NGO Partnerships for Sustainable Urban Development

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Walking along a slum or squatter settlement - one is frequently confronted by the image of a fine two-storied brick house with paneled doors contrasting right across the street with a low tin-and-asbestos structure. There are many reasons for this apparent contrast, but one aspect that repeatedly comes up as a sort of common denominator is access to resources, both material and non-material. The power to be able to shape one's own future (and habitat) is a critical feature that underpins much of interventions and actions in habitat development today.

This paper lays out a framework within which such 'empowerment' of the citizenry can take place by discussing the roles of non governmental organizations (NGOs).

NGOs and Associations can be broadly defined as groupings of individuals and institutions who come together around a specific theme, subject, philosophy or profession. Such NGOs can be regional, national or global. The key resource that NGOs bring with them is the collective knowledge and wisdom of its members, who are nodes in vast, in many cases global, networks.

What are the characteristics of NGOs in general that have made them ideal and popular 'agents of change'? It is their ability to experiment freely with innovative approaches and, if necessary, to take risks. It is their flexibility in adapting to local situations and responding to local needs and therefore able to develop integrated, as well as sectoral projects. It is their good rapport with people, rendering micro-assistance to very poor people as those who are most in need, and tailor assistance to their needs. It is their ability to communicate at all levels, from the neighbourhood to the top levels of government. It is their ability to facilitate active participation and to recruit both experts and highly motivated staff with fewer restrictions than the government.

Such advantages enable NGOs to reach people and communities far more effectively than government departments or programmes. But their activities and actions are few and far in between. There is a pressing need to understand the forces and processes that shape the organization and operations of NGOs in order to scale-up and replicate their 'people-centered' actions.

These would essentially constitute a compendium of best practices or 'inspiring ideas' that would be the target for replication and diffusion, and has to be built into the working of an NGO. Of particular significance are the best practices and ideas that emerge from the community itself. An enabling environment that fosters such local innovations and solutions to local problems would incorporate some of the following features:

- Building the innovative capacity of local leaders and organizations
- Supporting Experimentation.
- Identifying and document innovative approaches
- Disseminating innovative approaches in target areas
- "Celebrating" and publicizing innovations internationally
- Creating opportunity for peer-to-peer exchange
- Creating a forum for policy makers to learn about the innovations and consider opportunities for upscaling them or incorporating them into policy.
- Bringing together multisectoral groups around common problems or points of collaboration so that they may collectively generate, implement or replicate innovations.
- Creating recognition for the adapter so that he/she can feel motivation similar to that experienced by the original innovator.

In terms of concrete actions and projects, this would entail three broad approaches: publicize, interact, and support:

- Publicize: awards programmes, press campaigns, placards, posters, notice boards, media exercises (photographs, video, films, articles), non-formal activities: street dramas, newsletters, bulletins, documentation of case studies etc.

- Interact: formal and informal community group meetings, forums/workshops, site visits, interviews, etc.
- Support: minigrants, internships, training in leadership and other organizational/operational skills, surveys and other means of information gathering etc.

It is in the process of a NGO's interaction with communities that offers the greatest scope of increasing empowerment of communities geared towards sustainable living. Traditional approaches and roles towards habitat has been that of charity and relief. There is a clear need to move away from this reactive role to one that is interactive and proactive. This is explained in Figure 1. There has been a gradual shift/move of NGOs away from 'reactive' roles defined by relief and charity to that of 'interactive' roles which have emphasized communication as a tool for mediation. A further extension has been to 'proactive' roles of consultation, with information being a key resource in the process of support, documentation and dissemination of initiatives taken up by an 'enlightened' community. All three roles of social welfare, mediation, and consultation, in fact, go together as three facets of the same approach towards community development and empowerment.

Organizational independence and operational self-sustainability of an NGO can be achieved by an emphasis on their mediation and consultation roles, but without disregarding the social welfare role.

- The Social Welfare Role - where relief and charity are key actions. NGOs in this role can be seen as initiating internal programmes and projects. Major secondary actors who would support the NGO in this role include international donor agencies and other charity institutions.
- The Mediatory Role - where communication as a skill is important for development and social action. NGOs in this role can be seen as participating or taking up external programmes and projects. Major secondary actors include government agencies and other formal institutions.
- The Consultative Role - where support, documentation and dissemination of information and expertise is critical. NGOs in this role can be seen as working in collaborative programmes. Local experts/professionals/resource persons play major secondary roles here.

The true creativity of a NGO, lies in creating networks of information, innovation and interaction which enables people to communicate, to share and to receive, effecting positive social change in the long run. Such networks would -

- bring people together locally and globally, and focus attention on key issues for discussion, deliberation and consensus.
- organize communication and information relevant to communities needs and problems, in a prompt manner.
- require the involvement, support and participation of a broad base of citizens, including community activists, leaders, sponsors and other concerned individuals.
- include in its functioning, the concerns of low-income groups, women and minorities - who otherwise find it difficult to voice their problems and needs.

Such networks are highly consistent with the importance that is placed on grass-roots innovations which solve problems and satisfy needs of the local community, and instill/strengthen a sense of ownership and belonging to its members. Networks are therefore vibrant forces capable of building on the knowledge they have accumulated, and adapt to a rapidly changing world and community needs.

How can a successful global network be built, which will serve the needs of a diverse and constantly changing environment of/for communities? Global networks need to aim high, by working towards real and positive social change. It has to serve the pressing, local needs of a community. It has to engage the broader community - the 'community outside the community' and redefine the quality and quantity of support that can be provided. The networks have to be self-sustaining and independent of external funding. The modalities of operation within the network need to be strong and open - incorporating the parameters of growth and scale in it. Information provided on these networks should add value to raw data widely available by filtering and structuring it and ensuring broad access to all potential users in a user-friendly environment.

The significance of this can be understood by the fact that a strong and effective network is the bedrock of strong and effective participation. It is through such networks that communities and NGOs alike can voice their concern, learn from others and share their knowledge. More importantly, it allows for collective decision-making by inviting and incorporating comments and suggestions, as well as communicating decisions and policies to all users in a two-way flow.

NGO views on NGO Networking

NGOs in India, queried on their opinion on why NGOs should network among themselves, brought forth the following replies:

> *" ... a good platform to express solidarity among NGOs. Helps to share experiences and expertise to work for common action programmes to create an impact on the policies of the government"*
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> *" ... helps to share problems of development works and solve them. It also helps the groups to be better informed"*
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> *" ... important for collective action for social justice and common causes"*
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> *" ... networking is good and needed to think on similar lines. It supports each other"*
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> *" ... it is a positive structure which promotes smooth running of the organization."*
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> *" ... given the critical context in which India is today and the way the voluntary sector has plunged itself into a water-less ocean, there is a need for immediate networking of a genuine nature."*
>
> *" ... working together for common causes"*
>
> *" ... can achieve change in government policies in favour of low-income groups"*
>
> *" ... essential for developmental activities which implies adoption of technologies, implementation of developmental activities and those which involve procedural implications."*