

Understanding NGOs

samedi 16 juillet 2011, par [SULEHRIA Farooq](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 14 juillet 2011).

Using NGOs as a scapegoat for depoliticising is also only partially true. Nepal, for instance, with a large NGO sector, belies the depoliticisation myth. Nepal has seen a Maoist victory in elections. It is not correct to say that NGOs do not depoliticise. However, the NGO sector is not a cause but one of many means to depoliticise a society.

In the beginning of the 1960s, there were a couple of hundred NGOs on the go internationally. Now there are more or less 29,000. The rich countries are distributing one-fifth of their development aid through NGOs. The NGO sector is responsible for distributing nearly \$6 billion, annually, in development aid. This is almost as much as is channelled through the multilateral agencies. More and more governments in the North delegate responsibility for disbursement of aid to the NGO sector.

Today, there are over 100,000 NGOs in the so-called third world, funded with \$20 billion annually by the US, the EU, Canada, Australia and Japan. The managers of these NGOs control accounts worth millions of dollars. The big NGOs use social reform activities to absorb what formerly used to be state functions : distributing loans under the guise of micro-credit and providing services in agriculture, health, jobs, or education, in the name of development.

The EU has delegated experts from 160 NGOs to manage all on-site aid work. In principle, local governments are not given any influence over this money. This partly explains General Musharraf and his ministers bad-mouthing NGOs.

Ironically, on assuming power President Musharraf adopted two leading persons (Zubeda Jalal and Omar Asghar Khan) from the NGO sector as his ministers, besides a couple of advisors.

As far as fundamentalists are concerned, the late Eqbal Ahmed elucidates their demonising of NGOs. Fundamentalists of all hues (Hindu, Christian and Muslim), according to Eqbal Ahmad, need an « other » in the society. The NGO sector (alongside Ismailis and Zikris) is the new found « other » since the Ahmadia sect as « other » has long been disused. But the bearded demonising of NGOs is hypocritical since mullas themselves were among the first to receive petrodollars flowing in from Sheikdoms, for big NGOs at the start of the Afghan Jihad. To cite one example, Khurshid Ahmed of the Jamaat-e-Islami is also chairman of an Islamabad-based NGO : Institute of Policy Studies.

But General Musharraf or beards bad mouthing NGOs finds an echo among radicals too.

Author of *The Green Capitalist*, Mikael Nyberg, [[1](#)] thinks the weakening of state structures in the South is part of a neo-liberal agenda and « in this process, modern charity and aid organisations play a similar role to that of Western missionaries in the past ». He considers NGOs as a conduit for discharging the « white man's burden » since : « The states on the periphery are regarded as malicious, impotent or otherwise defunct. Consequently, it is the task of the civilised world to give the peoples in the South human rights, peace, social services and environmental protection ». Thus aid is distributed through NGOs instead of states.

Arundhati Roy thinks NGOs' « real contribution is that they defuse political anger and dole out as aid or benevolence what people ought to have by right. NGOs alter the public psyche. They turn people into dependent victims and blunt political resistance. NGOs form a buffer between the sarkar and the public. Between empire and its subjects. They have become the arbitrators, the interpreters, the facilitators ».

Similarly, Tariq Ali in his book, *Bush in Babylon*, comes down hard on NGOs : « The message from the donors is straightforward : make some noise, by all means necessary, but if you do anything really political that seriously affects the functioning of the neo-liberal state at any level, your funds might not be renewed. And, as usually happens, participation in serious politics is likely to be forbidden. This is then characterised as »civil society« or »real grass roots democracy« , cleaner and more user-friendly than any political party. »Users may be limited, but the NGOs' salaries from the West are there to ensure that this remains the case. Some NGOs do buck the trend and are involved in serious projects, but these are an exception. Long-term experiments in Egypt and Pakistan have produced reasonable results. The main problem in both places is that religious groups have seized the day, filled the vacuum, and argued against consumerism as the dominant value in contemporary societies. There is no effective opposition in either country, both of which are presided over by a military dictator".

The role NGOs played in regime changes (Yugoslavia, Ukraine, and Georgia) conducted through « colour revolution » further earned them the radical wrath. Pora in Ukraine (Orange Revolution), Kmara in Georgia (Rose Revolution) and (Otpor) in Serbia, all have been funded by US donors such as Freedom House (an ex-CIA man heading it), US National Endowment for Democracy or George Soros Foundation.

Then there are allegations of corruption, waste and fraud. In most countries, Pakistan being no exception, the NGOs face an identity crisis.

But the NGO sector does not consist of one trend. There are different trends. Some of the NGOs work with religious references, others are aligned with the government and some work for social reforms. There are also different political trends : conservative, liberal, radical and religious.

There are NGOs relieving the state of its social responsibilities by taking over hospitals, public schools, and transport, thus proclaiming that the evils of the system are only a result of failure of « good governance ». The message is : the system is workable only if run by clean people. These NGOs provide a human face to the system when they want people to solve problems on a self-help basis instead of getting organised. In this way, such NGOs are an extension of charity. But their nexus to state, despite their claims to be non-state actors, makes them different from charities. The NGO phenomenon taking over state functions is an extension of reformism from above.

But then there are NGOs, both internationally and locally, that have taken up the cause of anti-globalisation, human rights, peace, environment, and third world debt cancellation. It is these social organisations that played a pivotal role in initiating the process of World Social Forum (WSF). The anti-war mobilisations on Feb. 15, 2003 (and on March 20 the following year) would not have been possible without the WSF process.

Using NGOs as a scapegoat for depoliticising is also only partially true. Nepal, for instance, with a large NGO sector, belies the depoliticisation myth. Nepal has seen a Maoist victory in election. It is not correct to say that NGOs do not depoliticise. However, the NGO sector is not a cause but one of many means to depoliticise a society.

In the case of Pakistan, it was the disillusionment in respective PPP and Muslim League

governments that isolated the masses from politics. President Musharraf is therefore did not initially meet the resistance Zia-ul-Haq had to face. It was mainly the political forces, not the NGO sector, responsible for the lack of interest masses showed in politics. However, 2007 Onwards, the country was in the grip of a feverish democracy movement that politicized, even radicalized to some extent, the country inspite of a big NGO presence inside the movement.

However, women, minorities, bonded labour, children, and trade unions in Pakistan would have been defenceless and vulnerable without some of the NGOs that « buck the trend and are involved in serious projects ». These NGOs, even if they are an exception, constitute the cross-currents that a society in Pakistan badly needs to attain civility. Civil society would be even less civil without such NGOs. Imagine a Pakistan without the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) ! The country would definitely have been poorer without the HRCP.

Farooq Sulehria

P.-S.

* From VIEWPOINT ONLINE ISSUE NO. 59, JULY 14, 2011 :

<http://www.viewpointonline.net/understanding-ngos.html>

* Farooq Sulehria is working with Stockholm-based Weekly Internationalen (www.internationalen.se). Before joining Internationalen, he worked for one year, 2006-07 at daily The News, Rawalpindi. Also, in Pakistan, he has worked with Lahore-based dailies, The Nation, The Frontier Post and Pakistan. He has MA in Mass Communication from Punjab University, Lahore. He also contributes for Znet and various left publications in Europe and Australia.

Notes

[1] www.mikaelnyberg.nu