

# **The Constraints of NGOs' Operational Flaws on Rural Development Initiatives in Nigeria•**

EBEBE A UKPONG\*

## **ABSTRACT**

The effectiveness of the role performance of NGOs should be measured against their ability to engender the preconditions to the attainment of rural development objectives. NGOs are yet to wholly generate these success ingredients. This failure is due to the paradox of performance. The dynamics of operations of NGOs produce some latent inhibiting consequences which constrain the attainment of anticipated grassroots development. This article identifies some of these shortcomings and concludes that concerted global research efforts are needed to understand better these nascent but elusive problems and to offer management strategies.

## **Introduction**

This article discusses some of the often unnoticed shortcomings generated by Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the course of their operations. It is argued that these flaws are paradoxical outcomes of the operational procedures of NGOs and have the capacity to constrain the attainment of the advocated roles of NGOs in rural or grassroots development.

The global concern for speedy rural development in the developing countries was unprecedentedly expressed in the 1980s by the avalanche of international and local conferences, new journals, organisations and institutions and publications that came into existence during this period solely for the promotion of this enterprise. Such spirited efforts were prompted by the mocking failures of part approaches to rural development (Famoriyo, 1989; Hyden, 1986).

•This study was supported by the University of Calabar Senate Research Grant.

\*Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Calabar, Nigeria.

The consensus that has emerged from the committed discussions on the effective strategy to overcome the failures of the "lost development decade" of the 1980s is to seek the active involvement and participation of the affected people themselves in development process (Ukpong, 1990 ECA, 1990; Patel, 1987). The overcentralised strategy of the top-down approach which conceives development process as a paternalistic and charity activity of the Government is no longer considered tenable nor appropriate. This is especially so for rural development, rightly viewed as a grassroots programme. Accordingly, the active participation of the local people in their activities is considered necessary for success (Durning, 1989).

In their broadest conceptualisation, NGOs are hailed for their unique capacity to enhance participatory development initiatives (The Editors, 1991: 6; United Nations, 1988). The last decade in particular has witnessed profuse efforts to place NGOs high up on the public agenda as a veritable instrument of development intervention (Aina, 1990; NGOS, 1990). The disturbing issue, however, is that not only is the advocated capacity of NGOs exaggerated, but such claims are often made without paying attention to the real inhibiting problems NGOs actually face in the field. The unrestrained propagation of such a position is quite dangerous and misleading. As persistently maintained, advocacy and practice are two worlds apart, sometimes without a bridge (Ukpong, 1990; 1989).

Using available field data, we show that NGOs have constraints which both frustrate public expectations from them as well as gradually diminish the self confidence of NGOs. Both sets of problems in turn, have shrinking effects on the operational capacity of NGOs. The data are drawn from projects that were directed at the promotion of rural development and they are those which reflect the common experience of both international and local NGOs.

### **The Ingredients of Rural Development**

In order to appreciate the interventionist role expected of NGOs in rural development enterprise, it is necessary to briefly first present the nature of the problem and the required ingredients of success. We begin by examining the meaning of the concept of rural development.

The Current inter-disciplinary approach used for the explication of the concept of rural development has paid off high intellectual dividends. The clarity of the concept is no doubt better today than at any other time. This clarity is made possible particularly by writers from the South and those whose recent works are equally based on the experiences of the many failed rural development initiatives

in the South. A cursory examination of recent conference proceedings and books of reading on rural development in Nigeria, for instance, will reveal this (see for instance Ebong, 1990; Ogunna et al, 1990; Ega, Atala and Baba, 1989; NRSA, 1987).

One can only hope that such clarity leads to a rapid resolution of rural poverty which has been perpetuated, in large part, by intellectual misrepresentation and misperception of the facts of the problem (Hyden, 1986: 245). Until very recently, conceptions of rural development based on Western theories had viewed the issue as that of numbers growth without equity and distribution under this perspective, rural development had the primary meaning of raising rural economic "productivity" (Lele, 1975) without bothering to spell out the goal and means in the context of the rural people themselves.

General, rural development is part of an overall development theory. Today the general concept of development is taken to mean a process of change which enhances the quality of people's life for people. The process is meaningful only when the people whose lives will be affected actively take part in the decision-makings involved. This then defines the parameters of current usage of rural development. It rejects the notion of external engineering and imposition. It also discountenances the subordinate position assigned to indigenous knowledge and creativity in the process of change. It subscribes to the well-being of the rural dwellers as the overriding goal of the change endeavour. In other words, it is accepted that the primary beneficiaries of development programmes should be the rural people and not those outside of the target of action, the urban dwellers, the policy makers and the "go-betweens". Finally, the element of rural development includes the recognition of the fact that it is not just the number of projects or programmes that is paramount but their relevance and sustainability.

Rural development, then, can be said to be a programme of change aimed at the elimination of the poverty of rural dwellers and the ultimate enhancement of their quality of life and general well-being. This entails the attainment of many related objectives. As rightly observed by Williams (1979), the objectives of rural development are quite many and can be restated to include:

- (i) integration of a marginalised population into the mainstream of development process;
- (ii) provision of basic human needs, including health, portable water, food, education and housing;
- (iii) improvement in basic infrastructures such as roads, rural electricity and public facilities;
- (iv) equitable distribution of resources, especially income;
- (v) access to productive resources like land and credit facilities;

- (vi) generation of employment opportunities;
- (vii) provision of opportunities for selfless and dignified living through acquisition of skills and development of human resources;
- (viii) transformation of fundamental institutions and organisations; and
- (ix) opportunities for participation in decisions and actions affecting the lives of rural people.

The lessons from past rural development programmes are that these objectives are hardly attained partly because of lack of initiatives or commitment of huge budgetary resources to the enterprise. The declared efforts of both the government and NGOs in the pursuit of rural development are impressive. Rural development objectives cannot be attained at once. But it is certain that there are preconditions to the successful attainment of these objectives which have thus far been taken for granted or underestimated.

It is becoming increasingly clear that there are certain pre-requisites which must be in place for the objectives of rural development, as outlined above, to be successfully attained. These are the success ingredients and include, *inter alia*:

#### ***a) Participatory Institutions and Organisations***

Past failures of rural development programmes have largely been attributed to the nonparticipation of the people for whom the development is designed. The past practice of engineering rural development from distant administrative capitals as a one shot activity meant the inability to fully understand the problem and the failure to engender a strong commitment on the parts of the development officials and the people as a necessary condition for the sustainability of the programme (Arema, 1983). The evolution of participatory institutions is considered to permit, besides the known traditional role of enhancing democratic principle and equalisation of resources, (ECA, 1990; United Nations, 1988; Mulwa, 1987), the generation of enthusiasm among the citizens to solve their problems, the development on local creativity and the enhancement of organisational and leadership capabilities. Such participatory institutions are built at or oriented towards the grass-roots. They are the intermediary organisations or simply the NGOs. It is this grassroots orientation which enables correct identification of problems and available resources.

#### ***b) Enhanced Leadership Capacity***

The new theory of rural development insists that a corps of committed leaders who owe primary allegiance and obligations to the people, the beneficiaries, is a must for any successful programme. Such leaders cannot be "outsiders" (Mulwa, 1987: 108-109). Local leadership guarantees the possession of detailed knowledge of

local resources, potentials, needs and priorities of local citizens. Indeed, the argument is that only the leadership with a good knowledge of the groups' needs and priorities can successfully guide a group to achieve its goals (The Editors, 1991: 4). Enhanced leadership, above all, gives local people the bargaining power with which to confront and deal with existing powerful institutions, groups and individuals.

The leadership called for must have the capacity to identify opportunities and the capability to mobilise the people to fulfil their felt needs within the limits of available resources. The argument is that a local group may not be endowed with such an enhanced leadership, at least initially. It may be imperative therefore for local people to forge a link with outsiders who are similarly committed to the promotion of their well-being for the purpose of acquiring and cultivating the necessary executive capacity and leadership skills by the local people themselves.

### *c) Local Autonomy*

Increasingly, rural development is becoming the responsibility of the local people themselves. This is the outcome of the failures of the government, even the local government system, to respond to the needs of the local people (Iyoha, 1989). Local people are compelled to undertake the development of their immediate community and provide themselves with the needed basic services. The inherent imperative of organising thus brings about the proliferation of grassroot development associations. These are countervailing power structures seeking to promote "bottom up" development strategy.

The grey area, however, is the issue of autonomy for these organisations. As the embodiment of the aspirations of the local people, it should be the only organ to project and protect the people's desires without outside interference (Kane, 1990). Often, this is not the case. Continuous dictation and imposition from outside often bring about conflicts in organisational procedures and goals leading to failures. The consensus is that local groups must attain a good measure of autonomy over the control of their activities, at least to break the "top-down" strategy with its negative concomitants (Jamela, 1990).

### *d) Coordination of Programmes*

As rural development becomes the concern of groups of local people, multiplication of initiatives emerges as the pattern of organisation. This situation sustains wastes, duplication of efforts and dissipation of scarce resources. A new network of integration which replaces government as the coordinating agency is necessary to coordinate the activities of the local people and unite the purpose of actions. The coordinating body must command the respect and trust of all parties. It cannot be

one which strives in asymmetrical power relations between parties. In the past, such relationship between government and the local people prevented the former from honouring its obligations to the latter without any remorse or repercussions (Brauer, 1992).

#### *e) Mobilisation and Utilisation of Resources*

There is a general agreement that past rural development programmes failed largely because of lack of sufficient resource commitment (The Editors, 1991; Orewa, 1979). Shortfall in rural service availability and delivery is further attributed to the inability of government and formal agencies to rightly identify, mobilise and utilise existing resources. This is partly due to the support-gap existing between the people and the government. Yet the resources of the government, which is in a stronger resources endowment position, and of the local people must be combined and directed at development programmes if success must be attained.

The need for an instigator and a synthesizer of resource mobilisation is manifestly thus expressed. In reality, mobilisation dovetails into coordination. What is required is the harnessing of local community initiatives to the resources of government and other formal sector agencies contributing to the development of the rural areas. Above all, the mobilised resources must be used for actual and meaningful service delivery. The outcome is an expression of a strong organisation on the ground with demonstrable capacity to achieve some useful and satisfactory end. An important ingredient of success here is the encouragement and support of the organs of government to local mobilisation initiatives, not confrontation nor sabotage.

The presence of the ingredients of success builds the confidence that rural development initiatives will be sustained. But the cultivation of these pre-requisites requires another deliberately engendered system of planned action. Indeed, their existence is a product of a separate, innovative regime of action. Its existence indicates the possibility of new heights of achievement. The NGOs are the current celebrated liberating agency with the imputed capacity to generate these sustaining ingredients of success of local or rural development.

#### **The Advocated Role of NGOs in Rural Development**

The popular approach to present NGOs as a monolith or a homogeneous enterprise is not only misleading but conceptually wrong. NGOs, as broadly conceived ordinarily, are a mixed pot of actors, institutions and capabilities. There is a phenomenal diversity in the orientations, focus of actions, institutional capacity, origin

and pattern of evolution within NGOs. This diversity is so sharply noticed now among the NGOs operating in the Third World (another vaguely misleading concept for the diversified developing countries) that attempts at distinction are being vigorously made.

In one respect, there is the trend to distinguish between foreign and local NGOs. As most of the foreign NGOs have come from the rich North, the dichotomy is simply to refer to them as "Support NGOs" and their local counterparts, "Community Based Organisations" (CBOs). This distinction is contained in the Limuru Declaration of 1987 (Turner, 1988). Community Based Organisations are also called Grass-roots Development Associations (GDAs). In Nigeria, they are popularly referred to as Community Development Associations (CDAs). Within the United Nations system, this distinction is maintained by a simple concept of Northern and Southern NGOs. The basis of this categorisation is the disparate resources endowment between the two. As Mayur (1991: 19) has warned, the differences between the two categories of NGOs in terms of goals, practice and capacities is quite obvious that notice must be taken of the existing gap.

Within the NGOs, sharp differences also exist in the realms of focus of action, developmental regimes and impetus for formation. Korten (1990) has richly documented this internal differentiation using the concept of "four generations" of voluntary development action. This concept permits the identification of four distinct categories of NGOs in terms of strategies of development orientation. Hence NGOs are identified as being relief and welfare, community development, sustainable systems and development or people's movements types. This distinction has a wide appeal (Hasan, 1990: 82-83 ; SPRA, 1990). This categorisation presents at once the role focus of an NGO as either a doer, mobiliser, catalyst or activist of development. Role focus also indicates what development theory underpin the interventionist programme of an NGO.

When Korten (1990: 122) introduced the concept of government non-governmental organisation (GONGO), he least probably had been aware of another subtle form of categorisation which characterises NGOs. Besides differentiating NGOs in terms of geographical origin and role focus, it is also useful to note the new trend of "government behaving like an NGO" (Hasan, 1990: 85) which has led to the emergence of a new type of NGO, the GONGO. There are examples of government sponsored NGOs in Nigeria today. They include the Better life Programme (BLP) and the Directorate for Food, Road and Rural Infrastructure (DFRRI) both set up by the Federal Government of the country. There is also an example of a state initiative in NGOs formation. It is the Neighbourhood Development Organisation (NDO sponsored by the Calabar Municipal Government in Cross River State. Thus, the source of impetus for the formation of an NGO

is another criterion of distinction.

The differences between Northern and Southern and within the broad categories of NGOs are quite significant and have direct impact on goal attainment. Unfortunately, this fact is often ignored and its consequences underestimated in the assignment of expectations to NGOs. What appears to be the rule is that every NGO is assigned a common expectation or assumed to have the same inherent achievement capacity in development initiatives. The dominance of a common mission or goal that unites NGOs is what is usually mistaken for an equality of capacity among NGOs. This is the basis of the prevalent faulty NGO role assignment and expectations. The flaws in this conception must be acknowledged. Our present concern, however, is to identify the common expectations from NGOs.

There is a solid consensus in the literature on the generalised role of NGOs in development. Based on the underlying helping-philosophy of NGOs, they are perceived as an active agent of development (Kinguanjui, 1987). The focus of action of NGOs is generally held to be the poor - helping the urban poor with local development but mostly advancing rural development (Lee-Smith and Stren, 1991: 35). Increasingly, the utility of the approach of presenting NGOs' role in a generalised order is being questioned (Mulyungi, 1990). There are calls for and attempts to specify what the actual role of NGOs might be in development process. We can identify the main functions commonly assigned to NGOs as follows:

### *(i) Empowerment*

This is the primary role assigned to NGOs. It is a political role. NGOs are firstly thought of as having the capacity "to empower the poor (and the oppressed) in their attack on both the internal and external factors which ensnare them in poverty" (Clark, 1991:192). This role is played by assisting local people to build counter-vailing power structure, acquire bargaining and leadership skills and the provision of the enabling resources with which to sustain local initiatives, thereby enjoying a degree of autonomy. But this role carries political implications which are almost always resisted by the existing power groups (Bunzenthal, 1992).

### *(ii) Building and Strengthening Institutional Capacity*

The focus of NGOs' action is the poor and the scope of their action is local or grassroot development. NGOs' role in this respect has been changing, as aptly represented by Korten's proposition of "Four Generations of NGO Strategy", from being doer, mobiliser, catalyst to activist/educator. The Chinese proverb of teaching the poor how to fish than merely giving a fish in the name of assistance is often used as the self-speaking illustration of the expected role of NGOs.



**(iii) Bridging**

Brown (1991: 2) captured and presented a vivid picture of this role when he described NGOs as "bridging organisations". NGOs are to link all the actors, constituencies and agencies involved in the development process. In particular, they are to link the resources poor people/communities to resources-endowed supporting agencies both locally and internationally. NGOs are currently seen as the strongest single link between the world's political decision-makers, resources managers and grassroots groups. Given this, NGOs are thought of as being in the advantageous position to mobilise resources for grassroots development initiatives. Because of their genuine commitment to development, NGOs are also seen as neutral conduits for the redistribution of the mobilised resources.

**(iv) Promotion and Rejuvenation of Social Movements**

This is the latest mandate assigned to NGOs. They are called upon to actively promote the rise of people's movements. This involves not merely engendering coalition and networking, but uniting the commitment, support and effort of the international community in the common goal of grassroots development. This is essentially a sensitising role. It is action at the level of advocacy, calling attention to an alternative course considered better and practical. NGOs expand this vision, cultivate the idea and mobilise the social energy of people across the world.

**(v) Promotion of Democratic Practices and Processes**

Perhaps, this is the most celebrated role of NGOs, especially from the perspective of the Northern NGOs. NGOs are looked upon as an enhancing instrument for popular participation in development process. This is done by organising the ordinary citizens, developing their self-management capacity through training and the provision of the enabling resources (e.g. credit facilities and information) and incorporating local creativity into development process. The opportunities and capacities to participate in decision-making so provided are extended even beyond development frontiers into other aspects of life, notably politics.

There are yet other important functions assigned to NGOs but which are hardly publicised. These include serving as trusted conduits for the direct transfer of resources from resources-endowed countries to the poor countries in which bilateral official development assistance is denied or cut due to political considerations. In this case, NGOs become the "saviours" of the poor, preventing them from being doubly punished. In other instances, NGOs have served and are increasingly being called upon to be the people's watch-dog, advisors on development issues as well as channels of communication and an enlightenment agency. Above all,

NGOs are called upon to play policy influencing roles.

The successful performance of the assigned functions can only be appreciated if NGOs ultimately engender those success-ingredients necessary to attain the goals of rural development initiatives. It is only when rural development programmes succeed that the poverty of the majority rural dwellers can be alleviated. And it is only then that the NGOs' broad goal of poverty alleviation can be said to have been accomplished. But as it is now, NGOs are yet to wholly discharge their assigned roles; a disquieting situation known and courageously admitted by only a few NGOs at present (NGO, 1990). This shortfall, it must be quickly pointed out, is not due to lack of efforts on the part of the NGOs but is more the paradoxes of their performance.

### **The Constraints to NGO's Role Performance**

It is commonly noted in Nigeria that thus far, the most successful element in rural development initiatives in the country is the propensity to failure (Ebong, 1990; Ega, Atala and Baba, 1989; Abasiokong, 1982). Such is the case for most rural development programmes measured against the objectives of rural development already outlined above. In particular, the failure to attain the objectives of participation and beneficial utilisation of projects services to improve the well-being of the people are most glaring. This failure is noted for government's programmes beginning from the farm settlement projects of the 1960s, through the Operation Feed the Nation (OFN) of the 1970s and the Basin Development Programme of 1980s to the current BLP and DFERRI projects (Ukpong, 1991; 1989; Famoriyo, 1989; Jackson, 1985). Quite sadly, failures are also observed in the grassroots development initiatives of NGOs (Altungo, 1992; Ukpong, 1989; Stamp, 1989; Ekpere, 1987).

It is common to notice and give account for the failures of governmental initiatives in rural development than those of NGOs. This is not only because NGOs are a recent phenomenon, hence the little attention to their operations but also mainly because of the subtleties underpinning their informal operations. This has often worked against the NGOs themselves in a manner that is even least understood by many NGOs. The inhibiting problems faced by NGOs today can rightly be traced back to the dynamics of their operation. For this reason, we maintain that the constraints faced by NGOs in their rural development initiatives are, ironically, the paradoxes of their performance. They are not due to inadequate monetary resources as often erroneously assumed. They are cognitive problems and therefore quite inhibitive.

But it is even more important to identify these constraints because given

the nature of their origin, they are elusive to many ordinary eyes. This is done by drawing data from the operations of three NGOs based in Akwa Ibom and Cross River States of Nigeria. The Lions Club International is a service organisation operating in 171 countries world-wide, including Nigeria. Founded in 1917, it has its headquarters in Oak Brook, USA. It came to Nigeria 27 years ago. Today, there are more than 12 Lions Clubs and an almost equal number of affiliate organisations called Lioness and Leo Clubs in the Region. Lions Clubs are a relief welfare NGO.

In 1988, the Calabar Municipal Government enacted a bye-law establishing the Neighbourhood Development Organisation (NDO). It fitted the description of GONGO. Each electoral ward, the smallest political unit, was enjoined to organise its NDO and undertake its peculiar grassroots development project(s) within the parameters of the general objectives of NDO set out in the enabling law. Four years after its inception, NDO is virtually comatose, following the exit of its founder, Bassey Ekpo Bassey, from the political office of the Chairman of the Municipality.

The third sample NGO is Ikono Development Association formed in 1972 in Ikono local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State. It was one of the eleven such associations formed in response to the impetus generated by the newly introduced system of local government called Development Administration. The territorial boundary of this NGO was coterminous with that of the "development area" of the clan.

The choice of these three NGOs are purposive. They represent both the foreign or international as well as local NGOs. The new trend of government sponsoring or acting as NGOs is also represented. Both successful and failed efforts are not lost out. The impact of size is also taken into consideration by including both big and small NGOs. Yet, at the end, they demonstrate the commonness of being susceptible, in varying degrees to the same flaws.

The ethnocentric dichotomy of private grassroots development organisations into NGOs and CBOs, for this article, does not hold. The futile efforts to promote such non-existing dichotomy reflect ideological bias. It must be noted that the term of reference given to the same organisation is a matter of convenience depending on the geographical location of the user. I quite agree with Hasan (1990: 82) that "It is difficult to draw a precise distinction between the larger and better organised community action groups and nongovernmental organisation. The concept of NGO equally covers any private voluntarily organised group for the purpose of undertaking grassroots development.

The constraining flaws emanating from the operations of NGOs can be identified to include:

### *a) Rationalised Ostracism*

This refers to the tacit avoidance of official contract or reduced dealings with NGOs. It occurs both at the governmental and community levels. The reason for this is mainly political; and there are many dimensions of it. It is known that the state - NGO relationship is far from being cordial. It oscillates between confrontation, cooperation and subjugation. The current that appears constant, however, is that of suspicion, distrust and misrepresentation.

Two issues easily foster the urge to keep the NGOs at a safe distance: accountability and power-sharing. Every NGO owes accountability to its initiator, sponsor and beneficiaries. Foreign NGOs owe theirs to the home initiators and not their host beneficiaries. In a way, foreign NGOs operate in the line of multinational companies with little or no accountability to the host country. Local NGOs, the CBOs, as indigenous organisations owe their obligation to the local people who are the initiators and the beneficiaries and not to the government. As local NGOs develop, the imperative of seeking the support of foreign NGOs becomes compelling. The need turns the accountability of local NGOs to external bodies and not the government nor local people. Increasingly too, local NGOs are urged to undertake networkings if they must succeed. This, no doubt, places elements of externality within NGOs (Schuurman and Naerssen, 1989).

The issue of accountability to an external body makes for other elements of mistrust in the operational thrust of NGOs. Funding bodies call for detailed and sensitive information from the local NGOs which expose the helplessness and vulnerability of the local people as well as disparage their dignity (IWTC, 1989). An examination of the standard application or proposal forms from foreign NGOs reveals this. This condition of required submissiveness to external command was noted in the course of implementing the joint rural health project, "Facts for life" between CUSO - Calabar and Zone 12-C of Lions Clubs International in 1991. The resentment by the Lions to this external accountability demands led to a sudden, truncated completion of the project. The final phase of project evaluation was never undertaken due to the misgivings.

Government resents this mode of operation as a threat to its political autonomy and a subtle form of deepening the dependency of its people on outsiders. In some instances, government views the activities of NGOs as contradictory to its sovereign interests. In others government frowns at some activities of NGOs as being inconsistent with or repudiative of its policies. This usually leads to government's covert attempts to limit the powers and activities of NGOs. NGOs in turn interpret the acts of curtailment as an attack on their autonomy which they jealously guard. The implications of this framed antagonism on cooperation and coordination are only too obvious.

To demonstrate governments' lividness with NGOs' repudiative acts, a nationally celebrated example is presented. Nigeria's anti-apartheid stand is globally renowned. In 1988, a white South African was elected a Director of Lions Club International representing Africa. The Federal Government of Nigeria considered that the continued participation of Nigerians in Lions' activities under the leadership of the white South African was an anathema and politically inimical to the country's policy on apartheid. Accordingly, government severed all links and associations with the club. Public officers were banned from participating, in any manner whatsoever, in any activities of the club.

However, the order was revoked at the expiration of the term of the director. But before then, a lot of harm had already been done. The ambivalence on the part of public servants who were members of the club led to the withdrawal of their contributions and support to Lionism. Government cancelled its earlier pledged contributions to on-going projects thus affecting their scheduled completion. For example, Ikono Local government refused to release its pledged grant towards the building of a commuter kiosk for a rural community and the project remained uncompleted. The project was initiated by Ikono Lions Club.

NGOs' empowerment role is by nature a political function. Organising a hitherto unorganised people, giving them a voice to speak out with and endowing them with leadership capability is not just providing the local people countervailing power structure but giving them the capacity to challenge the status quo. Besides, by assisting to meet long neglected needs, NGOs easily gain the affection of the local people. They become the known, celebrated "saviours" in comparison to the faceless, distant government. Both positions are often stoutly resented by the government which interprets the developments as deliberate attempts by NGOs to create disaffection among the people thereby eroding or diverting its legitimacy. In some instances NGOs are accused of subverting government support base.

These latent problems have often been used by government and local power groups to discreetly discredit NGOs and justify their tacit acts of armtwisting them to refrain from involvement in what is considered "interference in politics". When the government embraces the NGOs in the open, it equally treats them as pariahs behind the closed door on the account of "committing political crimes". Paradoxically, poverty alleviation which NGOs pursue requires the possession of some measure of political power by the disadvantaged poor as a prerequisite to participation and resources redistribution (Bunzenthall, 1992: 14-15).

Either as expression of their disapproval of NGOs political empowerment or efforts to discourage future involvement, government has often denied NGOs the much needed cooperation. The immediate result is the stalling of protect implementation. A few examples are pertinent. In Itu local Government Area the

the public outcry for a commuter kiosk at Oku Iboku junction had assumed a social problem status. Yet the government did nothing. The Itu Lions Club moved in to meet the need. In 1990, it applied for approval from the LGA to use a piece of land at Oku Iboku to erect the kiosk. The approval was not given until mid-1992 after much pressure. Construction started immediately. But overnight, the building was found demolished and the government is yet to make any arrests. The fear of the praise the NGO was likely to have earned from the public might have been behind the frustrated project. The abandoned NDO's Duton Soap Project in Calabar and Ikono Development Association's Hospital Project are similar tales of frustration engendered by government's withdrawal of support out of the fear of loss of popularity to the NGOs concerned.

### *b) Competitive Fragmentation*

The proliferation of NGOs in Nigeria is both phenomenal and exciting. It is however difficult to ascertain the actual number of both foreign and local NGOs in Nigeria, largely because of the non-registration of most NGOs and also due to the lack of established umbrella and coordinating bodies (CUSO, 1991). This notwithstanding, the trend is for the mushrooming of NGOs, especially at local community level. For instance, under the DFRRRI programme, each of the 100 000 communities in Nigeria is expected to form at least a CDA (Altungo, 1992).

The real drawback of this development is the insularity of each NGO. The proliferation is due to the perceived opportunities NGOs offer. It is considered that the fewer those that control them and the smaller the target population, the greater the share of rewards and visibility of results. At community level, CDAs are sought for because of the leverage they give local people to determine the agenda for the development of individual community. This raises the community's identity, consciousness and provision of basic needs, among other things.

Local NGOs compete amongst themselves to obtain supporting resources from both the government and foreign NGOs. There is yet another facet of competition among NGOs. This is to gain the recognition, acceptance and support of the programming or target community and populations. Here, competition involves three types of NGOs in hierarchical order. At the bottom are the unorganised and the less organised community development associations (CDAs). Above this are the few nascent bodies organised on the mould of the Northern NGOs and then the foreign NGOs. Unfortunately, cooperation between these three categories of NGOs is practically tenuous as there is no memorandum of understanding among them. Rather, there is suspicion and mistrust between them. Cooperation is also hard to attain because of the perception of incompetence and feeling of inferiority towards some NGOs, especially the local ones.

The problem of poor networking among NGOs in Africa, observed by Chitiga-Machingauta (1990) can be applied even in a bolder profile in Nigeria. NGOs are interested in erecting boundary preservation structures. Each adopts operational procedures that are peculiar as an attempt to maintain unique identity. But the greatest drawback is that the idiosyncratic operational procedures are a guarded secret of NGOs. NGOs are intolerant of external evaluation of their operations, even by fellow NGOs. In practice, they are reluctant to share vital information fearing that they might divulge their weakness or expose their successes to copying. Either way is considered inimical to the usual projected exemplary public image of NGOs.

There is certainly a lack of coordination of the activities of NGOs in Nigeria. Attempts at networking are faltering while efforts to create coordinating bodies in the country are sectoral in scope and still on the drawing board. The pioneering position on this is occupied by the Nigerian Association of Nongovernmental Organisation on Health (NANGO). But there are presently less than six NGOs as members. The Nigerian Association of Development Organisations is practically on the drawing board. The problem of lack of coordination is worse at the first level of NGOs, where the less organised CDAs of each community operate in a free hand competition.

The results of all this lack of coordination between NGOs are regrettable overlapping, paralyses and atrophy of initiatives and resources. The strategy of doing-it-alone does not permit operations on meaningfully substantive scope but on small, experimental and limited basis. The outcome is the littering of the rural landscape with dotted, disjointed projects. As Durning (1989, 51) asserted, "small may be beautiful, but it can also be insignificant". What obtains today at the community level amongst the CDAs is duplicated projects, even within a community, that are grossly underutilised, uncompleted and abandoned. This is an obvious demonstration of NGOs failure, thus diminishing public, and even some NGOs operators' confidence in the capability of NGOs as poverty alleviation agencies. Waning confidence takes as its first toll, people's willingness and enthusiasm for participation in and support for further NGOs activities.

The field data substantiating this drawback are not in want. For parsimony, we cite only the case of the NDO. The situation in Ikono was earlier presented, although briefly (Ukpong, 1990). At inception in 1988, the NDO's commitment to the promotion of adult and nonformal education in Calabar Municipality was highly welcomed. Each ward initiated a project immediately. But as soon as it became clear that Calabar Municipal Government placed high premium on this grassroot project (the then Chairman of Municipality was an avowed socialist who firmly believed in the "consciencitisation of the masses"), each ward competed to

outdo the other, to secure the government's grants and recognition. The proliferation of splinter CDAs within each ward brought about the initiation of too many related projects but without competent managers. The aroused enthusiasm in the prospective beneficiaries died shortly afterwards with the projects. Further attempts to rekindle the people's interest by renaming the CDAs in order to mobilise them to undertake another phase of project in mini-water works failed. Thus, the NGO's initiative became a victim of unbridled competition.

### *c) Constituency Recognition*

Constituency recognition as a development concept simply means the acceptance by the targeted beneficiaries of the necessity for a change programme and their preparedness to firmly support it for success. Not everyone supports a change programme. This occurs from two perspectives: those who oppose it because it threatens their entrenched privileged positions and those who do not understand the process. Constituency recognition is very important in NGOs' operation for it is the only guaranteed framework for participation. The importance of people's involvement or participation in development process needs not be over-laboured.

Unfortunately, NGOs' ledger here does not post any impressive credit balance on constituency recognition. This is a logical outcome of the first two problems discussed above. Although all NGOs emphasise participation as the cardinal principle and goal of their operations, they hardly pay adequate attention to isolating and building those factors which enhance actual participation. It is fashionable to read the policy statements of NGOs expressing the wish to work with the beneficiaries as active participants or partners in the development process. In reality, however, given the disguised disdain for and the underrating of the poor by NGO operators because they are considered to be ignorant, powerless, charity-objects and incompetent, they are hardly involved in decision-making.

NGOs operating in Nigeria, especially foreign NGOs, are equally afflicted with the weaknesses of the top-down development approach. Thus far, even at the CDA's level, involvement in NGOs' activities is still the preserve of the few enlightened or educated urban linked elites. They control and direct the affairs of NGOs. The issues and dynamics of NGOs are still a mystery to the majority of the unenlightened poor. The operators of NGOs therefore allocate to themselves the role of "defending the cause of the peasants" (Musengimana, 1990: 39) without ascertaining their needs and perspectives. Thus, they unilaterally design, implement and impose projects on the poor. These projects bear the sentiments, assumptions and preferences of the sponsoring NGO or its leadership than the aspirations of the intended beneficiaries. Most often, the projects lack any continuity with and relevance to the cultural roots of the constituency and its felt



needs. The outcome is resistance, or disregard to the project or both. Each grass-root project that fails deepens the apathy of the poor.

The place of external impetus in grassroots development cannot be denied. It is, however, meaningful when applied with the traditional knowledge and cultural values of the community. Imposition of external impetus serves to exacerbate the problems (Verhelst, 1990). It is relevant only when it plays a catalytic role.

This problem is illustrated by an example. In 1985, at the instance of Ikono Development Association, the LGA funded the building of a recreational park in Ibiaku Ntok Okpo. From the urban disposition of the initiator leaders of the CDA, such a park was thought necessary to encourage the rural dwellers to take active interest in outdoor leisure for health promotion. However, the community was never consulted on the design of the project nor did it participate in its execution. But on completion, the project was handed over to the community for maintenance. A few members of the community felt that the park would encourage vices among the youth while the adults would acquire the habit of modern idleness. The majority did not understand the rationale for the project. It was thus carefully avoided and soon taken over by overgrown weeds.

#### *d) Learned Helplessness*

When NGOs operate as the "saviour" of the poor, as they most often do, they not only exculpate the poor and give respectability to helplessness, but exonerate them for doing nothing to improve their lot. In the main, certain operational procedures of the NGOs are such that they do not expect the poor to do much for themselves.

There are two main ways through which the operational procedures of NGOs incapacitate the poor and dwindle the opportunity for them to build their executive capacity and strengthen their local autonomy. In the first instance, NGOs operate fully in accordance with the procedures approved at their headquarters. Local actions are directed by the headquarters' "standing order" which must be strictly followed irrespective of local peculiarities and demands. The foreign NGOs in particular consider their field offices and affiliate NGOs as mere hands that must take and execute orders from the headquarters. In this way, the right to full self-management and the opportunity to develop local autonomy are denied.

The opportunity to develop management capacity or enhanced leadership capacity is further constrained by the demands of NGOs. Most Northern NGOs tie their money direct to project execution and not training. The need for the development of competent indigenous management capacity remains unmet. Even the local NGOs are guilty of this neglect as well. Apprehensive of the prospect of power sharing with other capable hands, and in the bid to preserve their monopoly

of leadership, most local NGOs hardly incorporate training in their programmes. Like their Northern counterparts, they concentrate on directly "doing" projects using "technical" or "programme" officers who almost always are outsiders. The poor then continue to look up to these leaders with veneration and gratitude.

Arising from this mentality of incompetence on the part of local people, NGOs virtually seek to "baby" the programming community. Ba (1990: 99) succinctly presents the problem thus: In laying siege to villages with a whole battery of equipment, NGOs ... involuntarily foster an assisted mentality, stimulate non-priority needs, deprive villages of their prerogative for taking the initiative and choke the blossoming of original, locally appropriate solutions to problems.

This situation is a subtle way of deepening the dependency of the local people than empowering them.

It is not the receipt of external assistance packaged by NGOs that is the problem. The real danger lies in the practice of some communities giving up self-help efforts or underplaying its tempo and relying heavily on the resources of NGOs. Someone remarked at a recent seminar that the resources flowing from NGOs to the poor is the surest reparation to the poor for their stolen efforts to sustain the wealthy. The poor are thus encouraged to live a life of learned helplessness.

Even where attempts are made to strengthen the local capacity of the people, they inadvertently end up tying the people to the headquarters of NGOs for training and discussions of projects and funding. Local plans end up being drowned. Original local goals become diverted and subjugated to the plans and objectives of NGOs. In this way, many local initiatives are snuffed out in the attempt to receive the support of NGOs. BLP makes this demand on the rural women. The Executive Committees of CDAs composed mostly of urban-based elites, "sons abroad", retain the approval of what project is undertaken and when. Does one still wonder then why rural projects often carry high urban and external components?

Some of the most common problems generated by NGOs' operations have been highlighted above. Not all the NGOs generate these problems in the same magnitude. What, however, cannot be disputed are the facts that these are latent flaws emanating from operational dynamics and they have real negative effects on grassroot development initiatives. The problems must be addressed urgently.

### **Redeeming Policy Options**

What policy recommendations could be offered at this stage? The disquieting answer is that the problems are still least understood. Any prescription that ends up

distressing or killing the patient does not demonstrate any competence nor service on the part of the practitioner. What is required now is to appreciate the existence of the problems and urgently deepen our knowledge on them.

## Conclusion

The NGOs are truly a new fascinating vista of development. Many have already hailed them as the solution to the long sought, viable alternative development paradigm while others describe them as the third sector of the society after the public and private sectors. The excitement that usually accompanies any new finding is yet to abate to permit a dispassionate study of this wave-making phenomenon. There are indications of latent dysfunctions of NGOs which are scarcely admitted and discussed publicly with gusto as done with the advocated roles of NGOs. Many NGOs themselves are yet to come to terms with this disquieting development. The reluctance is predicated on the hope that the liberating roles assigned to NGOs will ultimately overwhelm whatever distractions may occur. But this can only be a cautious optimism.

While celebrating the arrival of NGOs, it is more pertinent to admit the existence of problems that have occurred as paradoxes of consequence and act on them in order to maximise the benefit of this grassroots strategy. The problems are manageable and require the upgrading of the point of consideration. NGOs originated as a private endeavour and have now grown to address public interests. Their present problems must similarly receive global scholarly attention.

## References

- Abasiokong E M (1982) *Integrated Rural Development in the Third World*, Exposition Press, New York .
- Aina T A (1990) "Understanding the Role of Community Organizations in Environmental and Urban Contexts" in *Environment and Urbanization* 2, 1, 3-6.
- Altungo P (1992) "DFRRI's Direct Participations" in *Daily Times*, Tuesday, September 8, 14.
- Arema J A (1983) "Popular Participation in Rural Development" in *CERES*, 16, 3, 15.
- Ba H (1990) "Village Associations on the River-banks of Senegal: The New Development Actors" in *Voices From Africa* 2, 83-104.

- Brauer D (1992) "Supporting Self-Help Activities in Fighting Mass Poverty" in *Development and Cooperation* 1, 16.
- Brown L D (1992) "The NGO as Bridge: Dealing with Multiple Constituencies" in *Development Forum* 19, 5, 21 .
- Bunzenthall R (1992) "The World Bank's New Anti-Poverty Strategy" in *Development and Cooperation* 1, 12-15.
- Chitiga-Machingauta R M (1990) "Networking Among NGOs in Africa" in *Voices from Africa* 2, 65-69.
- Clark J (1991) *Democratizing Development - The Role of Voluntary Organisations*, Earthscan, London.
- CUSO (1991) *Directory of NGOs in Nigeria*, Ibadan.
- Durning A B (1989) *Action at Grassroots*, Worldwatch Paper 88, Worldwatch Institute, Washington, D C.
- Ebong M O (ed) (1990) *Mobilization of Resources for Rural Development in Nigeria*, Wusen Press, Calabar.
- ECA (1990) *African Charter for Popular Participation in Development*, UNECA, Addis Ababa.
- Ega L A, T K Atala and J M Baba, (eds) (1989) *Developing Rural Nigeria*, NRSA.
- Ekpere J A (1987) "Action Research in Participatory Rural Development, The Case of Badeku, Nigeria" in *Development* 2/3, 115-120.
- Famoriyo S (1989) "Rural Development in Nigeria: An Unfinished "Symphony" in *Developing Rural Nigeria*, by L A Ega, T K Atala and J M Baba, NRSA.
- Hasan A (1990) "Community Groups and Non-Governmental Organizations in Urban Field in Pakistan" in *Environment and Urbanization* 2, 1, 74-86.
- Hyden G (1986) "Enabling Rural Development: Insiders and Outsiders" in *Third World Affairs*, Third World Foundation, London.
- Iyoha, P. E. (1989) "Local Government and Rural Development in Nigeria: The Problem of Political and Economic Powerlessness" in *Developing Rural Nigeria* by L A Ega, T K Atala and J M Bala (eds), NRSA.
- IWTC (The International Women's Tribune Centre) (1989) *Ideas on Proposal Writing and Financial/Technical Assistance*, United Nations, New York.
- Jackson C (1985) "The Kano River Irrigation Project" in *Women's Roles and Gender Differences in Development*, Kumarian Press, West Harford.
- Jamela S(1990) "The Challenges Facing African NGTOs: A Case-Study Approach" in *Voices From Africa* 2, 17-27.
- Kane T (1990) "Grassroots Development: What Role for Voluntary Organizations?" in *Voices From Africa* 2, 9-16.

- Kinguanjui K (ed) (1987) *Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs): Contributions to Development*, Institute of Development Studies, Nairobi.
- Korten D C (1990) *Getting to the 21st Century*, (reproduced by) CUSO Ibadan.
- Lee-Smith D and R E Siren (1991) "New Perspectives on African Urban Management" in *Environment and Urbanization* 3, 1, 23-36.
- Lele U (1975) *The Design of Rural Development: Lessons from Africa*, The John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.
- Mayur R (1991) "Broadening the NGO Role" in *Development Forum* 19, 4, 19.
- Mulwa F (1987) "Participation in Rural Development Kenya" in *Development* 2/3, 107-114.
- Musengimana S (1990) "Victims of their Success. Local NGOs become the Prey of Northern Developers" in *Voices From Africa* 2, 39-44.
- NGIS (1990) "NGOs and Grassroots Development" Special edition *Voices From Africa* 2, United Nations/ NGLS, Geneva.
- NRSA (Nigerian Rural Sociological Association) (1989) *Book of Abstracts:4th Annual Conference on Rural Development Policies in Nigerian ABU*, Zaria
- Ogunna A E C et al (eds) (1990) *Social Mobilization and Community Development Vols I& II*, School Social Sciences, Alvan Ikoku College of Education, Owerri.
- Orewa G O (1979) "Government Grants to Local Governments in Comparative Perspective" in *The New Local Government System in Nigeria*, by L Adamolekun and L Rowlands (eds), Heinemann, Ibadan.
- Patel S J (1987) "A Hopeful Future - Says the Past" in *Development Forum* 25, 3.
- SPRA (1990) *NGO Government Relations*, New Delhi.
- Schuurman, F and T V Naerssen (eds) (1989) *Urban Social Movements in the Third World*, Routledge, London.
- Stamp P (1989) *Technology Genders and Power in Africa*, IDCR, Ottawa.
- The Editors (1991) "Rethinking Local Government - Views from the Third World" in *Environment and Urbanization* 3,1, 3-8.
- Turner B (ed) (1988) *Building Community, A Third World Case Rook*, Habitat Int. Coalition and Building Communities Books, Dumfries.
- Ukpong E A ( 1991 ) *Giving Credit to Rural Poor Women* , Social Science Council of Nigeria Ford Foundation, NISER, Ibadall.
- Ukpong E A (1990) "Community Development: Self-Glory or Self-Reliance" in *Journal of Social Development in Africa* 5,2, 73-85.

- Ukpog E A (1989) "The Repercussions of Policy Misplacement on Rural Development" in *Developing Rural Nigeria* by L A Ega, T K Atala and J M Baba (eds), NRSA.
- United Nations (1988) *Implementing Sustainable Development* UN/NGLS, New York.
- Verhelst T G (1990) *No Life Without Roots: Culture Development*, Zed Books, London.
- Williams S K T (1979) *Rural Development in Nigeria*, University of Ife Press, Ile-Ife.