

The Role of International Development Agencies

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One of the items in the collective declaration signed by the delegates to the International Conference of Newly-Restored Democracies, held in Manila in July 1988, was a condemnation of international support for terrorist activities against duly-elected governments. The vote on that declaration was unanimous. But the reasons that motivated individual country approval of the generally-worded declaration may have been varied.

The Nicaraguans obviously had in mind the support of Contra activities being marshalled globally by the U.S. government. On the other hand, the Philippines had, on more than one occasion, criticized foreign support for the underground NPA. The bulk of this support is suspected to be coming from Western Europe, Japan and North America.

The issue is an old one in the Philippines. During Marcos' time, the military claimed that support for underground activities was not coming from the socialist countries, but from the capitalist world. Pressures were, even then, being exerted on friendly governments by Marcos, but the latter's legitimacy had been so eroded that nobody took him seriously.

In fact, international assistance was being given to legitimate aboveground non-government organizations engaged in citizens' organizing, education or livelihood support. But the government, then as perhaps today,

was so convinced that a large portion of these funds were and still are regularly being diverted to underground groups which are part of a large political network.

Most international development agencies, especially those that receive funds from their own governments, are naturally squeamish about being involved in domestic political controversies. Yet, during the time of Marcos, a number of them took the risk of being branded as political meddlers because of the widespread negative global attitude towards the Marcos government.

But what happens when a new government with broad popular support comes to power? The situation invariably compels international development agencies to reassess their positions and funding practices. This is what happened in the Philippines following the assumption to power of Mrs. Aquino.

The international perception is that the Aquino government, thrust into power dramatically by people's power, must be given all the assistance it needs to realize the aspirations of the revolution which she symbolized. The challenge that the armed Left posed and the succession of coup attempts by disgruntled sectors in the military only served to project Mrs. Aquino as a courageous leader desperately trying to preserve a precarious democratic center.

Having come to power in a popular way, first by a flawed snap election, then by a phenomenal four-day non-violent uprising, and successively vindicated by an overwhelming referendum vote for the new

constitution drafted by people personally chosen by her, and two successive elections in which candidates identified with her won handily against their opponents, Mrs. Aquino is naturally seen as a modern hero who is striving hard to rescue her people from the state of degradation to which 20 years of Marcos rule have consigned the Filipino people.

What the emergence of a popular, legitimate and duly-constituted government suggests to international development agencies is two things at least:

(1) That they must now summon strong reasons to justify the continued channeling of development assistance to NGOs instead of coursing it directly to the Aquino government; and

(2) That while they may persist in dealing with Philippine NGOs, they should take greater care than during Marcos' time, that their assistance is not wittingly or unwittingly diverted to those who might be planning to overthrow the Aquino government.

The Aquino government is quite aware of the global popularity it currently enjoys. For this reason, it has called on friendly countries to assist in the reconstruction of the Philippines from the ruins in which Marcos has left it. Beyond that, it has also insisted that existing development assistance be now given primarily, if not entirely, to government agencies instead of channeling it to non-government organizations. The justification offered is that this would allow the government to coordinate the reconstruction program, within which it has defined a role for the NGOs. There is a firm insistence that NGO initiative be woven around programs designated by the government itself. This attitude is not inconsistent with the desire of the government to harness the potential of NGOs. It only means that henceforth, their programs should reflect as much as possible the government's own system of priorities. In short, the NGOs can continue operating as NGOs, but they must take into account government priorities, and as much as possible, work hand in hand with government agencies.

There are enough reasons why a portion of international development assistance should continue to be channeled through Philippine NGOs.

First, because the NGO community has developed such a vast network, an infrastructure, and expertise for dealing with people's problems at the local level, which would go to waste if the NGOs were compelled to simply play an auxiliary role to government agencies.

Second, because two years of the Cory government have clearly shown that neither the State nor the formal sector of the economy is equipped with enough imagination or concern to alleviate the poverty of the people especially in the marginal areas of the city and in the countryside. NGOs have no choice but to

address the poverty and powerlessness of the vast majority as the principal component of their mission.

Third, because an important element of citizen's participation in development is self-reliance and collective effort in the planning and execution of projects, a feature which stands a greater chance of being realized through the NGOs than through the bureaucratic agencies of the State.

Fourth, because the problems at the grassroots level that must be quickly addressed, namely, livelihood, political empowerment through education and organization, etc., are so urgent they cannot wait for the tedious processes of the State. NGOs, again, have no choice but to do something quickly even before the State has satisfied itself with an assessment of the situation.

It is not easy for foreign governments or international development agencies receiving money from their own governments to insist that assistance offered to the country be channeled through agencies that are autonomous of the government. Recipient governments may accuse international donors of lacking in trust in the present government and its leaders; or worse, they may think that these foreign agencies have a hidden agenda.

In many Third World countries, recipient governments may agree to allow foreign money to be coursed through local non-government agencies or organizations, but only under very strict monitoring and supervision rules. This is the case of Malaysia and Indonesia, where NGOs are required not only to undergo a special registration process, but also to declare all the funds received by them from abroad and the manner and purpose for which these have been disbursed.

The other side of this relationship -- that of recipient governments, either directly or indirectly through affiliated NGOs, misusing assistance -- is seldom written about. But it is a serious and real problem. International development agencies could find themselves nurturing not the democratic impulses of a given society but precisely the very same forces which seek to preserve unequal power structures. In many instances, this would be completely unintended, of course, but it seldom excuses the agency from responsibility. There is therefore an implicit obligation on the part of any foreign development agency to know the spectrum of political forces at work in the society they have chosen to operate in.

Problems relating to the relationship between the international development agency and the host government can be very tricky. But these represent only a small proportion of the troubles and dilemmas that the same agencies are bound to face when they start operating in a country. Foremost among these, in my view, are the effects on the local NGO community. Below is a list of some of these largely unintended effects:

A. Promotion of parasitism and dependence

When big money is given by a single funding agency to a partner agency in such a way that that funding agency then becomes the key determinant of a particular NGO's lifeline, we cannot expect much autonomy and creativity or initiative to emanate from that NGO. The latter will simply come to reflect the priorities annually decided by the foreign patron. A displacement of goals takes place, and instead of being a partner, the local NGO is reduced to being an acquiescent creature of the foreign funding agency, or even a colonial outpost.

B. Exacerbating jealousies and rivalries among NGOs

In a poor country like the Philippines, there should ideally be enough room for every people-oriented development NGO. Moreover, because the number of intelligent individuals and groups who dedicate themselves to the service of the bottom poor can never be really enough, NGOs and development activists have a responsibility to work and coordinate with one another. Rivalries are the natural consequence of operating in the same field, but those that beset the NGO world almost everywhere are particularly intense and debilitating in their effects. These rivalries and conflicts are often exacerbated by international development agencies in two ways at least. One is by expressing particular preference for a particular NGO or clique of NGOs. The other is by playing out the international rivalries of the development agencies themselves in the local setting, using their local beneficiaries as their proxies.

C. Imposing an externally-generated priority system

International development agencies necessarily resonate certain concerns and priorities as a function of ideological inclinations and political considerations in their home settings. The degree to which they do would, of course, vary from country to country. Moreover, it would be naive and misleading for anyone to assume that factors external to the country being assisted do not come into play in the formulation of the assistance program. Local NGOs, however, can effectively insulate themselves from the pernicious effects of over-dependence if they take care to diffuse the sourcing of their funds. This is the only safeguard available. The easy availability of funds has an insidious way of neutralizing concern for organizational autonomy.

D. Eroding the norm of selflessness and commitment

Community organizers, people's technocrats, grassroots participatory action re-

searchers, and development activists in general are a special kind of people. They are assumed to be idealistic, not career-oriented, committed to an alternative lifestyle, and not power-oriented. Their concern is popular empowerment. This is why development workers serving in NGOs are regarded not as employees or entrepreneurs but as volunteers. To be sure, this does not mean that development activists must not receive remuneration for their work. It is rather only to suggest that NGO activity cannot and should not be equated with conventional occupations or professions either in the private or public sector.

A dilemma is indicated there. On the one hand, no amount of missionary zeal and commitment can sustain prolonged service in the NGO world if it spells destitution as well for the organizer. But on the other hand, situations do arise where well-funded NGOs (or BINGOs - big NGOs -- as they are called in Indonesia) corner all the top organizers and researchers simply because they can offer higher salaries. Such situations breed the kind of materialism which effectively subverts the essence of volunteer work. What is suggested here is the formulation of compensation standards that should be honored by international development agencies and local partners alike.

E. De-politicization of NGO work

Authentic NGO work, in contrast to conventional do-gooding (charity), is necessarily bound up with the goal of people's empowerment. Hence, NGO work cannot claim to be a political. It is very political. But NGO activity cannot and should not claim a license to undertake political proselytization. Respect for the subjectivity of the people and the authenticity of their own experience is an abiding principle of NGO work.

In the Philippines, in contrast to neighboring countries such as Indonesia and Malaysia, NGOs are very political and ideological. In a large number of instances, they are necessarily linked to political and ideological networks. This is a reality that international development agencies must recognize, accept and take into account in their programs. They cannot demand political and ideological neutrality from their local partners. They can only demand candidness, openness about their choices, and honesty in the rendition of reports and accounts. To make demands beyond these, is to de-politicize them and render them ineffective in their own milieu.

Conclusion

One of the ironies surrounding international development assistance is that while it purports to help liberate people from those conditions which enslave them, the very act of

offering assistance already constitutes a potential constraint to the liberative process.

Historically, international aid has been one of the abiding instruments of intervention in the affairs of another country. Yet at the same time, the ethic of global solidarity requires that local efforts at liberation from the disabling conditions of poverty, oppression, and domination must be enhanced and strengthened as if it was the whole global moral community itself that is offended by the persistence of these conditions. Concerned individuals working in international development agencies have a moral obligation to ensure that international assistance does not become the vehicle for new intervention or the seed for new forms of dependence. Political and business interest groups in the donor countries are known to be adept in exploiting such relationships for their own benefit. Great care should be taken that their influence does not determine the shape of the assistance to be offered.

The best way to protect the integrity of an international assistance program both from domestic and foreign opportunists is for the international donor agency to draw a coherent vision of its work in a country and to transparently premise all its activities and projects on such a vision. The concrete meanings of this vision must be articulated and carefully reviewed and assessed from year to year in the light of the unfolding realities they confront.

International agencies sometimes complain that they are often perceived as nothing more than "funding agencies". This is true, but it is not always an unfair comment. The fact is, by their notable lack of any meaningful or coherent program, and by their capricious choice of projects to fund, some funding agencies do behave as if they are really just nothing but funding agencies -- sources of "conscience" money. Even their beneficiaries laugh at them, because by the absence of serious follow-up and careful evaluative studies, beyond the periodic exposure tours to project sites undertaken by seven-day representatives, they merit nothing but the contempt of NGOs who know the score. In the long run, they exercise a deleterious effect on the NGO community.

Seriousness of purpose and professionalism in the evaluation of proposals, in the monitoring of projects and expenditures, and most importantly, in the assessment of the end-product -- without losing the perspective that process is as valuable as the product -- are what would earn respect on both sides of this complex and novel relationship.

A step towards developing professionals in the service of the people's community must come in the form of the emergence of an evaluative system. This must necessarily include a pool of competent and fair evaluators from the NGO community, from academe and from the research community in general. As important as the systematic recruitment and training of NGO workers who can work in the

variety of settings is the formation of a steady pool of evaluators who understand the realities of NGO work, have a macro view of the forces at work in the larger society and the direction that the society is taking, and have a clearly sympathetic attitude towards the necessity of popular empowerment as the soul of the democratization process.

Finally, the situation in many Third World countries is one that is characterized by the proliferation of NGOs of varying sizes. The pluralism is fine. But extreme rivalries are self-defeating. They pirate one another's staff. They bad-mouth one another. International funding agencies sometimes encourage these intrigues, believing that the inside information thus obtained would be useful to their own organization. In the end, when the political situation changes, all of them will be losers because they have not built enough solidarity among themselves to protect the very ground of their collective practice. Such solidarity can be nurtured in at least two ways:

1. First, by participating in the development of a common training institute for volunteers. The model that comes immediately to mind is the Thai Volunteer Service in Bangkok, which is hosted by the Chulalongkorn University. The best of the university studentry are exposed to the world of community service even before they finish their schooling. Once they graduate, their career paths need no longer be exclusively the domain of corporations and institutional employers. The recruits are then assigned to the different NGOs, reshuffled periodically, until they make up their minds about where they want to stay.

2. Second, by embarking on consortium activities and joint undertakings in which financial and human resources are pooled for a given issue or area. For instance, three or four NGOs can be encouraged to come together to, say, help a critically distressed community. The resulting combination would not only help the community more but could result in the accumulation of goodwill and trust among activists belonging to different NGOs. What is indicated here is more than just an ecumenism for NGOs: not a passive ethos of live-and-let-live, but an active effort at real collaboration.

International development agencies can harness the latent power of collective and coordinated action by investing more in the development of common support institutions, and the funding of joint or collective undertakings of NGOs, than by attempting to create individual super-NGOs, mini-states in themselves, whose very size and complexity of their operations, could make them vulnerable to the self-same vices of governments: bureaucratization, insensitivity, manipulation, inflexibility, imperialism.

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