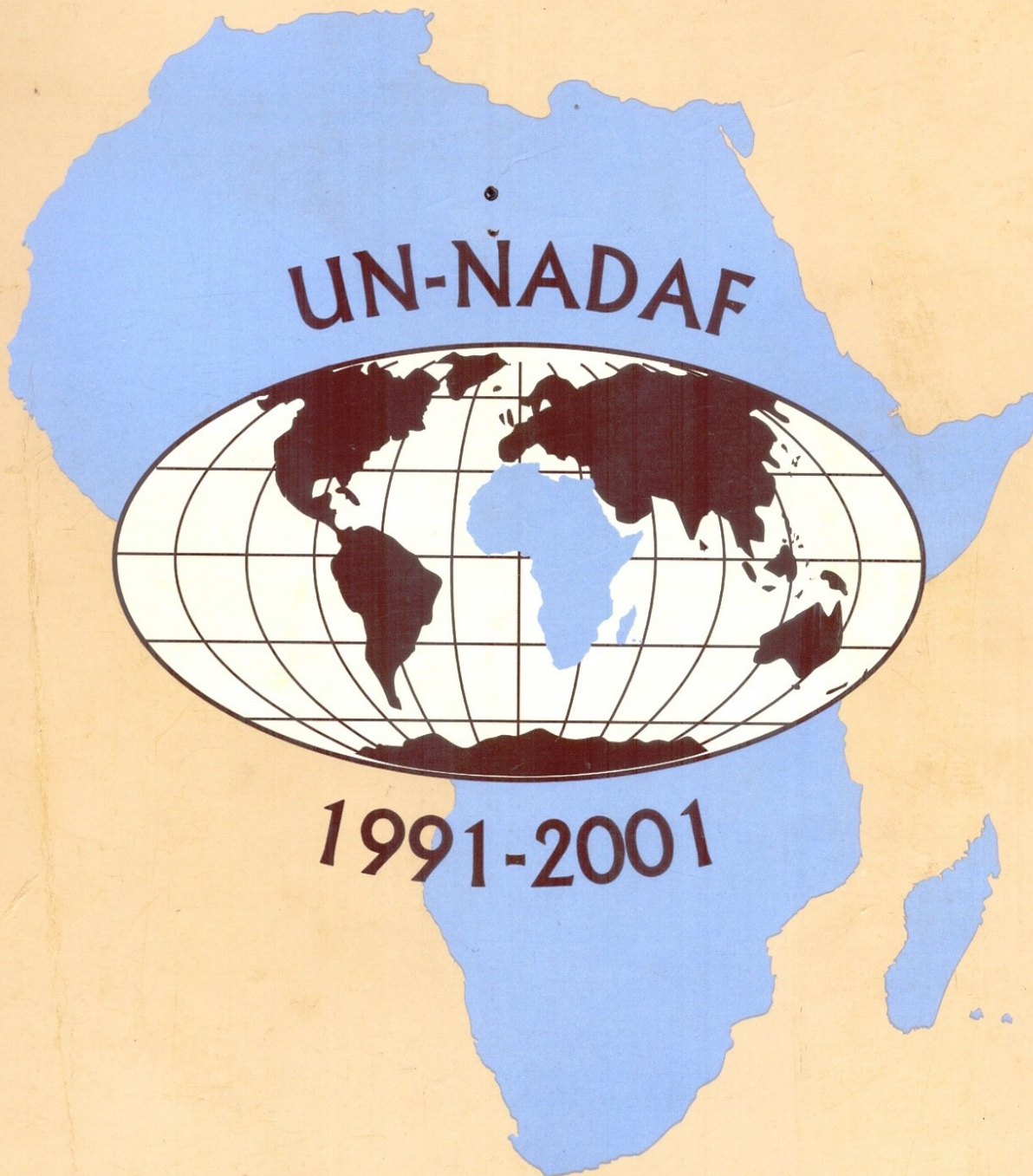


**The Emerging Role of NGOs
in African Sustainable
Development**

BN/50



**Le rôle naissant des ONG
dans le développement
durable en Afrique**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The Emerging Role of NGOs in African Sustainable Development

Introduction

Africa is the only region of the world to have suffered a continuous economic decline since 1980. Thirty three of the world's 48 least developed countries are in Africa (OSCAL 1993). In the search for solutions to the African development crisis, the international community is increasingly turning toward non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The rising popularity of NGOs is largely in response to the widespread disillusionment with the performance of mainstream development organizations. During the past two decades, the number of NGOs and the resources channeled through them have mushroomed. For example, between 1980 and 1993, development NGOs registered with the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) grew from 1,600 to 2,970 (Smillie and Helmich 1993); many other NGOs are not registered. By 1990, an estimated US\$7 billion, equivalent to 16% of total bilateral aid flows at the time, went through NGOs (Clark 1991). Northern governments and institutions are channeling greater funds through the non-governmental sector; some institutions, such as the World Bank and UN, now have departments specifically responsible for working with NGOs.

NGOs have emerged as influential actors in African development. As secretary-general Boutros Boutros Ghali stated in 1993 to the UN Panel of High-Level Personalities on African Development: "The United Nations has much to learn from NGOs." NGOs are perceived as more flexible, participatory, and responsive to the local needs of the poor—all prerequisites for sustainable development. NGOs offer a potential alternative to the bureaucratic tangle and corruption that often plague national governments, and to the technocratic paradigms and practices which typify the World Bank and other bilateral donors. Ideally, NGOs work on a smaller scale and are closer to indigenous people and are more sensitive to com-

munity values and environmental conditions. However, NGOs are far from a panacea for Africa's development problems. Like other actors in African development, they too face formidable external and internal challenges. This report brings together case studies of development NGOs functioning in Africa. It begins with this overview of some of the important issues concerning NGOs and African development. This overview concludes with recommendations for governments and large international actors, such as the UN, to better interact with and support NGOs in African development. A brief description of selected NGOs active in promoting sustainable development in Africa is then presented.

Prior to discussing NGOs in Africa, it is important to recognize that the term "NGO," like "sustainable" or "participatory," is an ambiguous and often contested concept, very malleable, and easily co-opted to serve various interests and goals. The term NGO is applied to a variety of nonprofit or voluntary organizations, ranging from development associations to churches and even sports teams. Such an extensive topology reflects the diverse nature of these organizations and who they serve. This report is concerned with development NGOs, non-governmental organizations dedicated to enhancing economic or social development. Development NGOs can be broadly divided into international organizations, (such as Trickle Up Program and Action Internationale Contre la Faim), and domestic (or indigenous) organizations that operate within a specific country or part of a country, (such as the Organization of Rural Associations for Progress in Zimbabwe and the Ethiopian Gemini Trust). Despite differences in scope and level of operation, organizational and operational competencies, and historical and cultural contexts, development NGOs often have much in common. Coalitions or networks between NGOs can prove invaluable in allowing them to scale up their combined resources and better achieve their missions.

The African Development Crisis and the NGO Potential

Any study concerned with a region as vast as Africa must acknowledge its great diversity. African countries are at various stages of development, with different cultural and historical backgrounds, geographical settings, political structures and public policies, and internal as well as international interactions. Nevertheless, most of the region does share a common underlying colonial legacy and a resultant welfare crisis. The 1993 deliberations of the UN secretary-general's Panel of High-Level Personalities on African Development (OSCAL 1993) poignantly summarizes the crisis in African development.

- ◆ In most African countries, per capita income has regressed to levels prevailing at independence, over 30 years ago.
- ◆ The number of people living in poverty in Africa has increased from 105 million in 1985 to 216 million in 1990, and is expected to increase to 304 million by the year 2000.
- ◆ Unemployment and underemployment remain widespread, particularly in rural areas, where 60% of Africa's work force is located.
- ◆ Food security is greatly threatened, and if current conditions prevail the number of undernourished people is estimated to rise from 180 million to over 300 million by the year 2010, including nearly a third of Africa's estimated population. Famine and hunger already characterize the continent, reflected in Africa's increasing share of emergency and humanitarian food aid: from 45% of the world total in 1986 to 67% in 1991.
- ◆ The flow of official development assistance (ODA) to Africa has diminished by 14% in real terms since 1990, from US\$25 billion in 1990 to US\$21.5 billion in 1993.
- ◆ Meanwhile, Africa's foreign debt has soared from US\$48.5 billion in 1978 to US\$297 billion by 1993. Debt service has become a staggering burden on the economy of many states.

Clearly, Africa's development crisis is formidable, with grave implications for both social and environmental stability. Much of the continent continues to be afflicted by persistent economic stagnation, rapid population growth, poverty, political unrest, and environmental degradation. Africa remains severely handicapped by a seemingly self-perpetuating decline, a situation in which the viable policy alternatives and the resources to implement them are severely constrained due to the weak domestic markets, vulnerability to changes in global markets, overwhelming debt, and volatile politics (Callaghy and Ravenhill 1993). The situation is compounded by the post cold war political climate and its dramatic economic changes, which has left Africa further marginalized in world affairs and the global economy.

The Increasing Role of NGOs

In response to Africa's development crisis, the international community has begun increasingly to recognize and empower NGOs as a vehicle for development. This trend was in part a result of a more critical and cautious stance toward the state as a vehicle for development (Farrington and Bebbington 1993).

Traditionally, the state and its many agencies have acted as the primary vehicles through which development policies and projects were implemented. State-centered approaches usually originated from Keynesian and import-substitution models of development in which the state was looked upon to expand domestic markets and capacity for industrial and agricultural growth, and thus to break the dependency on export markets. The African state was also viewed as a protagonist in the post-colonial project of nation building and self-determined development.

However, the expansion of the state and its institutions in independent Africa brought with it an array of inefficiencies. State bureaucracy and corruption drained finances, and policies were often motivated by institutional, political, and even kinship interests, rather than the needs of the poor. These policies were typically urban-based, delivering to politically-favored areas (Lehmann 1990). When state policies did address rural development,

they tended to rely on highly centralized and hierarchical decision making by urban-based functionaries; such an approach fails to be participatory and flexible, and thus is not responsive to the local needs. As the economic crisis grew in Africa and state budgets became more constrained, resources and assistance channeled through the state became likewise constrained.

During the 1980s, multi- and bilateral donor agencies began to reassess the state as a vehicle for development and redirect funds to the private sector. Foremost among these efforts were the packages for structural adjustment, in which the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank began demanding public sector reforms. While structural adjustment lending and its possible merits have been the target of much debate, (Van Der Geest 1994), it has forced African states to reduce their level of expenditure and to withdraw from many markets and development project interventions. As the state redefines and reduces its role, NGOs are being increasingly identified as an attractive alternative to the problem of the underfunded development and sharply declining welfare in Africa. This was confirmed by the "Copenhagen Declaration on Social Developments" adopted by the 1995 World Summit on Social Development. This transition has been facilitated by the shift toward political democratization, as more African countries move from single-party or military rule to multi-party democracies.

NGOs have several important advantages in development. Often they are more sensitive to and understanding of Africa's severe economic and political crisis than their respective governments and multilateral institutions. They usually have closer links with the local people and thus more direct knowledge of local needs and opportunities. This knowledge allows them to better recommend and implement truly sustainable development, which uses and regenerates local resources, and enhances local capacity to identify and solve problems. Closer links with the local community also allow many NGOs to play an important role in empowering the poor. NGOs can potentially foster and support grassroots organizations to become more numerous, sizable, re-

sourceful, democratic, and self-reliant. Grassroots contacts also allow NGOs to provide critical information on trends and events that lead to potential crisis and conflicts; they detect the breakdown in the socio-political fabric of a country or an oncoming famine, and thus contribute to an early warning system and preventative action.

In the field, NGOs are often more resourceful and flexible, requiring less financial input than government agencies. They are typically less encumbered by the bureaucracies and centralized hierarchies which characterize the government. Thus, NGOs tend to be more innovative and responsive, willing to pioneer and test new ideas where orthodox approaches have failed. In food production, NGOs typically promote low input agriculture modeled on agroecological approaches that may produce less dramatic yield increases than "green revolution" technologies, but are less costly, more environmentally friendly, and more compatible with community values and norms.

NGO approaches to development also tend to be more participatory than state strategies, actively involving the local community in the identification and resolution of development problems. Rather than introducing ready-made technology for food production, for instance, NGOs often work with participatory technology, as illustrated by the case studies. By involving the local people in designing technologies that are better suited toward their needs, these technologies are in turn more sustainable. The goal of fair and equitable development requires that development initiatives stem from the needs of those most vulnerable to the effects of potential resource depletion. Much of the failure with the orthodox approaches to rural development can be explained largely by an inadequate supply of productivity-enhancing technology appropriate to the needs of small-scale farmers (Lipton 1989).

The participatory approach is well suited to much of Africa, where national agricultural research services are typically small, under-funded, overworked, and generally unable to meet the pressing needs of the agrarian poor (Wellard and Copestake 1993). Like the NGO sector which promotes it, popular participation is gaining rec-

ognition as both a means and an end in development:

“As an instrument of development, popular participation provides the driving force for collective commitment for the determination of people-based development processes and willingness by the people to undertake sacrifices and expend their social energies for its execution. As an end in itself, popular participation is the fundamental right of the people to fully and effectively participate in the determination of the decisions which affect their lives at all levels and at all times.” (African Charter for Popular Participation in Development, UNECA 1990).

In advocacy, NGOs increasingly are interacting with their governments, and are bringing to the attention of donor countries and the multilateral institutions the harmful effects of some development policies and programmes. Growing evidence supports that NGOs often have a beneficial impact on governments and official agencies, but they cannot succeed as isolated actors. NGOs are especially effective when they work together as autonomous entities in addressing institutions and practices that cause social, economic, and environmental degradation, and when they advocate for reforms in the world trading and banking system that would make more financial resources available to African countries (Edward and Hulme 1992, Farrington and Bebbington 1993). Progressive NGOs are calling for strategies that stress equity, giving priority to broad participatory ownership, control, and management of natural resources. In attempting to do so, these NGOs are becoming more involved with both the local and national governments which control natural resources and implement policies that impact grassroots development.

Challenges and Concerns for African Development NGOs

While NGOs are an attractive alternative for African development, it is important not to lose sight of some of the challenges and concerns they con-

front. Like other development actors, NGOs have limitations and areas where they can improve their performance. They typically reach a wider cross section of the population than government or commercial agencies, and many have demonstrated an awareness that conventional development models frequently fail to improve the situation of Africa's poorest people. NGOs do not always perform as effectively as expected in terms of poverty reach, popular participation, sustainability, cost effectiveness, flexibility, and innovation. In some instances they have neglected the landless and other marginalized peoples, thereby failing to reach the poorest of the poor (Carroll 1992, Farrington and Bebbington 1993). This shortcoming often stems from the NGOs' perpetual scarcity of funds and other resources. As a result, NGOs face a chronic risk of limiting their outreach to a “patchwork quilt” of social services in which only certain regions are serviced by well equipped NGOs, while neglecting other areas more desperately in need.

There is also a tendency among some NGOs to follow established channels of assistance where networks already exist, in efforts to minimize costs and to focus their efforts where they are most likely to succeed in bringing about tangible and immediate improvements. In addition, NGOs run the risk of duplicating services in the same region due to lack of communication and coordination among organizations.

The principle of participatory development requires that NGOs do not exclude certain segments of the population, such as women or the landless. Recent research from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) concludes that participatory development among NGOs is no easy task (Bebbington and Theile 1993, Farrington and Bebbington 1993, Farrington and Lewis 1993, Wellard and Copestake 1993). Even among NGOs that successfully promote participatory practices, qualitative aspects of development such as participation are not enough if the projects fail to meet the urgent needs of the people (Farrington and Bebbington 1993).

Key factors impacting the success of NGOs are the political and economic realities in which they operate. NGOs do not work in a political-eco-

conomic vacuum, but must instead contend with political, policy, and economic instability, as well as adverse weather that can devastate crop and livestock production. Ultimately, it is usually the state which remains the final arbiter and determinant of the wider political and economic climate which shapes the outcome of NGOs' work. When it comes to influencing governments, NGOs are small players as compared to bilateral and multilateral donors such as the World Bank. Because NGOs are, by their nature, peripheral to the systems they seek to change, they lack the leverage necessary to maintain their influence when there are other, more powerful competing interests involved.

In many African countries, recent shifts toward political pluralism and decentralization have complicated the political context in which NGOs operate. Replacement of a one-party regime with fragmented special interests has often led to polarization, violence, and political paralysis. In this context, NGOs confront vested and competing interests from bureaucrats, politicians, multinational corporations, rural power elites, and others who may oppose attempts to transfer power and resources to the local causes which NGOs support. In recent years, as governments are being bypassed by multilateral and bilateral, they have made attempts to coordinate and control NGOs. Understandably, many NGOs have resisted such advances. Government officials are often suspicious of social elements beyond their patronage and control, such as NGOs that receive external sources of funding. They typically refuse to recognize these NGOs, thereby excluding them from policy debates (Bratton 1989). In some cases, African governments actively attempt to restrain NGOs and nullify their impact on political reform (Fowler 1991, Cherrett et al. 1995). NGOs, on the other hand, are likewise suspicious and critical of governments, especially those seeking to limit their operational freedom. This suspicion is most acute in cases where the NGOs emerged in opposition to an existing authoritarian regime.

Despite their differences and their often antagonistic relationships, there are sound reasons why NGOs and the state should cooperate. As already

noted, the state is ultimately the final arbiter shaping the political and economic context in which NGOs operate. While the ongoing democratization and decentralization in Africa presents certain political challenges for NGOs in their relation to the state, it also presents new possibilities for negotiations and collaboration. In many ways these new possibilities can be advantageous for NGOs. In some cases governments may be able to provide valuable technical assistance and research that is typically beyond the reach of NGOs due to their limited budgets and lack of access to scientific and technical information. Cooperation with the government may also allow NGOs to magnify their impact on government policy, promoting more functional links to direct resources for the poor. Furthermore, NGOs choosing not to work with state agencies increasingly must contend with a new form of competition: opportunistic NGOs. As the availability of funding for NGOs has increased, NGOs have proliferated, and a new opportunistic breed of NGOs has emerged, willing to accept government money and projects without any of the deep concern for sociopolitical change which characterizes the progressive NGOs. Thus, as a matter of self defense, even the most reluctant of the progressive NGOs sometimes find it to their advantage to explore ways to collaborate with the state. Just as NGOs are noted for their flexibility and adaptation in the field, some may find it useful to exhibit this same kind of versatility in the political arena during their dealings with the state.

The advantages notwithstanding, NGOs must often use caution in working with the state—especially avoiding the risks of co-optation and a resultant loss of credibility among their local clientele. Such caution also applies to NGOs dealing with other large institutions such as the World Bank, foundations, and multinational corporations. In general, as NGOs collaborate with large donors, they face three major concerns: *autonomy*, *performance*, and *accountability*.

Autonomy: NGOs dealing with large donors need to be careful to maintain their identity and autonomy. Many NGOs have built a reputation on their critique of and alternative approaches to

mainstream development. As NGOs accept donor funds to expand their operations, there is increasing concern that this dependency may threaten their identity and autonomy (Buturo 1994, Edwards and Hulme 1996). Financial dependency can undermine an NGO's ability to speak out against those policies of donors which they see as harmful to the interests of the poor, or to advocate approaches that are unpopular with governments and other donors. Often this connection can severely inhibit their capacity to serve the poor. For example, many NGOs have criticized as socially regressive and perverse certain structural adjustment programmes, such as the privatization of agricultural extension services, arguing these should remain a public-sector responsibility. But by accepting new working relations with the agents of structural adjustment, NGOs risk becoming viewed as accomplices. Thus, NGOs risk being co-opted into the agendas of funding sources or power elites, often at the cost of their independent social base and their effectiveness as catalysts of social change.

Performance: Closely related to autonomy, the performance of NGOs may also be impaired in working with certain large donors. This is particularly true with government organizations, where NGOs risk spending their limited time and money coping with layers of bureaucracy. The frustrations of dealing with the slow and often interrupted time cycles and decision-making processes of government institutions can retard the efficiency for which NGOs are noted. The same reasons for which donors often prefer to avoid channeling funds through state—the state's notorious lethargy, inefficiency, and corruption—must also be considered by an NGO in establishing a working relationship with government agencies. As NGOs become more involved in large-scale service delivery and more reliant on official funding, they may risk an erosion of their most valuable resources: flexibility, speed of response, and ability to innovate. Donors are rarely unwilling to provide the long-term support and careful nurturing needed to attain the local capacity enhancement and gradual qualitative results that characterize successful institutional development. In-

stead, development activities are often packaged in compressed project cycles which stress immediate or short-term quantitative targets and leave little time for innovation or lessons from experience. Consequently, some NGOs tend to base their strategic plans on their easy access to funding for humanitarian emergencies, while neglecting longer-term work in institutional development, education, and other aspects of local capacity-building.

Accountability: Accountability refers to the means by which individuals and organizations report to recognized authorities and are held responsible for their actions (Edwards and Hulme 1996). NGOs juggle multiple accountabilities, including their donors, governmental organizations, and beneficiaries. Accounting for NGOs' performance is not a simple task; while profit may be used to measure the success of a business, and democratic governments are accountable in elections, NGO accountability is often more subtle. NGOs need to be careful that while they advocate democracy and equity, they must also practice these ideals. NGOs commonly lack systems for internal monitoring and self-evaluation. Northern NGOs, for instance, have been the target of much criticism due to their lack of accountability, as they often behave as though they are under little obligation to tell the truth (Lehmann 1990). In participatory development, Chambers (1992) recommends that systems of self-evaluation stress critical self-awareness, personal responsibility, and the transfer of responsibilities and initiatives to the beneficiaries. While such accountability could well serve NGOs, and could lead to greater effectiveness in attaining the goals of sustainable development, donors rarely provide the resources needed for self-regulation and evaluation. Understandably, donors want to be assured that their funds are being properly put to use, but excessively formal accountability procedures can discourage innovation, create burdensome bureaucracy, and promote politicization and patronage. Furthermore, donor-regulated accountability often biases performance evaluation on criteria defined by the donors, which may be incompatible with the needs of the people at the grassroots level.