

TRANSFORMATION, POVERTY AND
CIVIL SOCIETY IN SSA

What Roles for NGO's?

By Reginald Herbold Green

Efficiency matters... in a poor
country waste is a sin.

The end, means, test and
justification of development is
man.

- Julius K. Nyerere

Inasmuch as ye have done it unto
The least of these my brethren,
Ye have done it unto me.

- Christ

"EUROPA-UNIVERSO: CRISI O ABANDONO?"

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I.**WASTELAND OR LANDS OF HOPE?**

1992 is not a good year for most Sub-Saharan Africans. The last time their sub-continent saw output rise faster than population for five years in a row was 1975-1979. Rapid decline in per capita income may have ended in most countries, but for over half the past five years have been bumping along the bottom. Even in countries like Ghana and Tanzania with eight years of rising GDP and clear trends of rising output and food production per capita there is little sense of enthusiasm - the peak output per capita levels of the 1960's in Ghana and 1978 in Tanzania are not regained let alone the confident enthusiasm of 1950's Ghana or late 1960's/1970's Tanzania.

And Ghana and Tanzania are today among the most successful of the larger states. Zimbabwe's 1980-1991 5% growth trend has collapsed into free fall with a remarkably ill articulated structural adjustment phase two (phase one was 1984-1991) and drought. The Ivoirian miracle (and its Cameroonians mirror) are dust. Kenya's economy is reeling as dangerously as its political and social structures.

From South Africa through the Sudan drought has gripped the people (with only Tanzania spared). From the Cape of Good Hope to the Zambesia River this is the "apocalypse drought" the worst in at least a century. In Gaza (Mozambique) they say "When the great river dies the end of the world is at hand". In March 1992 (seven months before the next rains) for over 200 kilometres the Limpopo had died to cracked mud flats and pools. In Southern and South African 25,000,000 souls risked famine and in SSA as a whole nearly 50,000,000.

Weak economies, deteriorated infrastructure, eroded state capacity, world press boredom with African droughts and parsimonious donor responses (over \$1,000 million, yes, but under 50% of total requirements) have guaranteed deaths from famine even where war is not a noose around the distribution pipeline. Where it is and guns shoot the hungry and fires consume the food - instead of guarding and cooking the food - the four horsemen of the apocalypse ride out. Ethiopia, Mozambique, Liberia, Sudan, Somalia is a litany of prayers not only for these at risk but also for the dead and the doomed to die. The vistas - and not only for the sceptical, aloof onlooker - are often those from the gates of hell.

And yet... In Tanzania the proud record of effective food distribution averting death by starvation from the end of the 1950's will survive 1992/93 and the last decade has seen effective, community based, state backed child nutrition programmes grow to cover half the country. In Southern Africa it was the Southern African Development Community (ex Development Coordination Conference), Zimbabwe and Mozambique that first sounded the tocsin leading to a set of national responses and just enough international support that deaths may be under 50,000 persons not the 5,000,000 souls one had good cause to fear in March. In Rwanda mediation has suspended a civil war/invasion and the first halting steps toward reconciliation and return of exiles from the 1960/61 overthrow of the Tutsi aristocracy by the Hatu majority have been taken. Even in South Africa there are almost as many signs pointing to progress - however agonizingly slow - as to a Dantesque downward spiral. However uncertain the outcome Nigeria's press gropes toward both freedom and responsibility as does its third try at competitive civilian rule. In a majority of countries civil society groups (religious, women's, locality based, trade unions and others) are growing in vigour and initiative taking. Perhaps - just perhaps - 1992-3 is a crisis in the original meaning of that word, a turning point.

II.

THE DISMAL SCIENCE REAFFIRMED

But if 1993-2003 is to be the turning point to a return to the social and material advances and the optimism of the will common in the 1960's and 1970's, the cause is unlikely to be found in macroeconomic projections.

The World Bank and the UN Economic Commission for Africa are at one in seeing an average 4% annual rate of growth of output (1% or \$4 a person a year) as a barely attainable target. And in the 1980's 4% to 5% rates have not been enough to reverse the rise of absolute poverty (now afflicting almost one household in three) nor to do more than halt the corrosion of basic services (health, education, water, extension) or basic infrastructure (transport, urban services, communications, energy supply), let alone to restore confidence that there is a way forward.

And those 4% estimates assumed a healthy Northern economy - not 1% annual growth in the OECD and minus 5% in the former communist states. Inadequate as its performance is, Africa is growing faster than Europe! The implications both for earned import capacity from exports and resource transfers from OECD and ex CMEA governments are as clear as they are dismal - quite apart from the rather lurid light they shed on the capacity of economic management to overcome structural problems even when of lesser magnitude than those confronting SSA!

Transformation (to development or to sustainable growth depending on the writer's tastes) is the fashionable answer. But if - as it usually does - that means restoring infrastructure, qualitatively improving the education-health-nutrition of the labour force and building up a new, dynamic export base - as well as the industrial relations and morale to achieve sustained labour productivity increases - a decade and a half (at least) separates most SSA countries from the promised land.

To be blunt Africans do not have a decade and a half. 3% to 4% growth (basically 0% consumption per capita growth) with no reduction of absolute poverty or return to living wages is not socially and politically sustainable. The process will implode into dull despair or frenetic populism at best and explode into mass civil disorder or civil war at worst. Either will halt the transformation progress long before it can pay off.

About the macroeconomic prospects there is relatively little Northern Non-Governmental organisations can do, beyond chipping away at the margins and helping prevent shocks destroy otherwise viable national trajectories. Publicity and mobilisation in the North do have an impact. But in the context of both recession and immediate, nearby challenges in the European marches the best outcome of that impact is more likely to be to secure

backing for emergency appeals, ward off cuts in other transfers and achieve major debt writedowns than to win a break through to massive increases in real resource transfers. Similarly in their actions in the South the total resources NGO's do or can hope to deploy cannot make much impact on the overall resource bill or personnel and institutional requirements for transformation.

Is there an answer or is Africa's leadership doomed like Moses to die in sight of, but unable to reach, their promised post-transformation lands? And, unlike Moses, with no sign of a Joshua to complete the crossing?

There may be an answer. Counterintuitively it lies in reducing poverty (40% plus) and absolute poverty (about 33%). If Africa's poor could be enabled to be more productive, the food constraint like that of effective demand for urban production would be loosened quite remarkably and output growth could be pushed to 5% to 6% a year in a way that allowed the majority of poor African households to believe the present was and the future could be better (assuredly a sea change in attitude that would lead to an unleashing of effort).

This is neither a day dream nor a call for abandoning macro economic transformation. The health - education - water - nutrition component of the latter is a vital input into the struggle to overcome absolute poverty as, potentially, is its stress on infrastructure rehabilitation and upgrading. In a very real sense the World Bank's new documents on poverty reduction and UNICEF's strategies in partnership with the Organisation of African Unity for moving the 1990 Children's Summit goals onto the operational agenda are groping in this direction. But neither to date appears to have focussed on how poor people can be enabled to produce more - quickly and sustainably. In a sense after a lost decade and a half one returns to ILO's World Employment Programmes concluding (in effect if not intent) valediction Employment, Growth and Basic Needs: A One World Problem.

III.

TRANSFORMING TRANSFORMATION?

If a shift of focus and priority to enabling poor people to improve their diets, their access to basic services and to markets, their incomes and their ability to achieve changes is central to successful transformation, more is needed than a reallocation of central government resources and personnel - crucial as those are. Less government is hardly part of the answer - even if rather different government is. In most of SSA government spending is one third to one half less than the minimum levels the World Bank's long term projection study for Sustainable Growth imply are necessary. Nor is there any way the bulk of the cash costs of basic services and infrastructure can come from poor households, peri-urban neighbourhoods and rural communities. More community input frequently requires an enhanced core government resource flow to which to contribute.

Local government with real powers - as well as the initiative to use them and the capacity to use them efficiently - is part of the answer. So are civil society organisations. A central government can design a basic pure water strategy involving users in maintenance and operation (physically and in provision of materials and cash). It cannot operate if district by district let alone well by well from the centre. Similarly using feedback on one rigid, unresponsive agricultural extension system (whether the current Training and Visit fashion or its predecessors) to design another is to repeat the problem - failure to begin by responding to local farmer capabilities, needs and practices.

In this context NGO's have - potentially at least - a more pivotal set of roles. Their smaller size, greater flexibility (where it exists) and attunement both to smaller projects and to a desire to enter - build up local capacity - move on are potentially relevant to local government and civil society in ways main line government to government technical assistance (no matter how sympathetic the personnel may be) is very unlikely to be. This is usually especially true if the NGO has parallel domestic civil society bodies to which it can relate.

This perspective on NGO roles does require that they and partner civil society and local government organisations mobilise more resources. But the sums are not astronomical and part could well come from SSA reallocations to local governments and basic services plus - once results

began to be seen - community/civil society organisation contributions in labour, cash and kind. On the NGO side, provided they can avoid the risk of becoming "fronts" for their governments there is no reason most of their additional funding needs could not come from fairly moderate government financed development assistance augmentation and reallocation.

But finance is not the basic obstacle. Governance, Platonic Guardianship and Efficiency are. In SSA even relatively participatory governments with strong civil societies have a habit of keeping central control over local government, relating at arms length to civil society bodies and to running political input from people all the way up to the top and back down rather than more directly at community, town and district levels. What the less participatory - let alone the positively repressive - do is far worse. Platonic guardianship is a constant peril for any person or institution which has a vision and is determined to see that others share and benefit by it. NGO's should not be quite so happy as some are with the term "New Missionaries". At the least it carries Platonic Guardianship overtones and, in SSA, usually is a subliminal criticism of perceived links to Eurocentric colonial perceptions, attitudes and practices. As to efficiency (or more accurately its absence) African local governments in general make their central governments look like paragons (and positively incite their populations to beg the centre to intervene to clean up the rubbish - literally as well as figuratively). Civil society groups are much more diverse in respect to efficiency but most lack the personnel, knowledge and communications to transform their roles and capacities. NGO's are in general not very cost efficient - partly because civil society bodies' skill base is limited and partly because the "volunteer in the village" - or capital - syndrome leads to lavish use of expatriate personnel. Nor to date do they, in fact, systematically build up sustainable capacity in their partners, with the telling exception of some "old missionaries" who have learned from history not to be "new missionaries" too, whatever the virtues and necessities of their earlier role may have been.

Before exploring civil society/local governance and NGO's in more detail it is appropriate to take a quick look at absolute poverty and strategies to make overcoming it central to governance and macroeconomic transformation.

IV.

ABSOLUTE POVERTY IN AFRICA

Almost one household in three in Sub-Saharan Africa is afflicted by absolute poverty. They have incomes (cash and self-provisioning) so low that 60% of total income cannot procure a minimally acceptable household diet. That figure ties with South Asia for the unwanted distinction of being the highest of any region in the world. Worse, it is rising - unlike South Asia where it is being reduced.

The degree of absolute poverty varies widely. In only three countries is it below 10%; in several it is over 50%; in most 20% to 40% of households are absolutely poor. Most absolutely poor households are employed/self-employed; overwork is a more frequent problem than nothing to do. Indeed most have multiple sources of income. Very few households are entirely self-provisioning (subsistence) and in many urban areas over 50% of all households have one recorded employment ('formal' sector) job. Formal and relatively permanent informal (not officially recorded) jobs account for at least 60% of urban household income in most of Africa. It is low productivity and low pay which underlie absolute poverty not low hours worked or low willingness to work. In SSA, access to basic services tends to go hand in hand with income (except for being somewhat higher at all income levels for urban residents) so that the income and service access aspects of absolute poverty are reinforcing in all but a small minority of cases.

The causes of poverty need to be understood in order to take effective action to overcome it. Absolute poverty is not new - its form has changed but its existence is recorded from Ancient Egypt and the Sahelian Empires onward. It has been exacerbated by general economic unsuccess in the 1980s because, while growing overall resource availability may not benefit poor households, a shrinking national resource base weighs heavily on poor people. Natural calamities (especially drought) and man-made catastrophes (especially war) have reduced vulnerable households to absolute poverty and the absence of livelihood rehabilitation programmes has trapped them there.

But policies are also involved. That is not unique to SSA nor is it necessarily a pessimistic judgement. Policies, unlike history, terms of trade and drought, can be altered by Africans. Indeed there is reason to

believe strategy and policy transformation to focus on reducing (not merely alleviating) absolute poverty is both practicable and integral to overall macroeconomic policy transformation.

Absolute poverty is not distributed randomly. About 10% is urban and 90% rural, although the former has increased more rapidly in the 1980s. In rural areas lack of cash income from sources other than food crops, affliction by calamities and/or catastrophes, location in peripheral areas or hostile ecological zones and shortages of labour power (female, aged or disabled person headed) are the main identifying, and to a large extent causal, categories of absolutely poor households. The main difference in urban areas is that absence of at least one formal sector job is a key characteristic.

Especially in urban areas, a significant proportion of households are unempowerable. The reason is lack of enough labour power relative to mouths to feed. Aged, disabled and single adult (overwhelmingly female) headed households dominate this category.

Absolute poverty weighs most heavily on absolutely poor people. But it also weighs on society - beyond the extended families of the poor who lack sources of solidarity support in times of calamity. How a society treats its least privileged members does define and inform it.

Further, the moral economy case for priority to reducing absolute poverty has economic as well as social and political aspects. Adam Smith stressed this in affirming that no nation could be great and prosperous the majority of whose people were poor and miserable.

The ill and ill-nourished cannot work long, hard and productively. Wages can be inefficiently low - productivity, morale and morals then deteriorate and labour costs per unit of output (which are the crucial cost line not wages per day) rise. Those with little production or income do not provide much in the way either of markets for, or inputs into, the production of enterprises or less poor households creating severe demand recession and domestic input supply problems. In SSA, neither national physical nor household entitlement aspects of food security can be achieved until absolutely poor small family farming households are enabled to produce more food to sell and to eat.

Socially and politically it is a well know fact that massive inequality does tend to lead to strikes, riots and non-cooperation with employers and officials. The social and political costs are clear enough - the macroeconomic ones ought to be. Nor is grinding, growing poverty a context likely to produce either reasonable stability of policy (or personnel) or plausible economic discourse and commitments in a context of competitive elections.

V.

NOTES TOWARD A STRATEGY

Absolute poverty will not be overcome by piecemeal tactics, marginal add-on projects nor muddling through. A four point strategy - backed by substantial policy, institutional, personnel and resource allocations - is needed.

1. Enabling poor people to produce and to earn more - including initial asset provision and ongoing extension and other productivity raising measures;
2. Provision of physical and support for expansion of market (competitive traders/transporters with vehicles and working capital) infrastructure;
3. Rehabilitation and expansion of basic services/human investment with concentration on basic health services (educational and preventative as well as curative), accessible household water, primary and continuing (adult) education and basic sanitation;
4. Safety net provision and promotion (for household and community nets) including calamity relief, old age and disabled pensions, transfer payments (especially in urban and peri urban areas) to temporarily (e.g. drought victims and orphans) and permanently unempowerable households and persons.

Because the numbers of absolutely poor households is very large, efficiency matters both in respect to low unit cost and broad coverage and to rapid gains in production and access to services. Programmes which are efficient on output tests but have high unit costs are not suitable because adequate coverage cannot be achieved.

This strategy explicitly or implicitly includes macroeconomic transformation. Absolute poverty reduction strategies can become self-sustaining on fiscal and external balance accounts within five years, but cannot cure existing macroeconomic structural imbalances. Both directly, via its own employment, and indirectly by enhancing demand for, and employment in, the micro and household enterprise sectors, a buoyant large scale enterprise sector paying rising (up to efficiency levels) real wages is needed. The feedback from the specific articulated strategy into the macro package is revival of demand growth, directly backed (particularly in rural areas) by supply (including food and inputs traded with the urban sector for manufactured goods). Without overall growth so that "all boats float higher", the resources to sustain and absolute poverty reduction strategy will not be available. Further, reallocation of new (additional) resources in a buoyant economy is infinitely easier (technically and economically as well as socially and politically) than reallocating existing resources within a stagnant or shrinking economy. Like law and order, growth is not adequate, but (also like law and order) without it, little else will be achievable and that little with great difficulty and high fragility/vulnerability.

VI.

PARTICIPATION, ACCESS, ADMINISTRATION

Participation by absolutely poor households is necessary - if they do not produce more the entire strategy will fail. To achieve results, participation must begin in data collection and design and continue through operation and maintenance to financing-accountability-review/revision. To concentrate on user fees is to parody participation properly defined and, indeed, to misjudge how households/communities can best provide resources. For example, labour, goods, operation and basic maintenance, community safety net schemes (as in some aspects of the "Iringa" nutrition programmes) may often allow larger as well as less burdensome contributions to costs. Participation on that definition requires decentralisation both of administration and of governance. Community interaction with and accountability over service providers requires, at the very least, strong regional and urban government and, as rapidly as possible, strong district and town governance and service provision units.

The way to reach out to enable and serve absolutely poor households is - except in the case of safety nets - rarely to create special programmes for them alone but to ensure their access to broader articulated programmes. Affirmative action is basically about inclusion not exclusion.

That underlines the need to evaluate all programmes and projects in terms of their contributions to employment, to earned income of absolutely poor households and to provision of services to them. The issue is not whether these should be the only criteria - evidently not - nor the overriding ones in all cases - again not since, e.g., high cost labour intensive cement plants and technically inefficient labour intensive port facilities ultimately increase poverty. Rather it is to ensure that employment and poor household income criteria are operationally accepted as important across the board.

In practice, programmes that benefit absolutely poor households will also raise the income and service access of less poor and not so poor ones. That, in itself, is highly desirable. The problem is in ensuring that absolutely poor households do have access to them. Six approaches are relevant:

1. rapid advance to universality in respect to basic services (and extension) with special, workable fee waivers for absolutely poor households;
2. common programmes with specific attention to ensuring absolutely poor households do benefit, e.g. initial free tools/seeds packages to enable higher production to benefit from - e.g. - local roads and rural commercial network strengthening;
3. self selecting approaches, e.g. seasonal (or permanent) labour intensive infrastructure construction at wage levels attractive to absolutely poor and/or land short (a highly overlapping category) households but not to others;
4. self-financing indirect support programmes, e.g. loans and provision of training/services to micro enterprises and rural commercial networks;
5. area based approaches when particular districts are largely absolutely poor or drought stricken, so that the cost of identifying households to exclude is in excess of any conceivable efficiency gain;

6. safety net programmes for unempowerable (and disaster stricken) households on a need-based approach linked to identifiable characteristics (which do not include detailed household income accounts).

The necessity for cost control - i.e., value for money with value defined as enhanced incomes of, and services used by absolutely poor households - flows from resource constraints. On fairly optimistic estimates, \$20 per capita or \$60 per capita annually for absolutely poor household members (\$400 to \$425 per poor household) can be available in an 'average' SSA economy and \$150 to \$300 per household) in a poorer one. That assumes that the 30% of GDP overall public expenditure target derivable from the World Bank's Long Term Perspective Study can be achieved; the share to law and order, housekeeping, large infrastructural projects and debt service held to half that; of the balance, the proportion directed to the struggle against absolute poverty, parallels the proportion (30% to 33% on average) of absolutely poor people in the population. In a context of 4% to 6% growth, substantial reallocation (including a "peace dividend") and moderate increases (from new flows or massive external debt write-offs) in net resource inflows, those assumptions are potentially attainable.

Institutionally the keys are coordination and decentralisation.

Coordination (at all levels) is needed if strategic programmes are, in fact, to complement each other and if a coherent national strategic frame to allow decentralised articulation of contextual measures to meet common objectives is to have a real existence. Coordination is the opposite of parallel government - not new agencies, but strengthened functioning of existing ones (including provincial/regional and district, urban, town governments) is the appropriate route.

Decentralisation is needed to make participation effective and to allow specific variations as to means and emphasis to fit divergent contexts. How far which functions can be decentralised and how fast is a question of fact. If district governments are very weak, professional and technical services (albeit not data collection, implementation and participant review) will need to remain at provincial level until they are strengthened. A budget drawn up without even a qualified bookkeeper, and a

public works package elaborated without any engineering input, are most unlikely to be efficient or operational and will discredit rather than promote decentralisation and participation.

VII.

VULNERABILITY'S AFTERMATHS: PREVENTION AND REHABILITATION

Calamity and catastrophe relief as practised today, are survival promoting (poverty alleviating) but are not vulnerability reducing and livelihood rehabilitating focused. At the same time, adjustment and project development programmes are relevant only to households who can respond. They may be just accessible to poor households, but rarely to those in absolute poverty.

This gap is not of purely intellectual interest. It is a yawning chasm into which vulnerability has pushed literally millions of African households and from which the present disaster relief and development dual approaches provide few ladders to climb out again.

This is not inevitable. Calamity (especially drought) programmes need to be on a permanently structural standby basis with programmes "on the shelf" for fast implementation when (not if) calamity strikes. Key goals include:

- a. enabling afflicted households to remain on their farms to prepare for the next season (e.g. prompt, nearby food distribution and continued access to water);
- b. provision of inputs, e.g. seed, and, for wiped out pastoralists, core livestock to make resumption of production possible;
- c. vulnerability reduction measures, e.g. as to water and basic veterinary drug supply as well as to socially and economically (not just technically) viable drought resistant crop research and extension;
- d. public works (food for work or cash paid work for food) both to contribute to vulnerability reduction and to maintenance of afflicted household incomes.

Catastrophe result reversal (basically after wars) requires a somewhat different approach because dislocation is the rule, and the gap in livelihood earning as well as the degree of pauperisation, is usually much more severe and widespread. The requirements - as set out both by affected households and by logical analysis of how to create conditions enabling households to benefit from more general development programmes include:

- a. adequate security to return home (or to a self chosen, usually nearby, alternative);
- b. transport back;
- c. access to adequate land to restore household livelihood with credible security of use rights (usually evolved traditional not titled);
- d. packages of tools, basic household equipment and production inputs - the working capital without which production cannot be restored;
- e. food for the period from return until first attainable harvest (usually 9 to 15 months because of bush clearing requirements before planting is practicable);
- f. restoration/creation of access to basic health services, water supply and education;
- g. roads usable by lorries most of the year;
- h. access to a functioning (and preferably competitive) rural trading network;
- i. supplementary cash income earning opportunities, e.g. from labour intensive infrastructure restoration.

VIII.

WHERE NEXT?

Resources to make a meaningful start do exist. This is especially true if they are deployed cost efficiently within a national strategic framework. Positive initial results would make further steps easier both by increasing

resources available for all uses and by building up groups and institutions with vested interests in the successful prosecution of the Struggle Against Absolute Poverty.

Mobilising complementary external resources should not be impossible. The World Bank and most major bilateral agencies as well as most UN institutions are, in fact, convinced that for social, political, economic and humanitarian reasons, poverty reduction should be a priority objective.

But the initiative and the frame setting need to be African. No outside state or institution (and only a small group of expatriates) is primarily concerned with the development of Africa for the benefit of Africans. Even less do any of them feel the full cost of failed programmes have a detailed human level contextual grasp, or an ability (still less a willingness) to be accountable primarily to Africans and African institutions.

Raising external resources for an articulated strategy with clear programmes and institutional structures as well as substantial domestic resource inputs is desirable, even necessary. Blank page begging for foreign donors to come in and do "their thing" is neither.

IX.

CIVIL SOCIETY/LOCAL GOVERNANCE - A SKETCH

To speak of African civil society is to oversimplify - the divergences in form and strength are as great as those within Europe. But some moderately general observations can be made.

Most African societies do have both a civil society and a pluralist tradition (and for that matter of debate on issues before decisions though much more rarely of permanent, formalised organisations divided on a general political issue basis). But African civil society organisations are not what the North now thinks of as NGO's.

The bulk of African civil society organisations are local or local units whose national superstructures are often rather weak in relation to the base communities and not as hierarchically dominant as they would like to think. Locality based groups, religious congregations (Christian, Islamic or indigenous), age groups, women's groups, and trade unions (the one

'modern' form) are dominant. In some cases one or two more 'modern' groups - e.g. Red Cross societies - are significant and in many a range of modern quasi NGO's (e.g. Boy Scouts, St. John's Ambulance Brigade, Rotary and Lions - the two legged variety that is) have a fringe urban elite existence. A more recent trend is locality groups focussed on particular issues - e.g. parents associations, water users committees - but these are a fairly evident evolution of the basic locality groups.

The resilience of many rural civil society organisations is high as - up to a point - is their capacity. But their resources (including knowledge) are usually a constraint on both volume and variety of activity in rural areas. Peri urban and urban centre areas have fewer and weaker civil society organisation networks - excepting trade unions and a minority of welfare oriented religious congregations. Traditional links have eroded under contextual shift and calamity pressures faster than new forms have emerged.

These are largely "people's organisations" arising organically out of and accountable to relatively homogenous, self perceived local or functional communities. That explains their weakness in peri urban and urban areas and also their underrating by (sometimes to the point of invisibility to) many Northern observers. Northern NGO's in the development business (with the exception of some church and trade union related ones) are rather different in nature. They are groups of self selected persons who share common thematic interests and a desire to do something for - or in support of - persons not primarily of their own community. They can be styled "people's organisation support groups" but are not - least of all abroad - themselves peoples organisations nor in any organic way are they accountable to those persons they seek to support or to help. Indigenous "support groups" as such are both thin on the ground and weak in Africa (unlike - say - India or the Philippines). The major exceptions are located in the broader levels of civil society groups with national linkages (e.g. church and women's councils). Like external NGO's they often have difficulty in understanding, being understood by or relating with "people's organisations". That is a weakness which interlocks with civil society organisation weaknesses in respect of knowledge and skilled personnel. Community, tradition, highly contextual knowledge can take are only so far in changing contexts and to day neither indigenous "support groups" nor NGO's have been able to address this constraint more than occasionally or peripherally.

At local governance levels - particularly in respect to villages or (in a minority of cases where civil society groups are strong) and peri urban neighbourhoods civil society organisations and formal local government interpenetrate. This can be to the point at which an analyst is hard put to divide them and most constituents would hardly see the exercise as having much point. This could be a strength for both were the base tiers of local government less weak and the structuring of scarce district (in states with more capacity) and provincial (in the less capacitated ones) skilled/professionally personnel more oriented to supporting the base units. At present it is a mixed blessing (or shared curse).

Beyond local government - civil society/government relations vary widely. Probably the commonest is general neglect (not by any means always benign) mixed with non-comprehension and a mutual wariness if either appear to be becoming powerful and/or critical. Repression (usually barely successful if overt and likely to end by eroding the state without necessarily strengthening the capacity of the civil society organisations to promote and to do as distinct from to reject and to block) is common. Co-optation - whether in good faith or to tame - is a less common strategy, albeit one practiced in several major countries where it is backed by the threat of repression. Its latest variant is an attempt to offload service provision and revenue collection onto civil society bodies in a manner strongly suggesting that neither better services nor more participatory service design - let alone more accountability - is the main aim whatever the cover glosses may affirm.

However, to point a totally negative picture would be inaccurate. Some of the neglect is benign - to leave space to act. Consultation and dialogue, with varying degrees of seriousness, are becoming more common. Some "users committee" approaches really do incorporate participation and more accountability, better services as well as more civil society inputs of time, materials and money.

X.

NGO'S - PROMISE OR PROBLEM?

Clearly African "people's organisations" and "support groups" could use partners and supporters. Many are well aware of that fact. Equally clearly Northern NGO's are eager to play these roles and are currently "in fashion" in the North. But to date the results - and especially the growing resentment among many African people's and support group members and leaders - are disquieting. NGO's seem relatively unaware of this "backlash" - perhaps because Africans are often too polite in discourse and perhaps because Northern NGO's like their Northern Government big brothers are perceived as not really welcoming criticism and as being quite prone to moving their marbles to a different game if the African players complain of their rules. The most scorching critiques to date (e.g. Joe Hanlon's Mozambique - Who Calls the Shots?) are by Northerners. They probably exaggerate and do not quite see the problem through African eyes, but there is a rapidly growing body of African support for their main challenges to the current Northern NGO global view/African field practice.

Foreign NGO's are external - in style and in accountability. To suppose (as some do and others pretend) the reverse, leads to failure to seek mutual accommodation to these realities. Their level of expertise is all over the map - even in the same organisation - ranging from superlative to non-existent and their level of understanding of realities and of priorities as perceived by civil society organisations is, on average, little better than that of their official technical assistance brethren.

While NGO's like to believe that they, unlike external governments, do not dominate, that is usually an illusion as seen from the African perspective. The very real disproportion of resources, of personnel of external links, of access to those in power (including in African governments) and of prestige between an NGO and a local civil society or governance body is objectively frequently greater than that between a resource providing and a recipient state. To ignore this is to make focussing on how to reduce the disparity, build up African capacity (and thus countervailing power) and to transcend didactic monologues with participatory dialogues harder and less likely.

NGO styles also create operational problems. In one very poor SSA country over sixty are listed (oddly not including the largest Protestant/Anglican and Catholic cooperating NGO's because they operate through their national counterparts, have no permanent offices but - on their home government's evaluation - get better than average value for money). For example 5 OXFAM's, 4 Save The Children's, 4 Medicines sans Frontiers (apparently except boundaries between each other) all have offices. The problems of liaison (even nationally let alone for local government or peoples organisations) are virtually insurmountable. This problem is enhanced by a number of NGO's having scattered, specialised (at least in one place) projects and wishing to have a fairly rapid in - do the job - out and on cycle. The result is all too often passive acceptance of whatever is 'on offer', no coordination of the external NGO's and a litter of unsustainable ex-projects for whose sustainability neither domestic expertise nor resource bases had been built up. Efficiency does matter and at least from an African perspective these styles are inefficient and tolerated only from fear basic criticisms would lead to mass exodus to more complaisant venues.

To cite these limitations (or worse) is not to deny the dedication and energy many NGO's and their personnel have demonstrated. Nor is it to deny the potential for much more constructive interaction; still less to advocate rapid withdrawal. It is to ask "What is to be done" to achieve that potential primarily through more sensitive, accountable, partnerships with African "support groups", "peoples organisations" and local government.

XI.

A FEW SIGNPOSTS

1. Building African capacity is the prime purpose for and justification of partnership. Only in emergency life threatening situations does getting the immediate task done faster justify compromising that principle;
2. Apart from external publicity/mobilisation against repression (when, how and as sought) NGO's need to concentrate on enabling their partners to build up the knowledge, personnel and organisation to carry out dialogue (including tense dialogue) with their governments - not to try

to design their domestic political strategies or wage campaigns for them. Possible (and desirable) relationships among civil society organisations and different levels of governance vary widely. From country to country and overtime. A uniform choice to act as if government were not there (the inverse of governmental neglect of civil society) is not appropriate. Still less is a general stance of open distrust and covert attempts to undermine state capacity (the inverse of repressive co-optation). But there are, indeed, contexts in which these may be the only practicable ways ahead. The points are: a) relating to context and b) the primary of African (not NGO) decisions if only because it is the Africans who must continue to live in the contexts and with the consequences;

3. NGO's should structure their programme and project choices (and geographic foci) largely in response to perceived partner needs and capacities. By the some token programme duration needs to relate to sustainable domestic capacity buildup and, therefore, can rarely be set in advance;
4. Both inexpert and insensitive expatriate personnel are something of which SSA already has a large surplus and which contribute nothing (or less than nothing) to African civil society or local government capacity building;
5. The difficulty of working to and through domestic organisations is real - but those NGO's determined to overcome it have done so often enough to suggest the greatest barrier to NGO's doing this is pessimism of the will. Learning by experience is crucial and it is crucial that experience be built into abiding African groups not encapsulated in transient expatriates;
6. The imbalance of resources and of influence between external NGO's and their African partners needs to be recognised openly in order to devise agreed ways to reduce its distorting impact on relationships;
7. NGO's should consider how their own space to operate can be reconciled with the limited administrative and liaison capacity of most of their African partners, as well as with African interaction and coordination with national (as well as local and particular) strategic and goal frameworks;

8. NGO programme and project concepts (like those of governments) should be scrutinised for cost efficiency and sustainability (in terms of knowledge, personnel and central government access as well as of finance) to reduce the growing debris of abandoned (before or after the NGO moved on leaving the fallout to its partners - or clients).

"Parish churches in a wasteland", however small, are no more monuments to God or to the persons who built them than "Cathedrals in the desert".

None of these signposts points down a path posted "no through road". But the roads are likely to prove long, winding, steep and strewn with obstacles circumventing or digging out of which require time, skill, energy and faith. To cite the Lord Krishnas injunction on a rather different field of battle:

Not farewell, but
Fare forward
Voyagers.

Author Note

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