

NGOs and advocacy:

how well are the poor represented?

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A growing number of non-government organisations (NGOs), North and South, have intensified their advocacy work in an attempt to surmount the constraints placed on their development efforts by the global powers that be — both economic and political — which they allege serve interests other than those of the poor. They have come to the sad realisation that, although they have achieved many micro-level successes, the systems and structures that determine power and resource allocations — locally, nationally, and globally — remain largely intact. Therefore, they need to find ways to ‘scale up’ their influence upon these determinants, so that their small-scale successes have greater and more lasting impact (Sutherns, 1996).

Until the 1980s, greater impact was thought to come about through replicating successful projects, or what Clark (1992) refers to as the ‘additive’ approach. However, many strategy-minded NGOs find expansion by replication too slow and resource-stretching, especially as those restricted resources are declining. They seek to move into the ‘faster lane’ of positive and strategic social change by influencing attitudes, policies, and practices of the decision-makers at critical levels (op. cit.). In their advocacy work, such NGOs ‘have assumed the role of ambassadors for the World’s poor’ (op. cit., p. 195). They see part of their mission as being to represent the political concerns of the poor, injecting the voice of the traditionally voiceless into international decision-making, facilitating the two-way flow of information, and helping to make the world’s political and economic institutions more broadly accountable.

However, achievements by NGOs in these areas are, at best, mixed. Some do argue that enormous successes have been won. Caldwell (1990), for example, contends that ‘the growth of NGOs during the past century has changed the character of international relations, broadening their scope, multiplying the number of participants, and sometimes outflanking the formal protocols of international

diplomacy'. The North–South Institute would seem to agree when it argues that the education and advocacy role of Canadian NGOs over 15 years may have been their most significant activity and contribution, having had a more lasting effect than the millions of dollars they used in programmes in the developing world in the same period (op.cit., p.7).

According to Clark (op.cit., p.197), the combined influence of NGOs and public opinion has initiated major policy changes by Northern governments on several issues, including the production of a code of conduct for the marketing of baby milk, the drafting of an international essential drugs list, concerted action on international environmental issues such as global warming and rain-forest destruction, and affording special debt-relief to the poorest countries. Edwards (1993, p.166) adds to this list, citing developments in the food régime of refugees and displaced persons, and modifications in 'structural adjustment packages' to take more account of social impact, among others. Quoting Clark, he concludes that 'if it were possible to assess the value of all such reforms, they might be worth more than the financial contributions made by NGOs'.

Edwards, however, is more circumspect, and argues that most achievements have been at the level of detailed policy and/or on issues where NGOs have not encountered strong interest-group pressures. According to him, little progress has been made at the level of ideology and global systems. Furthermore, progress on more fundamental issues, such as the conservation of the environment and the impact of structural adjustment on the poor *en bloc*, appears less impressive on closer inspection. While there have been superficial responses, the basic ideology and structures have remained largely intact. Where changes have occurred, they may have been damaging in their impact on women and children. And there is no conclusive evidence that changes have been due to NGO pressure, except in a few instances. Finally, 'NGOs have failed to build an international movement for development' (Edwards, p.167).

The new division of labour

To enhance the effectiveness of their advocacy, NGOs have evolved a new division of labour. Northern NGOs are relinquishing the more operational roles to concentrate on ideas, research, empowerment, and networking (Clark, 1992). They are increasingly focusing their efforts on development education, advocacy, and information flows, and challenging policies of their governments and of the corporations and

multilateral institutions that are perceived to block, undermine, or co-opt 'genuine' development initiatives. They are leaving the 'hardware' — the time-bound, geographically fixed projects, such as building schools or health centres, or installing oil mills and so on — to their Southern counterparts. They are also assigning to these the advocacy task of addressing the forces emanating from the national or sub-national political economy. Northern NGOs prefer to concentrate on forces of an international character, such as the structure of the world trading system, financial and investment flows, energy consumption, technological innovation, and intellectual property, and the policies of multilateral and bilateral donor agencies. 'The increasing internationalization of decision-making in economic and political fields, and the limited accountability of global institutions, have increased the power of these interests' (Edwards, p.163) and made the task very urgent. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that most NGOs are still relatively weak on advocacy, not yet having the stature, expertise, and reputation to match their capacities to deliver material assistance.

Sutherns views the need for the new division of labour as arising from a commitment to local empowerment: '[w]hatever division of labour is considered optimal will be grounded in our fundamental values and beliefs about development ... A commitment to local empowerment will lead us to organize ourselves in such a way as to affirm that the burden of responsibility for development in the South lies with indigenous NGOs', adding the punch-line '... no matter how poorly managed or ill-experienced they may currently be. Strengthening the competencies of Southern NGOs means Northern NGOs moving away from a directly operational approach.'

The decision of Northern NGOs to relinquish the directly operational role to their Southern counterparts may be strategic, but it certainly is not altogether voluntary. Southern NGOs have for years been calling for it. They have been highly critical of Northern NGOs for being operational, and have long pushed to be given the funds and left to do the job.

Underlying this separation of roles seems to be the assumption that Southern NGOs more effectively hear and represent the authentic voices of the poor, while Northern NGOs are better able to articulate — in sufficiently sophisticated language — their concerns to Northern governments, multinational corporations, and global institutions. The law of comparative advantage is thus employed.

Southern NGOs: the authentic voice of the poor?

Southern NGOs have made many positive local-level advocacy-type contributions. As one respondent to the draft of this article wrote:

we have ... to acknowledge the great efforts and the remarkable accomplishments of (S) NGOs, as part of civil society, over the last decade, especially when we have to consider the political and cultural constraints they had to struggle with. The role they are playing, contributing to the democratization process in Africa, the recent changes of family and customary laws (marriage, inheritance, child custody) in many countries; and their contribution to the reshaping of state vis-à-vis society relations on the continent is worth pointing out. (personal communication)

However, uncritically to equate Southern NGOs with the voice of the poor could be somewhat misleading. Another respondent — a senior staff member of an international NGO — put it thus:

There is the danger of assuming that Southern NGOs necessarily speak for the poor and the marginal. This is a matter which is sometimes avoided out of politeness or fear of offending (S)NGO colleagues. Listening to those on the margins requires a stretch for anyone who has become part of the 'development set'. It is harder when based in the North, but even when working for an NGO in the South, there are many filters, barriers and distractions. How to genuinely listen and represent (as opposed to speaking for) different poor communities is a significant challenge for all NGOs. (personal communication)

Even for Southern NGOs, poorer people are, for a start, hard to reach. Chambers (1993, p.28) argues that:

they are typically unorganized, inarticulate, often sick, seasonally hungry, and quite frequently dependent on local patrons. They are less educated, less in contact with communications, less likely to use government services, and less likely to visit outside their home area ... They are relatively invisible, especially the women and children ... Visitors could easily spend a week in a village without either seeing or speaking to the poorer of its inhabitants; and without ever entering one of the colonies where many of the poorest live, visitors tend to see, meet, and interact with, only the more influential and better off rural people.

We can quote the example of some villages in Kabale in south-western Uganda which the author recently visited. There, NGOs are little known. In fact, only one — World Vision, which runs the Rukiga Area Development Project — is resident and operational. NGOs are not evenly or systematically distributed in geographical terms. Rather, there are pockets of concentration and competition in some areas, but in many others NGOs are virtually absent. There are, however, a number of community-based organisations (CBOs) in Kabale as elsewhere, stretcher (*engozi*) groups, *Biika-Oguze* (savings and credit) groups, and digging groups. CBOs are working throughout Uganda (Nyamugasira, 1995) and are making substantial contributions in forging community solidarity, uplifting the human spirit, promoting togetherness, and helping to combat the feelings of helplessness that poverty can induce.

CBOs are, however, primarily a coping mechanism. They cannot encompass everybody, and often the poorest do not belong and do not voluntarily participate. CBOs are typically functional, addressing one specific need at a time. People are simply preoccupied by the struggle for survival and do not have time to think about longer-term objectives. In the area visited, there was little evidence of CBOs interacting to develop any semblance of a common advocacy strategy. Neither did the author find any systematic gathering of information for such purposes by the operational NGO. On the whole, CBOs are too small and localised to have an impact on poverty reduction, let alone on its elimination. They do not add value to what the poor already do, for example by encouraging the planting of high-value crops to maximise effort. Recent research into improved crops and better markets is simply inaccessible to them. And neither NGOs nor government bodies are effectively bringing these services to the people.

Even *in loco*, Southern NGOs can, at times, be a poor imitation of and often distort the voices of this 'silent' mass. All NGOs tend to be self-appointed, and neither consult nor give feedback to their constituencies. As Sutherns (op.cit., p.5) puts it, the people 'have no independent voice or authority over the NGOs in their midst'. In fact, NGOs rarely have constituencies which have mandated them as their advocates. Rather, NGOs have often created their own abstract constituencies; are socialised in the value systems and thought patterns of the global élite; and project their own construct of the issues purported to be those of the poor, while they consciously or unconsciously protect their own interests and those of their kind. It is not a question of Northern versus Southern NGOs, as is often portrayed: it is the poor versus both.

The bottom line

With all due respect, many Southern NGOs do not qualify as 'indigenous', in that they are not born out of the situations in which the poor live. Rather, they are modelled on the Northern NGOs who founded and/or fund them, often with strings attached. Consequently, they feel accountable more to the North than to the local poor, whose values and aspirations it is hard to prove that they represent. Indeed, they seem to be more concerned with their own survival and advancement. In situations where poor people still walk bare-foot, for example, their purported NGO representatives will insist on the latest four-wheel drive vehicles and so are necessarily biased to roads and urban areas. Many are thoroughly foreign, with all the trappings of the aid industry, and can be accused of patronising the poor. They love status and are committed to maintaining the *status quo* so long as it works in their favour. They have weak management structures, as well as problems of vision and accountability in relation to their local-level partners.

This situation will not get any better simply by Northern NGOs' delegating more development responsibility to their Southern counterparts. It will be improved only through the genuine search for viable alternatives. The good news is that the NGO sector has become a growth industry. The bad news is that this growth has spawned a multitude of small, localised organisations which are often invisible and ineffectual and have little influence on local or national development processes. This truth must be faced. In our view, a relinquishing of operational roles by Northern NGOs risks being an abdication of their responsibilities to the poor.

The poor need effective organising, and need to be perhaps more aggressive in order to be competitive and more efficient. Southern NGOs have little track-record in high-level organising, constrained as they are by inherited shortcomings in this realm. The capacity to organise independently was destroyed during the long period of colonialism and neo-colonialism. The poor need access to capital, technologies, and markets. Indeed, the very term 'South' is almost synonymous with their absence, as if they were intrinsically incompatible. What the poor do not need is pity, exploitation, or patronising; they already endure more than their fair share of these. Their genuine partner is one who adds value to what they are already doing. NGOs should perhaps concentrate less on projecting their supposed altruism and work harder to develop more of the appropriately selfish interest that spurs and drives people's (including poor people's) entrepreneurship. Aid must be run on sound business

principles of measurable efficiency and effectiveness, even in respect of qualitative parameters. For this, NGO philosophy has to change. A world is passing away, leaving a fine line between myth and reality in terms of what Southern NGOs can and cannot do. There is value and strength in being interdependent, if the terms of this interdependence are equitable — a view that is now beginning to emerge from the South.

Northern NGOs: chasing an advocacy agenda

Northern NGOs also need to get their priorities right in defining their agendas. Agendas for advocacy should grow out of action and practical development experience, not from the minds of thinkers in the North, however brilliant these may be (Edwards *op.cit.*, pp.168, 173). For when government policy-makers are challenged by advocates from the North, their line of attack tends to be to question these advocates' mandate to speak for the poor. There is a need to rise to such challenges, for the real strength of NGOs lies in their simultaneous access to grassroots experience in the South, and to the decision-makers in the North.

By the same token, Northern NGOs must be held accountable for the advocacy agenda they pursue. Otherwise, information flows between field and Northern headquarters may be weakened, because field-staff do not feel part of one system with common objectives, driven by and supportive of their own work. Without a constant supply of high-quality information, advocacy cannot be successful. But if the desire is to focus attention on the opinions of the traditionally voiceless, then their voice must be clearly heard before their message can be clearly articulated. This voice is constantly changing. However, if Northern NGOs are still relatively weak in advocacy, then Southern NGOs are even more so, while the linkage between them and the local or grassroots organisations who are in direct touch with the people on whose behalf they purport to speak is weaker still. NGOs need to stop being preoccupied with their own narrowly interpreted bureaucratic mandates and get down to the business of seeking out and listening to the poor in order to secure a mandate to speak clearly and with conviction on their behalf. The poor live in the so-called culture of silence from which they must be liberated. The first step is, then, to meet them at their own level before they will speak.

Doing so must mean seeking out all the sections of society, in particular women and children. Gender-awareness campaigns have shown us that there is a marked difference in the perspectives of women and men, arising from women's lack of social, economic, and political power. What is not yet emphasised enough is the perspective of children.

For example, as a result of genocide in Rwanda in 1994, a new phenomenon called ‘child-headed households’ has appeared, with families being headed by children as young as 10 years of age, of whom 75 per cent are girls. Prior to the genocide, the child in Rwandese society occupied a central and key position. Although children-headed households are a reality, it is one still not acknowledged by most Rwandese in their thinking and planning. The children say that they are not involved in making the important decisions affecting the nation or even their own well-being. Now, according to a qualitative needs-assessment study conducted by World Vision and supported and publicised by UNICEF, these children feel detached from the community, to which they desperately want to return. But they are becoming resigned to their situation. For example, when children are asked to draw pictures to show how they feel, they sometimes draw pictures of people with no mouths, signifying that they no longer want to speak, because they feel that no-one is listening. Yet they also argue that they have something to say that no-one can say for them. These children have latent abilities which can bring benefit to those communities who choose to listen to them.

There are other examples of children in need of a voice: those abducted by the Lord’s Resistance Army in northern Uganda, those taken into prostitution in many countries of Asia and Latin America, and more recently in Europe and Africa, AIDS orphans in East and Central Africa, and many other examples. All this implies that there are different and sometimes even conflicting needs and perspectives among the poor, even when they are united in their poverty. Various groups and sub-groups have very different stakes in the *status quo*, as they do in engendering change. Priorities for advocacy and other appropriate forms of support can emerge only if we listen, so that we gain enough trust to enable the different groups to ‘articulate’ their needs. While the issues are urgent, nevertheless we must hasten slowly, ensuring that we have not left behind those very sectors for whom we purport to speak.

Redefining partnership

Rather than ‘specialise’ in different roles, NGOs North and South would do better to revisit the concept of true partnership. A first element must be making space for each other within their traditional domains. If advocacy must grow out of, and be informed by, grassroots experience, Northern NGOs can ill afford to abandon the operational arena. It may be their only way to retain an ‘authentic’ voice, and hence there continues to

be plenty of room for them to co-exist in partnership with their Southern counterparts. To hear and join in with these ‘authentic’ voices, however, they also need to go beyond their partners and counterparts to the people to whom these voices belong. Relying on second-hand information is inadequate, especially as this is filtered and necessarily distorted. For too long, the sources of information have been the small select group of intermediaries who largely share the Northern NGOs’ basic philosophy and objectives. But these do not necessarily represent the poor in any significant sense (Edwards, op.cit.). The need to go to the people themselves may call for a greater rather than a diminished presence, albeit one of a different kind. There is a call for a new generation of partnership, or ‘joint ventures’, to use the language of modern commerce.

Allowing Northern NGOs to have greater access to the authentic grassroots experiences must, however, be reciprocated; Northern NGOs should not seek to monopolise access to Northern-based institutions. Representatives from the South must also be afforded unrestricted access into these enclaves of power so that they can engage with the relevant actors directly. Ultimately, the people must represent themselves, and all NGOs — Northern or Southern — need to internalise this way of thinking. After all, most of the global institutions do not belong exclusively to the North. They are universal, and are only housed in New York, Washington, London, Geneva, or Paris. Conceptually, we need to view them as belonging to all of us, which is how they too must learn to see themselves. They do not represent just a Northern NGO constituency; NGOs and people from the South need no ‘permission’ to engage constructively with these institutions, but simply require certain barriers, such as language, to be removed.

In short, we should aspire to a joint venture of effective engagement with the political and economic powers that control and allocate the world’s resources, and not get excessively concerned about interfering in each other’s supposed constituencies. A free unhindered flow of, interaction with, and access to authentic opinions and experience in the South and to policy institutions in the North and the South is what one could call genuine partnership. We believe that this is the alternative to the current division of labour in which Southern NGOs literally do development ‘hardware’ in the South and Northern NGOs do development ‘software’ in the North. The ultimate objective against which success must be measured is that the people’s voice increases, while that of NGOs themselves declines. The litmus test is that this

withdrawal becomes voluntary on the part of the NGOs. For the goal is not to build up NGO empires but to integrate the poor into the global mainstream in a manner that maximises their benefits and minimises their exploitation.

In search of 'linguistics'

Whether from North or South, advocates must obtain the people's mandate and regularly return to have it renewed. At best they must have twin citizenship, or be what Chambers (1993) calls 'new professionals', and Bourdieu refers to as the 'new middle class'. This is not the monopoly or preserve of people from one hemisphere. An advocate from the North should not be written off just because of geographical origins. S/he could, with some effort, be as effective, even 'authentic', as someone from the South, especially if s/he spends quality time with and has the right attitude towards those who are poor. The poor are universal. (A better criterion for carrying out genuine advocacy might be that the 'advocate' goes to the poor and immerses herself or himself in their lives, value systems, and thought patterns and regularly returns, so as to be sure that s/he keeps in touch.)

We believe that the poor, in spite of the supposed proliferation of Southern NGOs, do still lack 'linguistics', a term used in West Africa which here would describe a capacity to interpret the reality of the poor, and translate it into conceptual frameworks and policies that are intelligible to the outside world but retain the original meaning. Exploiters have never been limited by language barriers, so why should do-gooders be so limited?

Interim representation

Interim representation, the duration of which is jointly defined, is another approach to genuine advocacy. Ultimately, the poor must be the ones to make their voices heard at the highest levels possible, and they have the potential to do so. 'The ability to analyze life situations, structures of society and development processes is not the preserve of intellectuals or development professionals. Individuals and communities possess these abilities in varying degrees ... A transformed people need no outside representation' (Muchina, 1995, p.4). This is the ultimate in capacity-building: a matter of emancipation, working oneself out of one's job.

Part of capacity-building is to enable advocates to acquire the ability to disempower themselves in order to empower others: self-disempowerment. Muchina suggests that beyond ten years, expatriates (who see themselves as interim representatives) cease to enhance others

and start to perpetuate themselves. Muchina is brave in assigning a timeframe to a process, but she speaks for many who feel that open-ended timeframes are unacceptable.

‘Linguists’ in this sense need not lose their identity completely. Rather than attempt to identify with their target group by adopting a similar and literal external social style (where they are obvious misfits), external advocates need to realise that they can instead adopt the attitude of ‘accompaniers’, for which all they require is respect for their partners. They can act as sounding boards, asking the kinds of question that enable people to identify the real issues and in turn formulate their questions to those in power. The accompaniers can be there as people discuss these questions with the policy-makers. They can also be there to help them evaluate their achievements and set higher objectives. They can use their contacts to gain access for them and give them confidence when walking in the corridors of power, which can indeed be daunting to the uninitiated. But they must never lose sight of the fact that they themselves are not the actors. They only accompany and act as temporary brokers.

Looking to the future: alternative approaches to capacity-building

Critically analysed, capacity-building as we now know and interpret it often results in further alienating the advocates from the grassroots by coaching them to speak the ‘language’ of the advocacy target while ignoring that of the grassroots. Genuine capacity-building must incorporate an aspect of ‘reversal’ if, as Edwards (*op.cit.*, p.174) argues, we need better ways of linking local-level action and analysis with international advocacy. To achieve this, we need the ‘linguists’ and accompaniers who can enter into the reality of the poor and interpret or translate it into the sophisticated conceptual frameworks and detailed policies intelligible to the relevant policy-makers, without compromising the authenticity of the original views.

‘Linguistics’ must acquire the capacity to cross social class boundaries for the ‘[v]alue systems of those with access to power and those far removed from such access cannot be the same. The viewpoint of the privileged is unlike that of the underprivileged. In the matter of power and privilege, the difference between the “haves” and “have-nots” is not merely quantitative, for it has far-reaching psychological and ideological implications’ (*Development in Practice* Editorial, 6/4, p.291). As we have already argued, the problem goes deeper than North versus South: ‘[C]ultural differences play an important part ... However, in the

process of communication, intracultural differences are more difficult to bridge than intercultural differences ... it would be rather naive to assume that because they [local elite], work in their own country, (they) will communicate as equals with “target groups” (Vink, 1993, p.25). We need ‘linguistics’ from both the North and South, learning together to listen and correctly interpret the voices at both ends. Presently, good ‘linguistics’ are few and far between.

Clement, commenting on a draft of this article, argued that churches may be well placed to play a ‘linguistics’-grooming role, since they are, through their missionaries and priests, close to the poor and to some extent living almost like them. This is exemplified by the fact that there are numerous examples of leaders in Africa and elsewhere who were identified as potential leaders by the church and groomed accordingly. An ‘incarnational’ development approach is highly commended, especially if ultimately people can then rise beyond their current limitations. Unfortunately, in the case of Rwanda, for example, the church divided itself along ethnic lines and, instead of advocating for the poor, identified with those in power and now finds itself too divided and compromised to play a meaningful role in social reintegration, mutuality, and cohesion. Even now, when children speak of support they receive from family members, neighbours, churches, local associations, and local authorities as well as international NGOs, the churches fare poorly, rated only a shade better than local associations. (According to the children, the greatest assistance is received from international NGOs and neighbours, while the least comes from family members.) This type of behaviour is consistent with the kind of misrepresentation of the South by the South, of the serious gap between rhetoric and reality that is rarely exposed. It is reminiscent of tribal and religious wars elsewhere, where elephants fight and the grass gets trampled. The churches’ grooming of future African leaders has, nevertheless, much to recommend it.

There is room for NGOs today to carry out a similar role, and equip and facilitate good ‘pro-people’ candidates to enter strategic representative forums, such as parliament. Although they may risk being accused of exceeding their mandates, unless good people are encouraged and supported to enter politics, ‘other interests’ will continue to dominate and misrepresent those of ordinary people.

World Vision Uganda developed a programme which is currently being successfully replicated in Tanzania, and serves as a good example of what can be achieved. Well-qualified university graduates are offered

an opportunity to live in remote villages, and to research and initiate simple activities as a way to get to know the community well. After a short orientation, they are abandoned there with no 'basic' facilities as they knew them. World Vision enters a contract with the community to 'facilitate' these volunteers. In some cases, the houses provided are open shells with no doors and windows. Often there is no latrine in the compound. Beyond a little pocket money, these Technical Associates (TAs) have no regular salary. For the first few days, they are scared and want to run away, back to urban 'civilisation'. A few actually do so, but many stay and become part of the community.

The TA Programme has proven to be an effective process of dialogue, of mutual discovery. Volunteers acquire 'community degrees' in addition to their formal university degrees. Many are surprised at how their cherished university degrees pale into insignificance next to the experience gained by living in the villages. TAs also add value to communities which, through admiration for their new 'son' or 'daughter', are inspired to set higher horizons for their own children.

The TA Programme also builds capacity for future leadership. The process needs to be made more clearly focused as a way of grooming leadership and engaging in authentic advocacy. If there is a critical mass of such people, the voice of the poor will begin to be heard. If a good proportion keep the contract, in ten years they will be the policy-makers in their respective countries. NGOs which invest in this kind of process are building invaluable policy capital.

Conclusion: learning from liberalisation and globalisation

Generally speaking, Africa as a whole is not part of the global agenda-setting mechanism. It does not in any significant way bring values or systems to the global table. It takes what is given: it has no authentic advocates. Africa is disenfranchised. In fact, one respondent during the research for this article commented that 'sadly, Africa's voice is absent in most global discussions. I would imagine that little interest was given to African perspectives at the recent meeting of the World Trade Organisation. Similarly, when I was at the Annual Meeting of the World Bank and IMF, although there were many African representatives present, there were no real alternative voices from Africa' (Commins, personal communication). There is no distinct African voice in global forums. 'Representatives' for Africa either sing the tune of the global elite or simply occupy space at the table. There is an urgent need for

NGOs, governments, and global institutions to change the way in which they present and represent Africa. This is a real challenge in a world that is seemingly indifferent to the continent's future.

This is not a time for 'business as usual'. The lack of distinct African voices is neither the creation nor the fault of NGOs; but one wonders whether NGOs have fared any better than governments. Have they sufficiently challenged the *status quo*? As the burden may fall on NGOs to push for this, change must necessarily begin at home. It is ironic that NGOs — the proponents of 'speaking truth to power' — are often unable to speak the truth to themselves. By obstructing such essential feedback, NGOs prove how big is the gap between rhetoric and reality. It is difficult to strengthen the competencies of NGOs if they take offence at the truth. Related to this, another respondent raised the issue of NGO ownership:

[O]ne of the major issues in this discussion is who owns the NGOs. Who makes the final decision as to the leadership of the NGOs, especially in Africa. Also who pays for the NGO's existence. Often staff who hold radical views or 'revolutionary' ideas never reach the top. They are perceived to be difficult to work with, a threat. They are an embarrassment to the donors. Obviously the voice of such an NGO is muffled. It is a poor imitation of the people's voice. Gagging the voice of upcoming leaders, often the brightest and the best, failure to tolerate dissent, can certainly have far-reaching adverse effects. (Pappetta, personal communication)

Unfortunately, such influence, whether by remote or direct control, is disempowering. With their own houses in order, however, NGOs that survive can take leadership in giving Africa a voice.

Secondly, NGOs should take a cue from the paradigm of global economic liberalisation which challenges us to adopt new ways of thinking, new ways of doing business. It represents aggressiveness, competition, dynamism, and other survival strategies. Southern NGOs cannot be immune from this, and cannot develop a capacity to represent the poor through holding on to the 'protectionism' of the past; old forms of propping up NGOs in the South need to be re-examined and transformed. They should not settle for being handed responsibility for development in the South merely because they are Southern. They must be open to competition and be aggressive but business-like, proving that they can deliver. They must find out from the people they claim to represent how well they are doing. They must seek and accept feedback, including constructive criticism, if they are to continue to be relevant.

Maybe some must also accept death or at least retrenchment in order to rise again in a better and more effective form.

Finally, we must seek to empower the poor to act as their own advocates, so that when speaking for them we avoid giving the impression that someone somewhere owes them a living, and that this someone is most probably the government, primarily their own, but also governments of rich industrialised countries. It is this tendency that seeks answers from out there, not from within the people themselves. We in the NGO sector have not promoted, by our own example, the entrepreneurial spirit, creativity, and initiative inherent in people who are poor. (The children in Rwanda accuse us similarly.) We have demanded more and more aid, which in general has been badly administered and is now dwindling or being withheld. The new paradigm insists that the poor are primarily responsible for finding ways out of their immediate problems, though we are well aware that the perpetual struggle to survive is immensely tiring. But it is dead fish that swim downstream. Needs are not necessarily rights, in the sense that someone else has the obligation to provide for them. The poor need to demand accountability from their leaders who take loans on their behalf. They must be vigilant against corruption, a form of mis-allocation of national resources. But they must also create wealth and safeguard it. Ideally, inter-dependency in advocacy will mean that poor communities who ‘pull themselves up by their own bootstraps’ do not get repressed for doing so. Instead, there should be sufficient solidarity to fight even powerful adversaries.

To enable the poor to engage in their own advocacy, we should encourage global institutions to release resources to be used to finance wealth-creation by the poor themselves. We must form partnerships with, among others, the business community, and, where feasible, commit resources to attract its investment to areas where poor people live. We must engage the business community to pay decent prices for labour and primary products, but also facilitate the poor to produce high-quality products. The poor must find a niche in global trade, but must also appreciate the need to save in order to invest, to forgo consumption today in order to accumulate, grow, and so afford more tomorrow. In short, the challenge is to make trade liberalisation work for the poor (even though it is now seen to be ‘anti-poor’, notwithstanding some small gains made by a temporary opening up of more job prospects for women — albeit often in insecure, part-time, low-paid, and low-status work). We need to exploit the revolution in communication, opening up the world of the poor.

For example, through radio programmes in their own languages, poor people can know the world market prices for their products. They can then organise to get the highest prices. It is in such activities that NGOs should be investing to make the poor more dynamic, aggressive, and competitive; so that they bring themselves into the economic and political mainstream and so widen their overall opportunities. This is what will make it possible to break the vicious cycle of poverty. We must believe it and make the poor believe in themselves. In supporting them, economic advocacy perhaps has to take precedence over political advocacy on the NGO agenda. Otherwise the poor, and perhaps NGOs along with them, will continue to be marginalised in the emerging dynamic of the global economy.

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