

Voluntarism and NGOs



Voluntarism and NGOs

Introduction

A dynamic civil society in an elected, participatory democracy such as India, ensures that there is a strong and vocal constituency for public financing and provisioning of basic social services. It also is the best safeguard against bad governance, inefficient service delivery and the hierarchical structures of decision-making that result in delays and red tape. At the same time, civil societies are often fragmented and stratified into 'haves' and 'have-nots' on the basis of income, gender and caste, resulting in disparities in access to public resources and services. The poor and the marginalised lack the ability to give voice to their concerns. Empowering the voiceless and giving visibility to the 'invisible' therefore, are significant aspects of the process of building strong civil society organisations (CSOs) and forms a part of the agenda of many non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Civil society organisations are community based organisations and include labour unions, NGOs, people's groups, foundations and religion-based groups.

Unlike the public sector, which is often accused of inefficiency and non-responsive behaviour, or the private sector which, driven by profit, prices itself out of the reach of the poor, the voluntary sector is perceived to be motivated by altruism, making it a suitable catalyst for promoting the sustainable development of the poor in rural areas; an agency capable of giving voice to the needs and aspirations of people and enabling the growth of local participatory mechanisms for self-empowerment. This chapter will look at the role of NGOs in human development from several perspectives, viz. (i) while the poor continue to be overwhelmingly dependent on public social services, NGOs have begun to emerge as key players in various human development sectors, thereby supplementing public efforts, (ii) NGO-driven initiatives often bring a more participatory and empowering focus to development, (iii) NGOs and civil society organisations, while not

necessarily coterminous, tend to have overlapping objectives and many grassroots CSOs have their origins in the ground-breaking work of NGOs. In this sense, NGOs have strengthened civil society.

The sheer diversity of NGO activity is testimony to the range, professionalism and expertise of these organisations. NGOs have been instrumental in the provision of healthcare, literacy, poverty alleviation through sustainable development, rehabilitation, women's rights, engendered human development programmes, environmental protection, HIV/AIDS support programmes, agriculture extension services, to name a few. They supplement government services in a significant way although their methodology is different.

The chapter acknowledges the strengths that NGOs bring to their work in diverse sectors and analyses their contributions to human development in the state. At the same time, the constraints on NGO actions are also briefly examined.

Voluntarism, which has its roots in altruism, has a long tradition in India, and particularly in Karnataka. The roots of voluntarism are two-fold: religion and the freedom movement. Karnataka has the classic example of Sri Basaveswara: born in 1131 AD, a very great social reformer, who at the age of 16, rejected untouchability and the rigid rituals that widows were forced to follow; and promoted, with vigour, equal rights for women and a casteless society. Although many of the voluntary institutions devoted to social service in Karnataka emerged from religion, they created a distinct space for themselves and adopted a professional approach to developmental issues. However, the degree of institutional space between the organisations devoted to social service and the formal religious establishment from which they originate differs. In some institutions, for example, the religious head is also the head of the social service institution, while in others, the social service organisation is more autonomous.

Unlike the public sector, which is often accused of inefficiency and non-responsive behaviour, or the private sector which, driven by profit, prices itself out of the reach of the poor, the voluntary sector is perceived to be motivated by altruism, making it a suitable catalyst for promoting the sustainable development of the poor in rural areas; an agency capable of giving voice to the needs and aspirations of people and enabling the growth of local participatory mechanisms for self-empowerment.

The recognition of the role of voluntary agencies in partnering government initiatives by the Centre may have had some influence in the initiatives taken by the Government of Karnataka to bring several NGOs into major government sponsored programmes.

The degree of space between the religious establishment and the social service institution shapes the social and development strategies that the latter selects as its mission.

The other major source of voluntarism was the freedom movement, and Mahatma Gandhi in particular. There are hundreds of organisations in Karnataka, which originated during the freedom movement and continue to do constructive work in communities, addressing issues like Dalit welfare, illiteracy and poverty. The inspirational basis for most of them is Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy rather than any religion.

The Central Government and NGOs

The Government of Karnataka's approach to voluntary agencies is conditioned very much by the position taken by the Central Government, mainly in the plan documents. Most of the plans focus on a broad spectrum of voluntary involvement. The Sixth Five Year Plan was the first to include a reference to the voluntary sector, even if it was only in the context of distinguishing such organisations from cooperatives and Panchayat Raj institutions (PRIs), which are government sponsored. In the Tenth Plan, NGOs are described as intermediary, not-for-profit institutions but they are referred to only twice; the space and attention given to the voluntary sector is really minimal. It is only in the Seventh Plan that there is an extensive discussion of the voluntary sector and 'NGOs', which are generally understood to be not-for-profit, professional, intermediary institutions, which manage programmes in the areas of economic and social development, engage in advocacy, welfare, rehabilitation and training. These NGOs are generally not membership institutions. They form one set of institutions, which are part of a broader portfolio, which include institutions like trade unions, professional associations, and environmental groups, which are largely membership institutions. However, the members of the membership institutions mentioned above are largely from the middle and upper classes. There is another category of institutions generally called community based organisations (CBOs)

which are also membership institutions but whose members are from the 'targeted sections' of development interventions and a majority are poor. Many NGOs are involved in building these community based institutions.

The plan documents, even the Seventh Plan, do not use the term 'NGO'. The Tenth Plan is the exception. The earlier Plans used terms like 'people's participation' (Sixth Plan), 'voluntary agencies' (Seventh Plan), 'voluntary sector/organisation' (Eighth, Ninth Plans). The focus, therefore, is on the broader portfolio of institutions described above, which fall more comfortably under the umbrella of Civil Society Organisations rather than NGOs in the commonly understood sense. This focus on 'voluntary' rather than 'non-government' is part of the long tradition of voluntarism in the country. Many voluntary organisations received grants from the Central and state governments to run orphanages, homes for destitute women, hostels for working women, hostels for Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe students, primary and secondary schools and colleges. The focus of government-voluntary agency partnership was the management of institutions. The management of poverty alleviation and social service programmes was the preserve of the government.

NGOs in Karnataka

The profile of government-voluntary organisation partnership followed much the same path in Karnataka. The recognition of the role of voluntary agencies in partnering government initiatives by the Centre may have had some influence in the initiatives taken by the Government of Karnataka to bring several NGOs into major government sponsored programmes. Though this experience has been a mixed one, there is ample evidence that, on the whole, this collaboration between the public and voluntary (NGO) sectors in development has helped to raise the ownership of people of these programmes and the quality of people's institutions that subsequently emerged.

One interesting feature of this process is that the government itself has promoted a number of NGOs registered under the Societies Registration Act. These institutions, registered under the

Societies Act, have government employees as members and executives of the society. Almost all of these government sponsored societies have been promoted in the context of bilaterally and multilaterally funded projects. Such organisations tend to further blur the profile of a voluntary organisation. In reality, they are part of the implementing structure of government. If we add to these organisations set up by government, other charitable societies and trusts set up by business houses as well as educational institutions (including the Indian Institutes of Management) and hospitals, the character of a voluntary organisation becomes further indeterminate. As a result, several of the problems that NGOs - as commonly understood - continue to face, arise from decisions taken by governments relating to taxation and other forms of control that are actually more appropriate to profit making societies like certain hospitals and educational institutions, but which, by default, extend to all institutions since they all fall under the umbrella category of 'registered societies'.

NGOs, CBOs and SHGs

It might be useful to briefly describe how this chapter considers these three institutions. As already mentioned, the Seventh Plan Document is the only one which focuses on those organisations which fit the category 'NGO' as we now understand it, and which are not-for-profit, professional, intermediary institutions which manage programmes in the areas of economic and social development, engage in advocacy, welfare, rehabilitation and training. The World Bank, for instance, defines NGOs as a wide spectrum of groups and institutions that are entirely or largely independent of government, and characterised primarily by humanitarian or cooperative, rather than commercial, objectives. This description excludes organisations such as universities and research institutions which are often autonomous, and refers mainly to private, non-profit organisations that are engaged in activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development. They depend on donations and voluntary service to run their organisations.

The term 'self-help group' (SHG) is sometimes used very ubiquitously to encompass all kinds of group activity; a more exact definition of an SHG would be a group or collective of people based on the affinity of its members, who share a similar socio-economic status. The group manages savings and credit to its members, provides access to regular income to enable members to meet their livelihood needs while empowering them to create social and political space for themselves in their households and communities. Over time, a sustainable and dynamic SHG may evolve into an NGO and/or CSO. (See chapter 14 for more information on SHGs).

A Community Based Organisation (CBO) is a generic term, used very loosely to describe a private non-profit organisation or group that works within a community for the socio-economic development of that community. Very often, the CBO focuses on issues of local significance such as literacy, violence against women, child healthcare and livelihoods, to name a few. The term is also used to describe any group of people such as SHGs, Village Forest Committees, User Groups, etc. The term CBO is used mainly to distinguish these institutions from NGOs, which are intermediary organisations. The CBOs are usually membership institutions that function at a more 'informal' level (though some of them do register or may even be compelled to register if they are to benefit directly from certain types of government programmes) while the NGOs are invariably legal entities.

How successful are CBOs in managing community resources in a democratic, participatory manner? The CBOs referred to here are those that manage community resources such as forests, irrigation tanks, watersheds and village water supply schemes. Most of these community user groups have been formed by NGOs working in a bilateral/multilateral-funded project administered by the state government. The management of community resources through user groups is often a component of the project structure. A survey of Village Forest Committees (VFCs) in Uttara Kannada district indicates that many VFCs have been successful in eradicating the role of contractors who used to exploit families who collected non-timber forest

A Community Based Organisation is a generic term, used very loosely to describe a private non-profit organisation or group that works within a community for the socio-economic development of that community. Very often, the CBO focuses on issues of local significance such as literacy, violence against women, child healthcare and livelihoods, to name a few.

The formation of a CBO does not automatically ensure democratic management of a given resource, even if NGOs are involved in the process. Besides, when a CBO is formed at the instance of government, then, the top-down approach of management remains and the user groups' dependence on government departments for technical and financial assistance impedes the evolution of an autonomous, self-managing CBO.

products (NTPF). However, power over these resources was then transferred to the powerful families in the village who dominated the Village Forest Committees. An employee of the Forest Department was the secretary of the committee and was responsible for organising meetings and keeping the accounts. As a result, meetings were not held regularly. This combination of legitimising the powerful and strengthening the nexus between the local Forest Department staff and the village elite did little to improve community ownership and management of forest resources. Both NGOs and government departments contributed to this situation. As a result, it was subsequently proposed that Village Forest Committees be disbanded and that the panchayats take over the responsibility of managing these resources. Village forest committees continue to function, however.

The performance of user groups in the management of irrigation tanks has also not matched expectations. This is due to many reasons, the major one being that many of the cultivators in the irrigated area of the tank are share croppers, and therefore, do not have much interest in improving the land or maintaining the water source. Management of these facilities, which had not always been efficiently managed earlier, means that the user groups will have to mobilise funds for payment of electricity and maintenance charges. The performance of user groups in major irrigation programmes has been comparatively better; but there is still much to be done in building a synergy between the government departments that manage irrigation and the people who use the water. The formation of a CBO does not automatically ensure democratic management of a given resource, even if NGOs are involved in the process. Besides, when a CBO is formed at the instance of government, then, the top-down approach of management remains and the user groups' dependence on government departments for technical and financial assistance impedes the evolution of an autonomous, self-managing CBO.

The conclusion is not that the CBOs have no place in development strategy, but that they cannot be expected to discharge their functions competently without systematic capacity building

inputs (which cannot happen through just one or two training programmes targeting one or two CBO representatives) and without the delegation of at least some real authority. The latter scenario can result in conflict-situations with PRIs but a 'happy' solution has been found by converting some CBOs such as watershed committees, which handle substantial funds into sub-committees of the jurisdictional GP. Co-opting a CBO may mean that statutory requirements have been met since the GP is entrusted with local developmental tasks but it does very little for the autonomy of the CBO. Further, the nature of the CBO should depend on the nature of the resource to be managed. A milk society at the village level, for example, must include both large and small farmers, as well as landless families involved in milk production. It is the large farmers who produce enough milk to make the route viable. The small farmers and landless families are then able to sell their marginally surplus production of milk to the milk union. However, when the resource is finance for credit, if large and small farmers/landless families are included in the same group, then the richer and more powerful people are likely to control all the resources and ride roughshod over the poor.

Karnataka enjoys the distinction of fostering a healthy relationship between the government and NGOs. Such partnerships are established in the hope of greater synergy, and even though they may bring conflicts in their wake, Karnataka has chosen to manage these tensions, rather than abandoning NGO partnerships altogether.

Government–NGO partnership

What are the reasons for involving NGOs in development programmes? There is a long history of NGOs being part of the service delivery system of the government; the major examples are in health related programmes, women and child care, and more recently in programmes funded by the Ministry of Rural Development. Involvement of NGOs officially in multilateral/bilateral programmes raises the level of cooperation to another level. The NGOs become not only implementers; they also find a place in designing and managing programmes together with government at all levels.

The Government of Karnataka was the first to take this step; the watershed project in Gulbarga (1986) was the first in the country in which the GoK, a bilateral agency (Swiss Development Cooperation) and an NGO (MYRADA) were officially involved in a triangular partnership. However, a conceptual framework is required which provides an institutionalised basis for such collaborations to work effectively.

Assuming that the basis for Government-NGO partnerships is the comparative advantages that each can bring into the programme, the relationship should either thrive on mutual respect – including spaces for disagreements and compromises in the interests of the partnership goals – or go separate ways: there is not much space for a middle path, and to take on the roles of contractor-supplciant defeats the purpose of coming together; at any rate, it cannot be called a ‘partnership’.

One issue that has been worrying many NGOs is whether the ability to remain true to their core objectives will be diluted when the government is the financing agency. How far is the NGO prepared to go in questioning the assumptions of the programme under implementation? There is no doubt that the ability of the NGO to question will depend very much on: a) the size of the NGO, especially at the grassroots in terms of the area covered and people directly involved in its programmes; b) the NGO's credibility based on its past performance and those involved with it at Board level and senior management positions; and c) the ability of the NGO to negotiate with government without polarising and publicising the issue. All NGOs do not have these features, nor are all these strengths equally obvious in those NGOs, which have them.

The ability to influence policy is also conditioned by the bidding process. NGOs argue that bidding for contracts to implement programmes announced by the government ties the hands of the bidding agency and puts it at a disadvantage if it were to question the contents and implementation strategies of programmes. However, NGOs do bid for contracts and the government then deals with NGOs as contractors.

BOX 13.1

Characteristics of NGOs' activities

NGOs are characterised by the diversity of their activities. They are also associated with efficient, participatory service delivery systems. Government-NGO partnerships seek to build on the indisputable strengths of the good performing NGOs. These are: (i) the willingness to work in remote areas among marginalised people, (ii) the ability to set in motion, a participatory process in the identification of needs, the design and implementation of programmes, (iii) the readiness to use and mobilise local resources, (iv) a non-hierarchical approach to working with people, (v) cost effective service delivery, (vi) freedom from red tape and (vii) freedom to innovate.

But then, the government is not the only organisation that may push NGOs in a certain direction. Many NGOs are dependent on donor funds and the increasing competition for donor funds squeezes out the smaller NGOs. Donors, in turn, may impose standardised formats, and this results in NGOs losing their key strengths: diversity and flexibility. Governments, in turn, accuse NGOs of secrecy and lack of transparency regarding donors and the use of funds. A more serious concern for many governments is the issue of mandate and accountability. Marshcall notes that NGOs must be very clear about who they derive their mandate from and to whom they are accountable. Professing to speak for the people or acting as alternatives to elected governments is misleading and undermines the credibility of NGOs. While tensions can erupt in the wake of successful social awareness programmes initiated by NGOs, when the power elites may feel threatened (e.g. anti-arrack agitations, anti-dowry actions), such tensions can be seen to be producing outcomes that promote equity and social justice. It is more problematic when NGOs and elected bodies come into conflict. In Karnataka, however, the very successful ‘Gram SAT’ training of PRI functionaries was implemented with NGO participation, so, it is possible for PRIs and NGOs to harmonise their developmental activities.

Categories of NGOs in Karnataka

NGOs are usually categorised according to their main activity. However, the history of NGOs shows that many NGOs start with a particular activity, but broaden their portfolio as they progressively

respond to people's concerns, which are not compartmentalised. Most NGOs however, are mobilisers of people and providers of services. From this basis, they move to catalysing social change and influencing gender relations. An analysis of the Directory of Voluntary Organisations

in Karnataka, which brought out profiles of 530 NGOs, indicates that of the 530 NGOs surveyed, the largest numbers are engaged in development, followed by social service and health. It also shows that the majority, by far, are situated in central and south Karnataka. (Table 13.1)

TABLE 13.1
Category index of NGOs

Main category	Sub category	No. of NGOs
Culture and Arts	Culture	5
	Media and communication	7
	Recreation and adventure	2
	Total	14
Education	Education – General	14
	Scholarships for education	2
	Non-formal education	1
	Primary and secondary education	1
	Value education	4
	Skills/Vocational training	9
	Research and scientific education	1
	Education – others	12
Total	44	
Health and Rehabilitation	Alternative/indigenous healthcare	2
	Blood services	2
	Cancer-related	3
	Community health	5
	Disability	5
	Services for the intellectually impaired	14
	Services for multiple disabilities	6
	Physically impaired/Cerebral palsy	11
	Speech and hearing impaired	6
	Visually impaired	6
	Eye care	1
	Family planning	1
	HIV/AIDS	5
	Hospitals	1
	Leprosy	4
	Mental health	5
	Substance abuse rehabilitation	7
	Health – General	11
	Health – Others	2
	Total	97
Social Service	Social Service - General	49
	Care of the elderly	21
	Childcare, orphanages, adoption	29
	Street children	2

(Table 13.1 Contd...)

(Table 13.1 Contd...)

Main category	Sub category	No. of NGOs
	Crisis intervention, counselling	14
	Destitute and abandoned	3
	Total	118
Environment	Alternative energy	2
	Animal and bird care	5
	Ecology and environment	9
	Organic farming and marketing	2
	Tribal communities and forests	9
	Environment - Others	1
	Total	28
Development	General Development Organisations	61
	Agriculture	4
	Alternative tourism	1
	Drinking water and sanitation	3
	Handicrafts support	2
	Housing	1
	Rural development	63
	Entrepreneur development	6
	Slum development	13
	Total	154
Law and Advocacy	Child labour	9
	Civic organisations/Civil liberties	5
	Consumer interests and concerns	3
	Dalit issues	5
	Women, Gender, Rights	19
	Human Rights and Legal Aid	3
	Devadasis and sex workers	2
	Law and Advocacy - others	1
Total	47	
Support organisations	Documentation and research	3
	Development research fellowships	1
	Grant-making (Indian)	1
	Grant-making (International)	1
	Management, HRD, Evaluation	2
	Networking and advisory services	4
	Literature (publishing/marketing)	1
	Training	7
	Accounting/Auditing/Legal Advice	1
	Fund raising	2
	Support – Other	4
	Total	27
Religion	Religion – support and promotion	1
	Total	1
Total of all types		530

Note: This is by no means a complete list of NGOs in Karnataka and the lack of reliable data is a serious constraint.

Source: Bangalore Cares: Directory of Voluntary Organisations in Karnataka, 2000.

Conclusion

It may be asked why NGOs should not take over more government functions when they have so many advantages. The answer is that most NGOs are small, and hence, lack institutional capacity, have access to limited funds and all too often, are capable of dealing only with single issues. Besides, the government cannot transfer its responsibilities for poverty alleviation, food security, social security and basic social services to NGOs.

People have certain expectations of their elected representatives that NGOs cannot substitute. NGOs, with their indubitable strengths, play a significant role in advocacy, building CSOs and CBOs and implementing services at the grassroots in a participatory manner. This is their great contribution: building a dynamic and responsive civil society and enabling the poor and the vulnerable to speak for themselves. This will become evident in the chapter on self-help groups.