

Roles of NGOs

NGOs role is often critical, especially in developing countries. During emergencies and famine, the non-governmental organisations have been important in providing food to the needy and poor people. NGOs often provide essential services in the developing world that in developed countries governmental agencies or institutions would provide. Normally, NGOs provide services that are in line with sitting governmental policy. In a wider approach, NGOs are also the source and centre of social justice for the marginalised members of society in developing countries or failed states. NGOs are often left as the only ones that defend or promote the economic needs and requirements for developing states, often bringing cases to the International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organisation and World Bank. The United Nations has recognised the special role of CSOs and NGOs. The Millennium Development Goals, as well as the United Nations Development Programme have recognised NGOs work in developing countries. If the Millennium Development Goals are to be achieved, the role of NGOs will have to be recognised by the international community. However, the role of NGOs has also been criticised, as many international experts estimate that much of the work done by NGOs is not harmonised to the countries' preferences.

Among the large range of roles that NGOs play, the following can be identified as important:

Development and Operation of Infrastructure:

Community-based organizations can be seen in developing small or large infrastructure and operate and maintain infrastructure such as wells or public toilets and solid waste collection services. For example, any local organization can step forward to mobilize the local communities for the establishment of girls' school through the utilization of community material and human resources. That developed school (infrastructure) could be operated by that organization or local community. There are many examples of almost all societies where organizations develop and operate infrastructures for socioeconomic development. In many

cases, they will need technical assistance or advice from governmental agencies or higher-level NGOs.

Innovation, Supporting, Demonstration and Pilot Projects:

NGOs have the advantage of selecting particular places for innovative projects and specify in advance the length of time which they will be supporting the project - overcoming some of the shortcomings that governments face in this respect. NGOs can also be pilots for larger government projects due to their ability to act more quickly than the government bureaucracy.

Facilitating Communication:

NGOs use interpersonal methods of communication, and study the right entry points whereby they gain the trust of the community where they want to work and benefit. They would also have a good idea of the feasibility of the projects they take up. The significance of this role to the government is that NGOs can communicate to the policy-making levels of government, information about the lives, capabilities, attitudes and cultural characteristics of people at the local level.

NGOs can facilitate communication upward from the people to the government and downward from the government to the people. Communication upward involves informing the government about what local people are thinking, doing and feeling while communication downward involves informing local people about what the government is planning and doing. NGOs are also in a unique position to share information horizontally, networking between other organizations doing similar work.

Technical Assistance and Training:

Training institutions and NGOs develop a technical assistance and training capacity and use this to assist both CBOs and governments.

Research, Monitoring and Evaluation:

NGOs are also effectively involved in collecting facts and figures about different issues prevailing in communities. Their research work provides bases for development of different need based development projects. In addition to that many organizations conduct monitoring and evaluation of their own or other

NGOs/government projects. Effective participatory monitoring would permit the sharing of results with the people themselves as well as with the project staff.

Advocacy for and with the Poor:

In some cases, NGOs become spokespersons for the poor and attempt to influence government policies and programs on their behalf. This may be done through a variety of ways ranging from demonstration and pilot projects, participation in public forums and the formulation of government policy and plans, publicizing research results and case studies of the poor. Thus NGOs play roles from advocates for the poor to implementers of government programs; from protesters and critics to partners and advisors; from sponsors of pilot projects to mediators.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Advantages

- They have the ability to experiment freely with innovative approaches and, if necessary, to take risks.
- They are flexible in adapting to local situations and responding to local needs and therefore able to develop integrated projects, as well as sectoral projects.
- They enjoy good rapport with people and can render micro-assistance to very poor people as they can identify those who are most in need and tailor assistance to their needs.
- They have the ability to communicate at all levels, from the neighborhood to the top levels of government.
- They are able to recruit both experts and highly motivated staff with fewer restrictions than the government.

Disadvantages

- Paternalistic attitudes restrict the degree of participation in program/project design.
- Restricted/constrained ways of approach to a problem or area.
- Relatively small project coverage, dependence on outside financial resources, etc.

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- "Territorial (Defensive) possessiveness" of an area or project reduces cooperation between agencies, seen as threatening or competitive.