NGOS IN DEVELOPMENT POLICY

I

BACKGROUND

Thanks to the organisers for giving me the chance to share my observations and experiences with NGOs in Bangladesh from a German point of view. Since I am neither a researcher, nor a scientist, nor a development expert, nor a politician, my views on the subject "NGOs in Development Policy" may be quite limited.

Although being part of a religious institution, the Catholic Church, my concern with development issues has only humanitarian and social reasons. However, I am convinced that religious-spiritual leaders and religious institutions should be related to the demand for basic needs by the people and to their struggle for survival and for a human future.

The aim of all religions is peace. Peace emerges from spiritual inspirations and sources as well as from equal distribution of material goods. Thus development activities as a process of socio-economic transformation, as I see it,
NGOS IN DEVELOPMENT POLICY

requires spiritual motivators in a holistic sense, peacemakers, non-partisan and non-profit-orientated monitors.

Starting in 1975, I have been associated with about 50 small NGOs in 7 regions of Bangladesh, most of them advocating integrated development approach, which responds to all basic needs of the people. Dipshikha in the north, Tarango, a women’s organisation, Bangla-German Sampreetti (BGS), Annesha Foundation and Anando – all national NGOs – are the main NGOs I am associated with. My role from the beginning was motivation of people to discover their own potentials, facilitating training for people and NGO co-workers, conceptualising and monitoring NGO activities and communicating with donors mainly in Germany. Anando, the latest NGO emerging from people’s own initiative advocates rural integrated development, promotion of indigenous multi-traditional culture, protection of environment through solar technology, training of youths for job preparedness, technical skill and small enterprises.

II

NEED OF NGOS IN BANGLADESH

Is there a need for NGOs in Bangladesh? The question is controversial, as development aid in itself is controversial. Bangladesh is a country with an extremely high number of NGOs (23000 NGOs under Social Welfare Development, 1178 under Foreign Donation Registration, 146 foreign NGOs.) About 13% of foreign aid is being allocated to NGOs. For some people, NGOs are the only solution to poverty
alleviation. For others, NGOs are the greatest evil. Some opine that there is an NGO-culture, other think that there is an NGO-disease in Bangladesh. Some feel that the country is flooded by NGOs, others feel great relief by the presence and activities of NGOs. For some, NGOs are the easiest way to get money, for others NGOs are engaged in a hard struggle with great personal sacrifices to assist disadvantaged and exploited people to get their due shares.

Irrespective of controversial issues my observations are as follows:

a. A healthy society or state needs a strong private business sector as well as a vital private sector of social welfare and socio-economic development activities.

b. People's own development initiatives demanding participatory development policies are, in a healthy society, as important as national macro projects and macro structures.

c. Top-to-bottom-development will not lead to a free and just society.

d. Without NGOs, many people in Bangladesh would live in pitiful conditions, in isolation and without human concern or future prospect especially in remote areas.

e. No government in Bangladesh at present can solve, on its own, the many challenges of the society, especially the challenge of poverty alleviation and amelioration of human sufferings.
III

CRITICISM TOWARDS NGOS

NGOs are subject to some criticism such as:

They are preventing radical social changes..., are creating or prolonging relief mentality ..., are lacking professionalism and efficient management...., are interfering into politics and religion........, are making business with the poor ......, are financially intransparent ........, are foreign, imperialistic agents ........, are maintaining monarchic work structures......, are setting up parallel governments etc.

In some cases, some points of these criticisms are true.

Often, however, such criticism emerges from basic mistrust towards NGOs aiming at maintaining status quo and own superiority or autocracy on any level or any sector of the society.

IV

QUESTIONS ON CONCEPT AND IMPACT OF NGOS

It has been observed that NGOs offering exclusively financial, technical or structural assistance are falling short from expected results. Far spread sectoral projects or programmes on credit only or even on education only do not equip the beneficiaries sufficiently to find practical solutions of their socio-economic problems. The credit-alone-policies are coming more and more under criticism since the empowerment of the bank or NGO may be successful. But the people’s empowerment lags far behind.
However, some financial institutions or credit NGOs are considered by foreign donors as ideal NGOs or institutions. There are increasing numbers of reports that indebtedness of the poor is increasing due to micro-credit-programmes since the poor are caught in a spiral of debts which drives them back to the previous money lenders. However, not all credit-NGOs evoke the same trend.

Some giant NGOs intend to impress by their size and financial volumes. Since the credit-NGOs are bound to recruit big number of group members to reach their organisational sustainability, they develop aggressive and crushing attitudes towards other smaller NGOs. Smaller regional NGOs often, however, give better, more human social services to the poor.

V

APPROPRIATE AND VALID CONCEPTS OF NGOS

NGOs are assisting people (mainly in rural communities) in designing their own development concept and in becoming masters of their future. Examples of tangible impact of this concept can be given by Dipshikha under Paul Tigga/Mofakkharul Islam or Banchte Shekha under 1999 Magsaysay awardee Angela Gomes. NGOs with a strictly participatory approach have become active work forces of national development.

The combination of skill training, seed capital for small enterprises and marketing assistance can help dependent people to become self-reliant. Examples are available such as Vocational Training Centre and small enterprises under
In spite of the need of national development policy and projects, many development problems are area or region bound. Solutions in regard to health, hygiene, education, agriculture, environment, business etc. are to be found area or regionwise in the concrete local context. With this aim in mind regional NGOs can play a vital role.

NGOs do not intend to replace government activities but rather solicit each other's responsiveness on a complementary basis. The typical role of NGOs is of innovative nature according to the human and social needs. Successful pilot projects, if possible, with scientific and technological backing, stimulate public awareness and solicit take-over of innovation by the government or by the public. Example given is Dipshikha with its education programme and Anando with its solar project and its promotion of culture along with socio-economic development. "Small is beautiful" – big is necessary – the balance has to be found indeed.

People believe in deeds not in speech. People sooner or later understand very well the motives of NGOs working with them. Ethics of development, honesty and transparency, are fundamental for any kind of lasting progress. NGOs should therefore clearly identify and expose the values of their concept ideology or development philosophy. "Sacred values" are the incontestable dignity of the human person, the social harmony of the community including communal harmony and the environmental natural resources. NGOs, which go against
NGOs, which protect nature, culture and religion in the process of economic transformation and serve the individual as well as the community, are likely to be the most sustainable NGOs.

VI

NGOS IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALISATION

The discovery that the world is becoming one is fascinating. The question is however, if under the pretext of globalisation new divisions are being created and instead of expected growth for all, the poor are becoming even poorer and new zones of poverty are being created. If people are only targeted as customers in a free worldwide market society, the poverty line will become ever sharper towards those citizens who do not have any material purchasing and buying capacity. Globalisation should lead to solidarity of all people.

In this regard NGOs have an ever increasingly important role to play:

a. In denouncing and resisting development policies that led the poor into even more deplorable dependence and misery;

b. In regard to huge chances and challenges of globalisation, the relationship between Government and NGOs (GO-NGO) should become complimentary and supplementary and ever more a relationship of partnership, partners in human and socio-economic progress. It should be a
partnership of mutual confidence and of utilising the strength of the partner in the process;

c. NGO-NGO relation should be improved by sharing openly each other's values and expertise avoiding domination of each other or competing with each other;

d. South-South and regional relationship among NGOs should be strengthened and elaborated;

e. Donors may be requested to support NGOs not only by fund but rather providing new technology, research and infrastructure facilities.

VII
NGOS OF THE FUTURE

one agrees that NGOs shall be needed in the next century as they had been needed in the past in order to respond to people's urgent and basic needs, one can foresee some trends which may shape the profile of the NGOs in the next century. Also conditioning factors of the NGO activities can be slightly foreseen.

a. NGOs of the future principally will depend on the characteristics of governments that come to power.

b. Despite diverse ideologies among NGOs in Bangladesh they all are sharing two common concerns: that of extreme poverty of many citizens and that of enhancing responsiveness of the government towards the needs of the poor. Principally towards these concerns the growing volume of GO-NGO interaction will be directed in the future.
c. New types of NGOs may emerge with a holistic response towards the needs of the poor within the context of nature, culture and religion and with efficient efforts towards economic self-reliance of the poor themselves. The future profile also includes more participatory and democratic work methods within the NGOs, efficient management and transparent finance systems, more self-reliance of the NGO and a certain independence from foreign fund with more concern for culture and ecology.

d. Since donors often see NGOs as "better value for money" and as more poverty focussed, donors will have to assign clearly their role and type of co-operation with non-governmental organisations aiming at transmitting universal human and social values and trade co-operation in a united and likewise divided world.

Environment World Conference in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 where NGOs played an important role declared: Sustainable development depends on successful economies, sufficient social services and unbiased environmental preservation.

I like to add: Sustainable development requires individual and social peace, preservation of indigenous culture and application of human ethics.