a dangerously double-edged sword.

28. Through the 1970s many Northern NGOs continued to see themselves as the 'owners' of the small-scale rural projects they were funding in Africa and elsewhere. The more progressive, on the other hand, were moving towards more flexible partnership arrangements with indigenous groups, seeking to build on the latter's strengths and traditions rather than overriding them with foreign personnel, expertise and technology. They were the first of any aid agencies to make this transition, and, in doing so, contributed healthily to the demise of colonial nostalgia in Africa, which tended to disparage native skills and know-how as somehow inferior to those of the white Western expert. Giving back to people this measure of control over their own lives went hand in hand with a new sense of self-respect and confidence in their cultural traditions.

Education and advocacy

29. The importance of informing and educating the Northern public about the economic and human realities of underdevelopment in Africa has been increasingly recognized over the past 15 years by NGOs in Europe and North America. Course material for schools is now produced by many NGOs, and in some countries efforts to stimulate debate on development issues in the news media have had notable success. In Britain, having extracted a government commitment to air time for development education on the fourth television channel, a consortium of 70 NGOs formed and funded a television company - the International Broadcasting Trust - to make it happen.

30. In the United States, two major church-related development groups - Bread for the World and Inter-faith Action for Economic Justice - have for many years been engaged in public education and information work. According to a recent survey, however, only 8 per cent of agencies described development education as a major focus of their work; one-third said they were doing little or none. 3/

31. In the related area of advocacy and public campaigning for international economic reforms, there are wide differences between the United States and European groups. The Public Policy Committee of Inter-Action, a co-ordinating body of over 100 United States NGOs, has stepped up the tempo of its advocacy work with member agencies, arranging briefings on policy issues and testimony before congressional committees. But as one commentator has observed, "much of the existing NGO public policy activity tends to be directed toward assuring more government resources for NGO programmes" 4/ - wherefore it lacks the confrontational sting of some of the more effective European campaigns.

32. But there are, of course, significant exceptions. Strong pressure from a coalition of the United States environmental groups recently led to legislation by Congress calling on the World Bank and regional development banks to do more to protect natural environments and indigenous populations. The World Bank has since announced a substantial upgrading of its environment department.

33. Within the broad range of their development work overseas, few Northern NGOs would have difficulty identifying with the main priorities listed by the United States NGOs in the survey already cited. These were to:

(a) Improve the skills, knowledge and capacity of recipients to solve problems and manage programmes;

(b) Provide technical assistance and technologies to promote economic and social development;

(c) Build new institutions and networks designed and operated primarily by the poor themselves; and

(d) Increase income and employment opportunities for the poor.

C. METHODS, MONEY AND MERITS

Operational strategies

34. To many African Governments, outside observers and, not infrequently, their own supporters, the way that foreign NGOs go about their appointed tasks at country level can be a source of bewilderment. True, most now work through counterpart organizations in Africa: village associations, indigenous NGOs, church groups or government departments. The formation of national co-ordinating bodies of NGOs in several African countries has also helped to bring some sense of order and better information exchange. But individual styles of operation remain as different as night and day.

35. Identification of projects, for example, may emerge from a process of dialogue between the organization's own field staff and local or national groups; it may be the job of a Northern-based project officer on a flying visit; or it may be simply a written application passed on with the endorsement of an affiliate in the country concerned.

36. There are those NGOs which can follow a project step by step, having locally engaged staff available as trouble-shooters if problems arise. At the other end of the scale are those who rely principally on written reports and annual project accounts. Equally, some agencies see it as their basic task to elicit the people's own ideas about their problems and help them to formulate an appropriate response; but others still arrive with something that looks like a ready-made, do-it-yourself development kit. For complete self-reliance, it says, all you have to do is follow the instructions.

37. While the working methods of the majority of NGOs fall somewhere between these margins, the development 'package' on offer is still, almost invariably, a project; that is, a set of activities over a fixed period of 2-5 years designed to achieve some precise and measurable objective. Project grants are most often in the range of \$US 10,000 - \$200,000 - finance on a human scale - though some, including the distribution of government-financed food aid in emergencies, may run to several million dollars.

38. For the donor, the project formula is neat and efficient: it presupposes a well-defined target (immunize X babies, dig X wells, plant X acres), and a number of prescribed steps, over two or three years, to reach it. The formula works less well, and can often be counter-productive, when applied to social processes where neither the donor nor the implementing agency can predict the speed of assimilation or change. Partly for this reason, African NGOs have set their sights on breaking down the project model, which they increasingly regard as a strait-jacket inhibiting the kind of development they want and the kind of equal, two-way relationship with NGO donors that is a prerequisite for it.

Where the money goes

39. In line with their commitment to institution-building and training for self-reliance, the biggest share of Northern NGO development project support goes to: (i) social or community development; (ii) health programmes; and (iii) agriculture. Among the United States NGOs operating in Africa, the most important categories in the period 1983-1985 were education and water supplies.

40. A graphic summary of the breadth of development co-operation offered by voluntary agencies is given by Joseph Short in his narrative account of the United States NGO survey:

"Some provide grants and loans to local groups; others provide food, medical supplies, clothes, vehicles, solar water pumps or other material aid. Some provide technical assistance by deploying water engineers or agronomists; others send volunteer professionals. Some send teachers; others train them. Some direct and operate projects primarily with United States or other expatriate personnel; many work with or support counterpart groups; some work in close collaboration with governments; others prefer to work with non-governmental organizations. Some work from the capital out to the villages; other from the villages towards the capital; and so on." 5/

The means by which NGOs fulfil their mission, Short concludes, are every bit as diverse as their ends.

41. Just as important as what NGO funds are spent on, however, is where the money came from in the first place and who actually controls the spending. Money, it must be said, is a source of current unease in relations between African NGOs and their Northern partners. The funding relationship between them, so vital to both, is seen to be perpetuating donor-recipient tensions and preventing the emergence of a more creative, forward-looking partnership.

42. The funding issue has become complicated by the recent major shift of Northern governments aid funds to their NGOs through co-financing schemes - and the awareness of African NGO leaders that this has changed the terms of engagement. The NGOs who have chosen to become to a significant degree, handling agents for official funds suddenly find themselves at risk - their independent status mortgaged, their probity a little in doubt, and their money in some cases probably obtainable from the official source direct.

43. The dimensions of the NGO funding problem - and the need for new financial channels to resolve it - are dealt with more fully in section D.

Impact and effectiveness

44. Serious evaluations of the long-term impact and effectiveness of Northern NGO programmes in Africa are still wanting. The agencies themselves have had neither the resources nor the incentive to attempt any broad assessment of the net social costs and benefits of their programmes.

45. Allowing that merits and defects are not quantifiable, it is nonetheless possible to identify, from the intense debate of recent times, some of the main entries on each side of the balance sheet. Among the plus-factors, the following stand out.

A holistic world-view

46. Underpinning their work in Africa, as in other regions, is a concept of the human condition which embraces its cultural and spiritual dimensions as well as the social and economic. The best NGO ethos keeps in mind the wholeness of people and their living environment, recognizing that the materially poor may be rich in ways lost to the wealthy. This world-view yields a markedly different set of criteria for action from those of national or foreign governments - criteria in which economic measures are only one element and will only work as part of a wider process of change.

47. One African commentator puts it in these words: "Although what is generally termed as Africa's crisis is often considered mainly in terms of Africa's deteriorating economic condition, it needs to be recognized that the crisis is multi-dimensional, and that economic decline and poverty are only an aspect. 6/

The human dimension

48. Perceiving themselves as intermediaries in an essentially people-to-people relationship, NGOs have always given primacy to meeting human needs at family and community levels, with particular emphasis on the non-material dimension of development. European NGOs believe that in their dialogue with the European Community during negotiations for the third Lome Convention they exerted a positive influence on the previously narrow official view of relations with Africa and the other ACP countries.

49. "Increased contacts and co-operation with NGOs during this period have certainly changed the perceptions of development issues in the European Community", asserts the Liaison Committee of Development NGOs to the European Communities. "Where it used to be conceived in purely economic terms, there is now a greater emphasis on the individual human being as the central point in the development process. 7/

Partnership and participation

50. Voluntary agencies have been among the first to assert the importance of working collaboratively and designing projects in free and equal consultation with their Southern counterparts. Though perhaps honoured more in the breach than the observance, the principle that people should have the determining voice in decisions that affect their lives is a fundamental one, which larger official development programmes are for the most part unable to follow, if only for reasons of scale. One of the keys here is to find ways of aiding people's development without creating dependency.

Innovation and the spread of ideas

51. Progressive NGOs recognize that in addressing the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable people a shared learning process will draw out their perception of the changes needed to improve their own well-being. Working in this way, NGOs are uniquely placed to contribute to innovative thinking by the people themselves and then to help translate it into techniques that yield more sustainable livelihoods. With many countries of sub-Saharan Africa seemingly trapped in a spiral of decline, self-help strategies are the only ones likely to bring hope to the poorest. In this context, new approaches and methods which people can adopt and spread spontaneously, whether in rural or urban areas, are among the most valuable contributions that African and Northern NGOs working together can offer. 8/

Reaching where others cannot

52. Directly or through their African counterparts, Northern NGOs have made it their job to work with people - often in remote and difficult conditions - where official development schemes do not reach. Without them, the distribution of international aid would be even more skewed than it is against those most in need.

Flexibility and rapid response

53. Operational agility - in identifying and adapting to changing conditions and mobilizing for emergencies - is a key comparative advantage for NGO methods. As the United Nations Office for Emergency Operations in Africa reported, in its evaluation of the NGOs' role in the 1984-1986 emergency:

"There is wide agreement that NGOs, especially international and indigenous organizations already engaged in village-level development activities in remote areas, can make important contributions to early-warning and information systems and that NGOs are often able to respond flexibly, rapidly, effectively and appropriately to urgent needs." 9/

Building understanding and solidarity

54. In their own countries, Northern NGOs have assumed a leading role in the formation of public opinion on all aspects of African development and North-South interdependence. The advancement in public support and understanding of the issues, though leaving much to be done, can be credited in large measure to these agencies, through their own information materials, through the mass media or through development education in schools.

Lobbying for reform of international economic relations

55. Overseas NGOs have become forceful campaigners for the rights and interests of African and other third world people, whose efforts to break out of the poverty trap are seen to be vitiated by external forces. They have formed networks and coalitions, national and international, to press for more equitable policies in many areas of aid and trade - a role which becomes more vital as it becomes more difficult to sustain in the harsh economic climate of the late 1980s.

56. Turning now to the minus-factors, it can be observed that several of the negative features ascribed to NGO interventions in Africa are the counterface of their virtues. In some cases it may be difficult to have one without the other, but in many there is substantial scope to offset or eliminate the worst deficiencies. Ways of dealing with the issues listed below will be considered in section D.

Disorder and dependency

57. If diversity is one of the collective merits of the non-African NGOs, the other side of the coin is disorder, duplication and interactions rivalry. Lack of concertation among the myriad foreign NGOs is frequently cited as a major headache for governments and voluntary groups in Africa, and although the creation of national NGO councils has helped in some countries, much more needs to be done to relieve it. This fragmentation, together with the donor groups' sole control of funding, is blamed for keeping their indigenous partners in a dependency relationship. In the mid-1970s, there were already some 250 foreign NGOs operating in Burkina Faso (then Upper Volta) alone.

Narrow project focus

58. By confining their support to a limited range of project tasks over a relatively brief period, aid-giving NGOs keep their partners on a tight rein. As well as stunting their institutional growth, African NGOs maintain, this prevents them from relating to community-level groups in an integrated way.

Religio-political tensions

59. A small number of NGOs act as covers for undeclared political or religious interests. A report to the United Nations Office for Emergency Operations in Africa highlighted this. 10/ Christian NGOs can encounter - and cause - problems in Islamic countries, especially if they have a conservative/evangelical optic. Wealthy NGOs operating aircraft and radio transmitters in politically sensitive areas during emergencies can be an embarrassment and a danger to the whole NGO community.

A lack of transparency

60. The motivation of Northern NGOs as a group has come under question as more of them begin to derive a significant part of their finance from Northern government budgets. Without some standard procedure for the disclosure of income sources, institutional background and affiliations, mounting resentment must be anticipated among African NGOs and their colleagues elsewhere in the South that they are regularly required to reveal every detail of their work and yet are seldom accorded the same openness in return.

Geographical and sectoral imbalance

61. An optimal distribution of resources according to need would be too much to expect, with several hundred Northern NGOs in Africa firing off their project guns in all directions. United States agencies, for example, have more than three times as many projects in comfortable Kenya as they do in Zaire, which is twice as poor and has 50 per cent more people (The European agencies may or may not be any better in this regard, but they have not produced an equivalent survey which would permit such comparisons).

62. Sectoral distortions, however, may be of equal or greater concern. NGO programmes have, for example, given minimal attention to the problems of the urban poor, relatively little to projects for women and not much to the vital issues of natural resource management. Forty-five African and other third world NGOs, meeting recently in Limuru, Kenya, with their international counterparts, deplored the 'insignificant' proportion of total aid flows devoted to improving shelter and tackling homelessness, only a tiny share of which was made available to NGOs.

63. "Governments should recognize", they declared, "that appropriate support for individual households and the community-based organizations that they form, and the NGOs with whom they choose to work in their efforts to improve shelter and environmental conditions, represents the most innovative and effective strategy to reverse existing trends". 11/

64. But the aid-giving NGOs will also need a push to redress the cumulative imbalances of their programmes in Africa.

D. TOWARDS SOMETHING NEW

The search for solidarity

65. The ways in which overseas NGOs can in future best contribute to the development of human resources in Africa will depend to a large extent on the designing of new relationships with African NGOs and new structures to match. Exactly what these relationships should be, and how to nurture them, are questions which have come to the forefront of discussion in several recent North-South encounters. If positive answers emerge, the current dialogue could go a long way to setting the parameters for a more constructive and creative North-South alliance.

66. New relationships are critical, for two fairly evident reasons: firstly, because our small world will not long survive the stresses imposed on it today by a heedless exploitation of people and resources and by extreme manifestations of power and powerlessness; and secondly, because many aspects of the present 'partnership' are inherently unequal and in the long run unsustainable.

67. Ten years ago, at the time of the ill-fated North-South dialogue, NGOs of the North were berating their own governments for refusing to accede to the third world's demand for a new international economic order. At issue was the case for a basic restructuring of the global economy, which, among other things, sought to provide for automatic transfers of finance for development.

68. Something not altogether dissimilar is now being sought from those same NGOs by their own Southern partners. It is not yet clear whether more than a few of them have got the message, but the debate has begun to acquire a momentum of its own. It is recognized, for example, that African NGO leaders are increasingly unhappy with Northern NGO patterns of project control and funding, which are seen as obstructing their development and inconsistent with the principles of self-reliance. Forward-looking Northern agencies can already see much to be gained from a freer and more interactive relationship with African NGOs.

69. Specifically in terms of relationships, the search for a new solidarity between African and Northern NGOs is seen to call for:

(a) A new rapport or compact between the two sides, detached as much as possible from project funding and based on a complementarity of skills to address the whole panorama of development obstacles, North and South. This sharing of responsibilities should find expression in new national, regional and North-South networks, and the strengthening of those already operational to enable them to extend their work in Africa;

(b) A review of the whole aid process and relations between Northern NGOs and their governments. There is good reason to underline a warning issued several years ago by the former Dutch Minister of Development Co-operation, Jan Pronk, when he said: "The corruption of NGOs will be the political game of the years ahead - and it is already being played today."; 12/

(c) A departure from the 2-5-year project framework and from the physical input approach (dams, wells, hardware, seeds, etc.) to straight grants for African groups to use as they see fit.

70. In terms of structures, various commentators have suggested elements of a new framework for the next phase of North-South NGO co-operation. These include:

(a) An interregional mechanism for co-ordination of NGO activities, which could be charged with supervision of:

- (i) A Code of Conduct regulating interventions by international NGOs and setting guidelines for the work of agencies in each region in order to fulfil their mutual responsibilities. The successful operation of such a Code might in due course lead to the formulation of a co-ordinated plan of action by NGOs world-wide;
- (ii) New and strengthened NGO infrastructures in Africa and other regions of the South, with arm's-length financial support from their Northern partners, in order to concert programmes at national level, permit constructive working relationships with governments and stimulate the kind of South-South networking which Northern NGOs have found increasingly vital for effective work among themselves;
- (iii) A World NGO Fund to support the role of third-world-based NGOs as guarantors of and advisers on the projects chosen and defined by community-based organizations;
- (iv) New or more effective co-ordinating centres for NGOs in the North to assist these agencies in fulfilling their part of the new NGO compact, especially in the fields of education, policy research, public advocacy, and promotion of a broader coalition for change including non-development NGOs.

71. This is a formidable agenda, which has begun to take shape over the past 18 months in a largely unplanned series of meetings immediately before and since the thirteenth special session of the United Nations General Assembly. The following review of themes and issues arising from this dialogue leads to an examination of the most evident obstacles to progress and thence to some priorities for future co-operation.

Beyond the special session

72. The special session of the United Nations General Assembly in May 1986 provided an opportune moment to review NGO contributions to African development in the wake of the drought emergency. Most observers felt that the NGO community, both indigenous and foreign, had acquitted itself well, carrying

a large share of the burden for aid distribution and having to make big adjustments. But with the immediate crisis over, there were longer-term questions about the Northern NGOs' role in Africa, waiting to be asked.

73. Many of the issues were explored at a 'strategy workshop' organized by the United Nations Non-governmental Liaison Service and co-sponsored by the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) and the International Coalition for Development Action (ICDA) in Geneva in November 1985. Bringing together leading representatives of African and international NGOs, the workshop was designed to prepare for their participation in the special session and for this purpose to conduct a wide-ranging and critical analysis of NGO achievements, with a view to identifying future priorities.

74. Recommendations from the Conference's working groups highlighted, inter alia, the importance of strengthening the information and communications capacity of Southern NGOs, the need to support independent African research and bridge-building information activities between North and South. One group suggested drawing up a code of ethics on NGO fund-raising and setting a target of 10 per cent of individual NGO resources to be devoted to development education. 13/

75. Also prior to the special session, a consortium of Christian agencies - the Churches' Drought Action in Africa (CDAA)* - published a key report setting out its commitment. The report declared that "in accordance with the African philosophy of maintaining an equilibrium between human beings and their environment, the churches and governments in Africa should analyse the causes of poverty, make the African people aware of this and provide means to enable them to overcome poverty and underdevelopment".

76. The churches in Africa, CDAA said, should "animate, co-ordinate and educate people in order that they may act on their own behalf". For Christian communities in the rest of the world, it added, the principal challenge was to pursue development education "which will conscientize people in such a way that pressure can be put on governments in the North, the transnational corporations and other powerful institutions to cease their misuse of the world's natural and human resources uniquely for their own ends". 14/

77. At the special session itself, African and international NGOs held their own forum in parallel with the official conference, and drafted their own Declaration. 15/ Their spokesman also addressed the General Assembly.

* Comprising the World Council of Churches, Lutheran World Federation, Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services and CIDSE (International Co-operation for Development and Solidarity).

78. In its recommendations directed specifically to Northern and international NGOs, the Declaration encouraged them to continue influencing their governments to adopt more democratic, humane and egalitarian policies in Africa; to recognize the linkages between the policies of their governments and other institutions which adversely affect the quality of life and the political and economic independence of African countries; to adopt a more consistent approach in influencing their governments' monetary, trade and fiscal policies, and to resist being used by Northern governments in the furtherance of narrow, short-term interests.

79. The Declaration also urged Northern and International NGOs to make long-term commitments to sustainable development in Africa, to ensure that their own internal structures were democratic, and to support the institutional growth of autonomous NGOs at national level in the third world, reorienting their own activities to concentrate increasingly on development education, advocacy, fund-raising and facilitating information flows. Northern and International NGOs, it went on, should not compete with their African counterparts in the implementation of projects but play a supportive role; and they should avoid sending in overseas project staff when appropriate personnel were locally available.

80. Among issues raised in the plenary sessions of the NGO Forum, one widely recognized, was the importance of strengthening both African NGO networks and the participation of African groups in international networks.

81. Only a week after the special session, another invitation brought Northern NGOs and their governments and some African NGO representatives together in Paris - this time for a meeting of the OECD Development Assistance Committee to consider 'The Role of NGOs in Agricultural and Rural Development in Sub-Saharan Africa'. Some Northern NGOs stressed to the Committee that they were anxious to obtain increased official funding, both to support worthwhile projects and to increase their effectiveness in respect of monitoring and evaluation, feasibility studies and action-oriented research.

82. The Committee noted a need for new forms of partnership between official and non-governmental institutions to support local initiatives, the Solidarité Canada-Sahel programme being cited as one positive example. The meeting recognized that new forms of financing were emerging and that the issue of direct funding to African NGOs was likely to become more pressing in the future. At the end of the session, the Chairman of the DAC took it as "very positive" that a broad spectrum of the NGO community - North and South - now wanted to be part of the development policy dialogue. 16/

83. Later in the year, a detailed survey of the role of NGOs in the drought emergency made it a prime recommendation that "donor NGOs should strive to support, service and assist in funding the overhead costs of indigenous NGOs", adding that "institution-building in Africa is one key to a better future". This report to the United Nations Office for Emergency Operations in Africa also underlined the African NGOs' need for long-term financial support, training and help in developing local funding sources. 17/

84. The next important occasion for substantive dialogue on the respective roles and development priorities of African and Northern NGOs was a symposium convened in London in March 1987 by the journal World Development and the Overseas Development Institute. More than 100 development professionals attended, including 14 from African NGOs.

85. In marked contrast with the DAC meeting, symposium participants from both North and South expressed concern about the consequences of accepting funds from governments. Although such contributions were increasing in scope and magnitude, it was generally held that they could compromise an NGO and pose a serious threat to its integrity, autonomy and advocacy role. If forced to accept the development agenda of their funders, NGOs would then "run the risk of becoming yet another system of aid managers and disbursers rather than development agents in their own right". 18/

86. Though financial transfers to Southern NGOs remained crucial, the symposium participants saw information and technical and organizational skills as increasingly important resources for the future.

87. There was general acceptance that NGOs had an obligation to assert their own vision of development, and discussion "repeatedly returned to the issue of empowerment as the bottom line of the development process".

88. African and other Southern NGOs stressed that development in their own countries was their responsibility. This necessitated a new basis for relationships with their Northern counterparts: an equal partnership providing for mutual respect and accountability, better communication and a continuing dialogue. In this context, it was agreed that NGO networks have an important role in strengthening both South-South and North-South co-operation. Networks should have three major functions - to provide a voice for their members, a clearing house for information and a forum for discussion of common issues and problems.

89. As the debate then moved to Dakar in May/June 1987 for the first major regional gathering of African NGOs, followed by a further encounter with their Northern and international colleagues, agencies and individuals on both sides were looking for concrete ways to structure the changes on which there appeared to be broad agreement in principle.

Overcoming the obstacles

90. The range of problems adduced by both African and Northern NGO representatives in these recent meetings can be seen as falling into two broad categories. At one level there are practical, organizational issues: needs for better information exchange, programme versus project funding, and clearer and more reciprocal accountability. At another, the problems are less definable ones of anxiety (What do they expect of us?), mistrust (What are their real motives?) and resentment (They want it all their own way!).

91. But in a sense all these obstacles are symptoms of one underlying problem: a basic dysfunction of the development paradigm within which NGOs have to work. Whether indigenous or from overseas, they find themselves trying to evolve a co-operative partnership within what is fundamentally an assistential model of North-South relations.

92. A first question, therefore, is whether NGOs can apply any of the leverage they have acquired in recent times to begin to transform the aspects of that model that affect them. The best would be to find a level which holds out the possibility of accomplishing several related changes: to create automatic transfers to Southern NGOs, to build new co-ordinating bodies at national level in Africa, to reduce the overall level of Northern NGOs' dependency on government funding, and to allocate a larger proportion of official co-financing budgets to development education and public information in the North.

93. What follows is an examination of one element in the package, which could provide that lever - namely, the escalation of official investment in Northern NGOs.

94. There was a time when Northern NGOs in Africa could say to people in the village: "All the help we bring is a gift from ordinary people in our country who want to give a helping hand - spontaneously given, with no strings, no ulterior motives". But that picture has changed, and with it the perception of donor NGOs by their African partners and governments.

95. In the 10 years to 1983, aid funds channelled to Northern NGOs from governments and other official sources tripled to more than \$1 billion. 19/ They now account for over one-third of the total NGO resources. In 1984, no less than 60 per cent of assistance to Africa by United States' NGOs was provided from official sources, in the form of food aid (\$220 million) and grants (\$50 million). 20/

96. In Europe and North America, some NGOs conscious that substantial official funding could upset their organizational ethos and motivation, have refused co-financing grants or placed strict ceilings on the percentage of their total income they will accept from such sources. On the other hand, more than half the annual budgets of several of the largest United States NGOs are underwritten by the United States Government; and among the spate of new organizations which have sprung up in recent years, there are some whose establishment was based on assumptions of access to public funding.

97. This changing face of the 'voluntary sector' has undoubtedly extended the range and impact of NGO interventions in Africa. The agencies handling public money may be conscious of the risks to their freedom and the problems of conforming to bureaucratic procedures for accounting and evaluation; but on balance they regard these factors as more than offset by the opportunity to acquire resources which in their view would otherwise be less well spent (if spent at all) on inappropriate, large-scale schemes yielding little benefit to the poor.

98. In the rush to take advantage of these budget lines, however, some Northern NGOs may have given inadequate attention to two factors - one immediate and one long-term - which stand to diminish their credibility as partners for development in Africa.

99. Whereas in the past recipients of NGO aid were usually too polite or too trusting to ask questions about the source of donor agency funds, the new African agencies, with a highly educated leadership often trained in the North, have no such scruples. Indeed, they are well aware of the geopolitical designs underpinning the foreign policies of industrialized nations, east and west; and they are familiar with the well documented cases of foreign aid being used to serve those designs.

100. The result is an aura of mistrust which permeates not just the officially-funded segment of an agency's programme but everything else as well. "Is this agency offering us a bona fide partnership or is there a hidden agenda? Are they, knowingly or otherwise, being manipulated by political or economic forces and thus reducing us to pawns in a game between the rich?" And even when answers are forthcoming, which ones are to be believed?

101. One African NGO leader has no illusions about the overall political context: "Indigenous NGOs... have to be constantly aware that they are fighting against an internationally well organized system of domination and exploitation".

102. Apart from misgivings of this kind, indigenous NGOs have found on a more practical level that their Northern partners, in agreeing co-financing contracts with their home government, have sometimes accepted - and therefore been obliged to pass on - far more stringent reporting and accounting requirements than they themselves could have negotiated directly with the same government.

103. Acceptance of government funding means that the cost of overheads and field staff is absorbed by NGOs in the North, rather than, as might otherwise be the case, by the recipient countries. Assuming a moderate allowance for overhead costs and for field supervision of projects, these agencies' expenses may well add up to between \$50 million and \$100 million a year that African countries are not receiving, except in some measure indirectly.

104. So where is this large and increasing shift of resources to the non-government sector likely to lead? Ever onward and upward, with the Northern groups becoming ever more closely identified with the policies and priorities of the official agencies backing them? Or will the bubble burst - perhaps when the NGO middlemen find they can no longer fulfil their part of the bargain, either due to loss of public support at home or loss of co-operation from their African partners?

105. These questions have not had much attention, but since a continuation of current trends is likely to prove divisive, NGOs are now beginning to look for options which would make it possible to turn the 'privatization' of foreign aid to their advantage.

106. One specific proposal, designed to help address the co-financing issue and at the same time provide automatic transfers to national NGO councils or committees in Africa, was contained in an earlier version of this paper and presented to the international conference of NGOs in Dakar in June. The proposal, endorsed by the conference, calls on Northern NGOs to negotiate with their official donors for a progressive rechanneling of the co-finance funds they now receive to national NGO councils in the South. It was recommended that the new Forum of African Voluntary Development Organizations (FAVDO) should identify one or more African countries where a new funding mechanism of this kind could be tested on a pilot basis. 21/

107. With all questions of funding, however, goes the thorny problem of accountability, which in turn is linked with the criteria for project evaluation. A number of Northern agencies are sympathetic to African NGO demands for less rigid and narrow requirements. There is some agreement in principle that NGOs should be accountable to the recipients of aid as well as to the donors, and that the traditional tools of evaluation - based on quantifiable results - are incapable of measuring the most vital processes of change: in values, attitudes and the overall effectiveness of local organizations. Against this, other Northern NGOs - and some of the official agencies funding them - consider that increased support to Southern groups carries with it a requirement for more systematic evaluation and accounting. The issue is not simply one of confidence or goodwill, since most northern voluntary organizations have both moral and legal obligations to demonstrate that the funds entrusted to them have been properly spent. Where problems exist or can be foreseen, Northern NGOs should initiate discussions with the appropriate regulatory bodies with a view to agreeing on more flexible criteria, consistent with changing needs and relationships.

Agenda for the future

108. From the foregoing survey and, more particularly, from the numerous recent analyses of the role of NGOs in Africa, it is possible to compile a check-list of key areas of future action for overseas NGOs in contributing to human development in Africa. Among the most important items on the agenda should be:

(a) Activities designed to relieve the external constraints on the self-development of the African people, in order to give them the economic, social and cultural space to design their own futures. In practice, this means giving primacy to efforts for the reform of international trade and development finance. It calls for more concerted development education, advocacy and media work by Northern NGOs, using their collective strength to change the terms of North-South engagement on issues such as trade protectionism and international debt. It also entails monitoring international commitments to African development, in order to assess and publicize the performance of both multilateral and bilateral agencies:

(b) Combined efforts by Northern, African and other Southern NGOs to alert world opinion to macro-policy issues affecting all countries, e.g. natural resource depletion, energy futures, North-South employment trade-offs, environmental pollution. In this context, Northern NGOs should be expected to forge alliances with wider social movements campaigning on global security, human rights, consumer issues and the role of women, in order to address as broadly as possible the issues of sustainable development, as posed in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. 22/

(c) Promoting closer ties between development research and NGO action, both within Africa and internationally. Stronger working relationships need to be established, between Northern and African research institutes and between the latter and the indigenous NGOs. This is needed to ensure three things: (i) that research to Africa undertaken by Northern agencies is freely available to their African counterparts and not merely harvested and sold as an export crop; (ii) that African researchers are enabled to contribute in practical ways to community-level development work in their own country/region; and (iii) that the experience of NGO development workers (on what works and what does not) is transmitted to the research community as guidance for future planning. In this area also, Northern NGOs should be supporting their African counterparts in acquiring their own skills in research and information-gathering, to be able to evaluate more effectively their interventions and to enhance their status and influence as interlocutors with their own government or foreign agencies;

(d) Networking and information exchange at various levels. Overseas NGOs can have an important role in providing conduits for information flows to, from and among African groups. Whereas bilateral information flows can be divisive (because some get a lot, others little), horizontal networking can provide a common knowledge-base on which to build regional co-operation among NGOs. Sectoral NGO networks, which have had considerable impact at international level (e.g. Pesticides Action Network, Health Action International) should be seriously considered as a model for regional collaboration among African NGOs which Northern agencies could support. One such network already operational is the African NGOs Environment Network (ANEN), based in Nairobi. Others could be valuable, perhaps initially at subregional level, in such fields as food security, rural energy and drought survival strategies. One primary purpose of Northern NGOs' involvement in African networking must be to help strengthen the institutional capacity of indigenous NGOs and to define and carry through their own policies and programmes, thus reducing their dependence on foreign technical and tied financial resources.

(e) Training as part of a two-way learning process. On one side, Northern groups need to take advantage of the human resources that African NGOs can offer to authenticate and enrich their educational and advocacy work in their own constituencies. Through South-to-North visits and consultative arrangements, African NGO personnel can add an important dimension to NGO policy planning, public information work and contacts with official aid agencies. In one example of this, the African Peace Committee - a United States coalition of NGOs and religious organizations - arranged a tour for 18 speakers, half of them Africans, to address groups in 30 American cities on the links between hunger and war in Africa. On the other side, Northern NGOs can have a vital role in assisting

with the provision of training for African NGO staff. The requirements are varied, needing to cover management as well as technical skills, and with courses tailored for women and men equally. Contrary to some past practice, training should be to the maximum extent within Africa, and given the language barriers to intra-regional communication between NGOs, special attention may be required for overcoming this.

109. In terms of sectoral programming and information work, there is a recognized need for Northern NGOs to focus a greater proportion of their efforts on the environmental aspects of sustainable development, ^{23/} as well as on the advancement of women and the relatively neglected problems of rapid urbanization. As African groups acquire a greater say in the allocation of total NGO resources in their own countries, it will be increasingly important for them to ensure that due weight is given to these and other concerns.

110. In identifying these areas for future co-operation by overseas NGOs, it is taken for granted that community development, health programmes and agriculture will continue to be the main focus of their work. The challenge of the new agenda for North-South NGO relationships lies not so much in what is being done at project level but very much more in the contextual questions: how? and by whom?

Conclusion

111. Overseas NGOs have made a significant contribution to human well-being and development in Africa in the first generation of the continent's political independence. But the second generation, now under way, poses a new challenge. Among the most positive aspects of the role played by Northern NGOs has been their encouragement and support for the growth of indigenous non-governmental groups, now increasingly able and determined to take over the lead role in promoting their people's development.

112. An intense debate is therefore now in progress to define the appropriate objectives, organizational structures and working methods for foreign NGOs in a supporting role - and, going beyond this, to find a solid base for partnership between NGOs of all regions, in order that they may pursue together the changes required for justice in a sustainable world.

113. The outcome of this debate will have a determining influence on both the form and the substance of the overseas NGOs' work in the future. It may result in their presence in Africa becoming less visible. If, however, their technical, organizational and communication skills can be brought to bear in support of Africa's own NGO movement, their contribution will be no less and perhaps more valuable than hitherto.

114. The transfer of power to African NGOs is the first critical step. It is now incumbent on their Northern partners to see that before the process is much more advanced, arrangements are in place to secure them adequate resources and infrastructural support.

115. If governments, particularly in the North, are now looking to the NGO sector for answers to the development puzzle which have eluded them, it is perhaps in this domain of new relationships, more than any other, that the NGOs may hope to contribute to a reorientation of development strategies in the 1990s.

Footnotes

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