

An appraisal of the roles of NGOs in society.

Stephen Ekokobe Awung, Secretary-General, African People Convention, Kassel, Germany 20.02.2004

Introduction

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are important actors in societal development. Their roles are:

- to represent the interest of the poor, less privileged, and voiceless
- to expose problems to the world and solicit assistance for a solution
- to advice and educate people on issues relating to their interest like creating awareness on ills such as female circumcision
- to support citizens in time of crises like natural disaster or refugees problem

Various types of NGOs exist with different and sometimes conflicting motives. Some NGOs are religious, cultural, social, economic, and political oriented. However, the main objective of NGOs is to use soft power to influence and achieve human rights, cultural and socio-economic improvement in society.

Due to bureaucratic systems of most governments today, decision making and implementation are slow; hence NGOs can play very important roles in supplementing governments' efforts, especially in areas of disaster management, the misery of hunger, minority problems and conflicts preventions. NGOs in the political arena like those dealing with human rights and corruption play a pivotal role to check governments and corporates excesses.

Sources of finance

Like states and other institutions, NGOs need money to finance their

activities. Although most NGOs are run by private individuals, the majority of them receive financial assistance from the state, international financial institutions like World Bank and International Monetary Fund, private foundations, donations from the general public and membership dues. They can also raise some money through the sales of items such as postcards, t-shirt, and also through the organisation of public shows like bazaars, sporting manifestations (for instance football matches), TV shows and gala nights. Some multinational companies have developmental funds that can be made available to NGOs, especially to those that operate in the areas of their location or interest.

These funds may only be given if the NGOs meet specific requirements as stipulated by the donors, for instance, well-detailed project proposals, a report of past working experiences of the organisations and technical know how. The interest of any donor is to see that his or her fund is used for the intended purpose (for example the promotion of women's education in rural villages or the rehabilitation of disables).

Activities of NGOs

Research carried out by social scientists have revealed that NGOs are fast to react in times of crisis like that of Tsunami's catastrophe in South East Asia, hunger despair in Sudan and Niger. This fact has encouraged some governments to work hand in hand with NGOs in areas like poverty alleviations and disaster relief.

It is important to draw your attention to the fact that most NGOs are non-profitable humanitarian organisations. A good number of their workers are volunteers although some are given a token, while others receive salaries in accordance with the type of NGOs and

their (workers) roles in the organisations. However, administrative expenses like telephone calls, transportation costs, hotel bills, etc are usually paid by the organisations.

Practical roles of NGOs

NGOs usually provide the following services during crises;

- rescue victims
- distribute food and clothing
- provide medical assistance to victims
- erect buildings or tents for immediate rescue
- counsel victims and families
- Advice government authorities on issues of their competence

Advice to NGOs

NGOs should publicise their successes or achievements in order to increase their ratings in society. This can be achieved with the help of the media (print, audio-visual and electronic). It is imperative to mention that the popularity of any organisation can be very instrumental to the realisation of its goals and ability to raise fund.

Critic

From analysis and several investigations, it has been observed that most NGOs have become big businesses today, especially those operating in the less developed world. Due to the fact that most of these NGOs are aware of the unreliability of their governments, they have capitalised on the weaknesses of these governments as most international communities prefer working directly with them rather than their governments because of rapid response in calamities, less bureaucracy in administration and better management of resources. As a result, some individuals have formed NGOs with the intention to enrich themselves. In such

NGOs, they use just a fraction of the donated funds to finance the proposed projects and misappropriate the rest.

In the end, false reports are written on how the funds were used and fake receipts are included to justify their report. However, it is difficult to sort out some of these corrupt NGOs that misuse the trust, confidence and constitutional privileges given to them at the expense of people in agony and distress.

Power

The soft power of an NGO lies in the constitution, where the aims and objectives are clearly defined. However, the power lies on a paper and has to be given a human face. Power in this context refers to how the NGO can influence the society positively. The executive of NGOs should publicise their organisations, organise presentations and conferences, invite government representatives or administrators, and social actors like the press and churches to attend or present papers.

NGOs could exercise power by protests, demonstrations and letters of complaint. These strategies could be useful instruments to exercise pressure and bring awareness to various problems in society. NGOs with similar objectives can form coalitions both at the national and international level to strengthen and increase their influences while at the same time exchange ideas and experiences through seminar, workshops and symposia. The popularity and reputation of an organisation makes it easier to acquire funds and exert influence on other people, institutions and individual persons in the society.

Case study: African People convention-Kassel (APC), Germany

I have tried to give a general overview of NGOs and mention some

of the points that came to my attention. I would like to use APC where I belong as an example to elucidate some of the aforementioned points. APC belongs to what some critics would call migrant organisations (MOs) APC was founded in the year 2000 to assist Africans and people of African origin to integrate into western societies. Other aims of APC include; to help African countries in times of crises, promote the culture of Africa and advocate for the interest of its members.

The principal source of APC funding is membership dues but APC also receives financial assistance from the state and free will donation from the general public. It has also generated revenue from proceeds acquired by selling African dishes in state-organised feasts like the Spring Feast, Earth Day feast in Kassel just to name but these. The organisation used to run a clubhouse where drinks and food are sold to members and guests.

With the revenue gained, APC has been able to assist some African and Asian countries in times of crises, sponsored a demonstration in Kassel against discrimination of Africans in the societies, organised several seminars and cultural feast to promote the rich and diverse culture of Africa.

The organisation recently carried out a survey on African embassies in Germany in her quest to improve the working relationship between the Africans and their representatives. The complete report is published on www.apc-kassel.com and some of the recommendations have been instituted by some embassies. The success of APC in achieving her goals lies primarily on the vision of its leaders and support from the members. The leaders have recognised their power and use it to work for the interest of Africa and Africans in Germany.

Conclusion

Having worked in many NGOs like the African People Convention, where I am the current Secretary-General, the International Rehabilitation of African Disables where I am one of the founding fathers and public relation officer, and many other small students unions, I have realised that NGOs, no matter how small they are, can be very influential in a society as they help the needy in times of crisis, fight and protect human rights, bring awareness of some ills in a society such as discrimination, xenophobia, and influence decision making by states or countries.

These can only be achieved if the executive and members work fearlessly for the interest of their communities. The participation of each and every member plays a vital role in the success or failure of an organisation, but efforts of a few can contribute meaningfully towards the attainments of the objectives of a union.

Transparency and accountability should be the basic principle of all NGOs. This will not only instil trust to the members and workers but also to donors who sponsor or finance projects. Studies have shown that corruption has led to the demise of some hitherto gigantic and popular NGOs.