NGOs, the poor, and local government

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Introduction

Despite significant improvements in some aspects of poor people's standard of living in sub-Saharan Africa, serious problems remain. Little has changed since the beginning of the 1990s, when almost half the population lacked access to health services, over half lacked access to safe water, and Africans still consumed on average only 92 per cent of their daily calorie requirements.[1] Two-thirds of school-age children were not enrolled at school, and one in two adults was illiterate. Foreign aid has been channelled to sub-Saharan Africa partly to address these problems, and a principal conduit is non-government organisations (NGOs). For example, in 1993 the Canadian government channelled US$210 million through Canadian NGOs, which themselves raised a further US$284 million from the Canadian public for overseas work. In the same year, the British government channelled US$48 million of its aid budget through British NGOs, which themselves raised an additional US$451 million.[2]

Through their projects, Northern NGOs are purported to provide one of the most efficient ways of helping poor people in sub-Saharan Africa. The following sentiment is common: 'While any aid programme will experience a level of waste and corruption, funds sent straight to the field, often in relatively small amounts via NGOs, are far more likely to be better spent than those flowing into the treasuries of countries ... where any effective government has ceased to exist' (Clad 1993). NGOs themselves claim that working directly with the poor is the most effective way to alleviate poverty, and that their projects contribute to lasting development by adhering to the principles of sustainability and participation.

In this paper I examine an NGO project in Zambia in which I was involved, and discuss the NGO's approach and its specific consequences for local participation. I also look at the potential for sustainability, and for what I consider the essential condition for improvement in the lives of the poor: their ability to hold their government accountable for how it uses public resources. Since the approach described illustrates a tendency common to the projects of Northern NGOs in the region, a discussion of its impact is of wide relevance.

My central conclusions are summarised below.

1 The use by NGOs of large amounts of their own resources leads them to overlook existing local capacities and responsibilities when designing and implementing their projects. This reduces the potential sustainability of their interventions, and can result in their doing more harm than good.

2 By providing goods or services directly to the poor, NGOs can reduce the accountability of local government to these people, undermining the foundation upon which future and long-term improvements in their lives must be built.

3 Approaches which begin to address the causes of the predicament of poor people will require that NGOs and their donors abandon their pursuit of short-term projects whose success is measured primarily in terms of the achievement of objectives expressed as specified levels of physical outputs.

Channelling food aid

A drought in southern Africa during the 1991-92 growing season resulted in low cereal production and concomitant hunger. Governments of industrialised countries responded with donations of maize, to be distributed to the affected population.

In Zambia, all donated maize was channelled through NGOs, grouped in district drought-relief committees. The project in which I was involved was intended to distribute this to affected people through food-for-work (FFW). I was handed the approved project proposal and asked to get things going.

An investigation into the food supply problems revealed that, independent of the activities of the drought relief committee, another local structure was supplying cereal to affected people. A co-operative

sold maize from branches in several villages in the area, although supplies were erratic and inadequate in the face of uncharacteristically high demand.

The co-operative seemed crucial to future food security: it functioned not only to sell cereal to hungry villagers, but also as the only permanent agency providing markets and agricultural inputs for the area's small farmers.

Most of the cereal managed by the local drought relief committee was being sold at prices undercutting those of the co-operative, forcing it to reduce its prices. Apparently, no consideration had been given to the probable impact of these sales on the co-operative's activities and economic viability. The importance of the co-operative was being completely overlooked in the aid effort.

In the NGO proposal, the co-operative and its activities had not even been mentioned. The NGO had not, for example, investigated whether the food shortage could have been addressed, at least in part, by working with the co-operative in such a way as to guarantee its supply of maize to villagers, or by shoring up the purchasing power of villagers, or both. Neither had it investigated the likely impact of its own activities on the co-operative. Looking into these issues at that point was out of the question, since the proposal had been approved a month before, and the donor would soon be expecting reports on concrete accomplishments.

Food-for-work: project experience

The main component of the FFW project was rehabilitation of secondary roads. The NGO planned to recruit and train its own technicians, who would organise and supervise the work of villagers employed on the project. The proposal did not mention that on-going responsibility for the rehabilitation and maintenance of secondary roads rested with the District Council, and it did not contemplate involving the Council in any way. Consequently, there had been no investigation of the human and financial resources that the Council could have contributed.

In overlooking important local structures, our project was no exception. The FFW projects undertaken by other members of the drought relief committee were being implemented without regard for their impact on the existing activities of key local institutions. For example, FFW was taking place in total disregard for the Ministry of Agriculture's on-going extension work, the aim of which was to encourage villagers to plant trees or adopt soil conservation measures, by convincing them that it was in their own long-term interest to do so.

Paying villagers in food for undertaking the same activities was setting a bad precedent and making extension work increasingly less viable. 'Why should we be doing this for free when others are getting food for it? We want food too' — so went the complaint of certain villagers.

It seemed that road rehabilitation and maintenance, or even drought relief through labour-intensive FFW, would be aided in the long term if the Council's Works Department could participate in and learn something from the project. In discussions, the Council revealed that in fact it wanted to move in the direction of more labour intensive road rehabilitation and maintenance. (The capital-intensive approach had proven problematic: machinery needed to carry out the work was often unavailable, or was broken down and waiting for spare parts.) Moreover, in spite of the national crisis, the Council had money to carry out road repair: a budget that it received regularly from the provincial government.

I proposed that the local Council, instead of the NGO, should provide the front-line project staff. In the context of the project, these technicians could be trained to work directly with villagers and, more importantly, get practice at it. On the other hand, the villagers could learn to identify problems needing attention, and know who were the specific Council staff to notify of the need for road repair. They could also learn to organise themselves for the purposes of carrying out public works. A relationship could be established between the villagers and the Council for the repair of local roads.

Senior NGO staff in the capital at first hesitated to accept this proposal. They felt, among other things, that Council employees might be incapable of carrying out the work, or might not get paid on time and become demoralised, with the consequence that project objectives would not be achieved. Eventually, however, the decision was taken to move ahead. The Council agreed to the proposal and initiated the recruitment of four locals to be trained as technicians. (I assisted in establishing the qualifications of candidates.) The Council's Works Foreman — a trained technician with experience in road construction — would supervise the technicians, in collaboration with the NGO project manager.

The Council agreed to pay the salaries of the technicians for the duration of the project from the road-maintenance budget. These would be normal salaries that any government employee would receive, and could be sustained by the government. When the harvest came in, and cereal was neither available from donors nor accepted as payment by the population, work could continue by substituting payments in food with small cash payments drawn from the Council's road-maintenance

budget. In many parts of the country, precedents existed for carrying out road maintenance in this way, and the Council's Works Foreman had indeed undertaken such activities in the past.

The NGO approach

As is common, the NGO's stated aim was to make 'a viable and meaningful contribution to development in Zambia' by adhering to the principles of 'participation' and 'sustainability' and by integrating these principles 'into all aspects of programme development'. The NGO's official funder, moreover, aimed to promote development by supporting projects which 'help achieve good government'. This experience illustrates how aspects of the way in which an NGO approaches its work at the project level can undermine the achievement of these objectives.

'Getting the job done'

The NGO intended to carry out the project by using its own front-line staff. By controlling them, the NGO would control the implementation of the project. This would help it to ensure that positive reports flowed back to donors on a timely basis. These reports would reassure donors that their money was making a difference — that 'the job was getting done' — and would predispose them to approve additional requests for funding, crucial to the NGO's growth.

By using its own personnel, the NGO would have eliminated the participation of the Council. The Works Department — which was responsible for road maintenance — would have learned nothing about labour intensive road maintenance. This would have led to very low potential for sustainability. Once external funding was withdrawn, it is unlikely that road rehabilitation and maintenance could continue. The NGO staff would be from outside the geographical area of the project, and would want to return home. They would have been earning good salaries with the NGO, and would not be willing to accept the relatively lower salaries of the Council. They would have gained the prestige of working with a foreign NGO, and would think of working with local government as 'lowering themselves'.

In order to maximise potential sustainability, the resources provided by NGOs should be kept to the absolute minimum. Whenever external resources are used, there should be a specific plan for their substitution by local resources. In this case, provisions had to be made for the withdrawal of food aid and NGO staff.

Space must be created for the use of local resources in the initial project, if they are to be counted on to sustain activities once external support is withdrawn. Roads can be fixed, wells dug, people fed, or seeds distributed. What is important, however, is not that these things are done, but *how* they are done. Achieving these outputs should not be an end in itself, but more a means of local learning, of establishing working relationships among relevant local actors, and of identifying and mobilising local resources. In the course of producing these 'outputs', a basis must be laid for the production of the same 'outputs' in the future.

The willingness of local counterparts (poor people themselves, or local government) to put up resources is an indicator of the project's potential for sustainability. If local government, for example, is unwilling to participate meaningfully in the project at the time of its design and execution, this suggests that its priorities are not the NGO's, and that it will have no interest in, or capacity to support, the activities or processes that the project has initiated.

NGOs should reserve the right to withdraw from projects if counterparts fail to live up to agreements, and donors should accept this. As it is, local officials can fail to fulfil their promises because they know that the NGO is in a vulnerable position: it has to report to its donor and show concrete results within a specified time.

Letting government 'off the hook'

Clearly, poor people should expect certain goods and services from their government. In addition to roads, these include health services, education, and water and sanitation. Projects in which NGOs use their own resources to deliver goods and services — which local government should be delivering but is not — lead the population to reduce its expectations of what local government can or should be doing for it. Such projects let local government 'off the hook'. The population's needs covered, local government is free to use in other ways money budgeted for projects intended to benefit the poor.

Local resources may be genuinely lacking, as was evidently so in at least some districts of Zambia. However, a lack of resources should not be assumed. In this case, funds had in fact been allocated to the Council for road rehabilitation. If the NGO had gone ahead and hired its own technicians, one might wonder what would have happened to these funds. The NGO project would have served to undermine the fundamental notion that local government should be accountable to the people. The impact would be a reduction in the long-term chances of improvement in the lives of the poor.

The importance of accountability cannot be overstated. Even famine has been tackled in this way:

> The conquest of famine in India and a handful of African countries such as Botswana, was based on democratic accountability. In these countries, famine is a political issue. When famine appears imminent, it is of urgent concern to journalists, trade unionists, and voters, and hence to members of parliament, the civil service, and the government. Giving famine a political sting is the secret to its conquest. (De Waal 1993)

Raising the accountability of local government to poor citizens is perhaps the most sustainable way to improve their living standards. Unfortunately, the NGO approach described above is generally antithetical to the goal of increased accountability of local government.

Working with the poor

A consequence of addressing the problems of poor people directly may be that the importance of other local actors is overlooked. The poor cannot achieve development in isolation. They must interact dynamically with other local agencies in various ways.

Future development will not depend on the NGO–'beneficiary' relationship, but on that between the 'beneficiaries' and other local actors. Since the NGO will depart, the relationship between itself and the poor is not sustainable. The questions which the NGO needs to ask are: 'How will this have to work in the future, after we leave? Who will these people need to work with?' These other agencies, whose existence predates the NGO intervention, and which may play important roles in the future, must also participate in projects, or at least be taken into account when projects are designed and implemented.

In areas of Zambia where there was no co-operative, the NGO might have been justified to go ahead with sales of food or food-for-work. However, in areas where a co-operative was working, it should have made efforts at least not to undermine it, or even to strengthen it. In the future, poor people will depend on the co-operative for supplies and markets. A project that puts the co-operative out of business will have a profoundly different impact on their long-term welfare from one that helps to maintain it.

The poor will also depend on the local Council for services and technical assistance. A project that alienates the population from the

Council will affect poor people's long-term welfare differently from one that builds the relationship between them and local government. If the NGO had gone ahead as planned, to whom would the population have looked for assistance in rehabilitating the roads once the project was over, and the NGO gone?

NGOs have an opportunity to play 'intermediary roles between state and non-state institutions in respect of participation, accountability and development' (Dias 1993). An NGO project can provide local government with a means of getting in touch with its people, and of integrating them in the planning and implementation of economic and social development — depending, of course, on the degree of decentralisation in government. An NGO can provide the poor with a means of becoming aware of local government responsibilities and capacities. It can also stimulate popular organisation, within the project context, by establishing a forum for meaningful participation in design and implementation, and a means of holding government accountable. An NGO project is an excellent context in which to establish or reinforce a process whereby people and government work together to solve local problems.

Conclusions

There is pervasive disappointment that aid to sub-Saharan Africa is not resulting in any significant improvements in the lives of poor Africans, and that additional aid will not solve the underlying problems. There is a feeling that no real basis has been laid for development, and that even increased quantities of aid will do nothing to resolve the problem of poverty.

Unless aid projects make it a priority to establish or reinforce mechanisms by which existing, locally available resources are mobilised and used effectively in resolving the problems of the poor, they cannot contribute to laying a basis for future development.

The direct provision by NGOs of goods and services must not lead poor people to expect less of their governments. On the contrary, NGO projects should promote popular organisation and the capacity of poor people to assert their claims to public resources, and to hold government accountable. Such projects should also help government to understand the needs and capacities of its population, and become more capable of serving it. NGOs can damage prospects for genuine development by undermining the relationship between the people and their government.

Notes

1 Statistics from United Nations Development Programme (1994), p. 133.

2 Statistics from Michel (1995), pp. C3, C4

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