



International funding agencies and marginalized sections: reflections on India

Mohammad Reza Iravani

Department of Social Work, Islamic Azad, University Khomeinishahr Branch, Daneshjou Blvd, Iran.

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 31 March 2011;

Received in revised form:

16 May 2011;

Accepted: 24 May 2011;

Keywords

NGO,

Network Associations,

Social service.

ABSTRACT

Reliable NGOs are an extended arm to any Governments. The purpose of this paper is to give an overview of the quantum of foreign aid contributed to Indian development and the role played by International non-Governmental development aid agencies and Bi-lateral and Multi-lateral agencies in this area. The paper also explains the role played by Indian non-Governmental organizations in the poverty alleviation programmed among marginal sections of the Indian society. The paper then examines some of the drawbacks in their aid programmed with special reference to Dalit cause and makes some recommendations to address these drawbacks. However some of the conclusions we have drawn in the paper is based on interaction with many groups and years of experience. Therefore please treat this as a first attempt of a beginning of a wider debate in the months to come.

© 2011 Elixir All rights reserved.

Introduction

International Aid agencies in India: A Retrospective

International NGOs vary greatly in size, approach and focus. Based mainly in the North, most undertake fundraising activities within their own countries and advocacy work at home and internationally. For the majority, India continues to be a priority area for their activities, where they use a variety of working strategies. Some manage their work in India mainly from outside headquarters, while others have non-operational local field offices through which all programmers are monitored. Some international agencies have operational local offices that also run programmers independently of the larger organization and are directly involved in advocacy work. International agencies may specialize in one area, such as on children or on agriculture. While some organizations fund projects directly, others work through Indian funding organizations, or instead of financial support provide technical and institutional expertise. International trust funds granting funds from parent companies profits are also regular supporters of development initiatives.

Official data about the number of international NGOs working in India or the total funds donated to NGOs is scarce. As per recent research carried out by CAF India (Charity Aid Foundation) and VANI (Voluntary Action Network India) there are an estimated 18,000 NGOs in India registered under Foreign Contributions (Regulation) act of 1976 in 1999 to receive foreign money without prior permission. Similarly another 4,000 NGOs were granted temporary permission during the period 1990-98 to receive foreign money. By the end of 1997, the volume of foreign contribution to NGO sector had reached nearly \$568 million (Rs26, 000 million), a growth rate of 643% over the last decade. Sri Satya Sai Centran Trust and Maharishi Ved Vigyan Viswa Vidya Peetham alone received 25% of the contributions. The research shows that only 20% of foreign aid are received by "development NGOs". The European countries were the single largest world donor group contributing two thirds of the total foreign contribution in 1996-97 and another one forth share came from North America (USA and Canada). The high proposition (i.e. about 93%) came from the Organization for Economic Co-operation Development (OECD)

donor group. Germany, which dominated the contribution for long, has been surpassed by the USA, which contributed more than one fifth of the total contribution during 1996-97. Three leading countries, namely, the USA, Germany and the UK, contributed more than half of the foreign contribution.

For the majority of international NGO donors, India continues to be a priority for long-term development programmers due to ample evidence that funds are being used wisely and productively. International developments NGOs are playing an increasingly prominent role in development thinking in India. Over the years they have made significant contributions to poverty alleviation efforts, particularly in the areas of advocacy, gender sensitization, capacity building, and new models of development, networking and north-south exchange programmers. They have a strong influence among the NGOs in India in prioritizing their work and target groups. Because of their proximity to Northern Governments and other international bodies they are in a better position in challenging and influencing their policies. In short they are one of the important players in the field of development in India, in shaping the policies, strategies and programmers of NGOs in India. However, they have also come under criticism for promoting donor driven policies, pushing western ideas on gender, and causing a mushrooming in the number and size of NGOs in certain regions.

NGOs in India: A Reflection

There is no one source of data on the vast spectrum of NGOs in India that provides enough information neither to categories them easily nor to estimate their number. While approximately more than 18,000 NGOs received foreign funds in 1999, many more are legally registered but do not receive foreign money, making them less easy to number. We do know that NGOs are still relatively few in the poorer northern and eastern states, unlike in the southern states, Maharashtra and Gujarat where they have a longer history. Despite this lack of clear information, however, we can group NGOs in India under three broad headings:

i) Charity approach/social service: Examples include running schools and hospitals, eye camps, relief during emergencies, old

age homes, child sponsorship hostels, etc. Many of the church run programmers fall under this category.

ii) Development approach: These are NGOs who are involved in long term development, social justice issues and people's empowerment processes. Their ultimate goal is a fairer and more just society with equal access to resources. This can be further divided into four loose categories: Community development/organization NGOs, Network Associations, Support Institutions and advocacy/campaign organizations

iii) Peoples organizations: These are created by NGOs but in theory are independent of them. Most of them however do not have legal status and in reality are not independent of NGO control.

Positive Contributions

While in the past, NGOs were associated with rich or high profile individuals, today the NGO sector attracts young educated people from the middle classes. The government has recognised the important role played by NGOs and has included some NGO leaders in government commissions and committees, thereby giving them the opportunity to influence government policies.

In the 1990s many indigenous fund raising efforts made successful in roads into the corporate and middle class sectors. Mobilizing funds from local sources, government, banks and local people has become a new source of revenue for NGOs.

Many NGOs are able to reach the most marginalized groups of society, Marginalized sections, Advises and women, even in remote areas. Both the government and bilateral agencies have recognized this role and made funds available to support this work.

Many NGOs have proved to be cost-effective in their work by introducing innovative programmers in the field of health, natural resource management, people-managed micro-credit and disaster preparedness.

Many NGOs have played an effective role in addressing national issues like communal harmony, gender sensitization, environmental issues and people's participation, and in building people's movements.

The good reputation of some Indian NGO leaders has led them to advise on global issues (e.g. Global March against Child Labor) and to influence world bodies (e.g. the World Bank NGO Committee).

Areas of Concern

Significant changes in the style and management of the NGO sector are a cause for some concern. The introduction of a corporate style of management, extravagant life-styles of some NGO leaders, a lack of accountability and the continuing lack of opportunities for women staff have all raised questions about the credibility of NGOs and their commitment to the poor.

While, the majority of NGOs focus their work on Marginalized sections, Advises and women, the leadership of many of these NGOs remains in the hands of men and members of the upper castes and classes.

The leadership of some of the larger NGOs by charismatic leaders has tended to fragment NGOs and hinder the building of coalitions and networks.

Many NGOs are skilled in working on local issues but do not have the capacity to relate to national or macro level issues, while those organizations working on policy interventions at macro level do not have much contact with ground realities. NGOs can increase dependency of people's organizations by

maintaining control of leadership, even when they are up and running.

While NGOs today have greater access to government funding, foreign funding is still sought after, as this gives them greater flexibility and more opportunities for long term support. There is a tendency in some NGOs towards large credit and savings schemes and to view these schemes as the panacea to poverty.

As we enter the 21st century there are many changes taking place around us, and the impact of NGOs work at the micro level is being questioned. A third of India's population continues to live below the poverty line. People are asking whether the present structures, policies and strategies of many NGOs are still relevant, and whether the capacity of NGOs to bring about change is keeping up with the changing environment. Higher professional standards and systems are expected of NGOs, and advocacy work is becoming increasingly important.

Despite these difficulties the majority of NGOs programmers are successfully facilitating the empowerment of the marginalized. While some NGOs continue to cause concern, the majority is doing impressive work, and credibility and accountability are still high.

Foreign Aid and Development: A Review:

There are four main sources of foreign funding to India: bilateral assistance from rich northern governments to India's central government; multilateral assistance from UN agencies, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the European Union, the IMF etc; international solidarity groups, international trade unions and other international organizations funding their Indian counter-parts; and international non-governmental development aid agencies and private trusts funding mostly the NGO sector in India. In the first two cases assistance is given primarily for government-sponsored development programmers in the form of grants and loans.

The official development assistance (ODA) in 1998 was \$1,594.6 million which constituted only 0.4% of India's total GNP (UNDP 2000) making India less dependent on foreign economic assistance than are many African and Latin American countries. The Organization for Economic Co-operation Development (OECD) countries is by far the world's largest group of donors for bi-lateral aid. Multi-lateral aid is channeled through agencies like UN organizations (UNICEF, UNESCO, FAO), the IMF, the World Bank and regional development Banks (the Asian Development Bank) and other institutions such as the European Commission. Subsequent to the opening of India's economy to multinational corporations (MNCs) as a part of India's Structural Adjustment Programmed (SAP) there has been an increased flow of funds into the country. However, the impact of foreign aid on India's development policies is highly controversial. While most aid is "tied" and in many instances given according to the political and commercial interests of donor countries, in some cases foreign aid has served to challenge some of the Indian government's policies on poverty alleviation. It is estimated that under 25% of official aid is spent on poverty alleviation, and most official aid is channeled through the central government which sometimes uses it for political ends that are not strictly development-related. The growing tendency of bilateral and multilateral agencies to fund local NGOs directly is a cause for some concern. There is a danger that direct funding could effectively transform local

NGOs into contractors, reducing their independence and undermining the empowerment process.

Areas of concern of International development aid and Recommendations:

In the context of this paper, Marginalized sections are seen as a combination of all the Scheduled Castes, Tribes and OBCs in India. Therefore, out of a total population of just over 1.5 billion there are approximately 400 million Marginalized sections living in India, accounting for 38% of the total population. Out of these 400 million people, 90% live below the poverty line, a total of 270 million people. It is understood that in India as a whole 345 million people live below the poverty line, therefore Marginalized sections make up approximately 78% of all Indians living below the poverty line.

Within India, due to the largely patriarchal society women face discrimination and oppression at all levels and stages of their lives, this is equally true within the Dalit community. Therefore, Dalit women are discriminated against twice, firstly for being a Dalit and secondly for being a woman, as a result there is the need for a specific focus to be put on addressing gender imbalances, especially in relation to the position of women.

The discriminatory position of Marginalized sections is recognized by the Indian constitution, with a range of guarantees of equality and affirmative action programmes existing to address the issue. However, within their categorization of Scheduled Castes and Tribes the Indian Government refuse to recognize Marginalized sections who have converted to other religions, such as, Christian and Muslim Marginalized sections. This is wrong and it is important that International organizations work with all Marginalized sections irrespective of their religious beliefs.

Situations in North India

1. This topic is quite new and not much detail is available at the moment. To draw conclusions we need to understand the current position of the International development aid agencies that are operating in India with special reference to their general policies and strategies in India, their position and approach to Dalit issues, the quantum of aid allocated to poverty eradication programmed, the staffing structure dealing with development aid programmed and the decision making process in the country.

We recommend that an in-depth scientific study be carried out before any concrete recommendations are made. Once the study is completed the findings should be shared with all concerned people (politicians, civil servants, Multi and Bi-lateral agencies, INGOS, Indian NGOs, Dalit organizations in India and outside India etc). A formal dialogue/workshop should then be held in India (for those who have a presence in India) and in the north to discuss/debate the findings.

2. Awareness rising on Dalit issues among civil society, the general public, politicians, civil servants and the decision-makers in the North are crucial if any changes are to be made in Bi-lateral aid programmed. Advocacy and campaigning on the Dalit cause in the North on behalf of the community in India can make a difference in the Northern Governments through their Aid policies. Continuous dialogue and information sharing with the North is important. At the moment there are specialist groups in the North (Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International etc) focusing on specific issues but that alone is not enough. We need a body that will co-ordinate, network, communicate, share

information with the various advocacy groups working on Dalit issues in the north.

We recommend that an independent "Dalit Research/Information Centre" be established in the North to communicate and feed regular information to Governments, civil society organizations and other advocacy groups in the North. The centre could undertake further research and co-ordinate efforts with various groups in the North and in India. We also recommend that in all the northern countries, that give development aid to India, at least one advocacy local group should be initiated and supported. This group can lobby the stakeholders in that particular country.

3. Most of the agencies have general and sometimes specific country policies and strategies. Those that have India country policy and strategy paper have developed policies based on poverty angle and refer to Marginalized sections as the poorest sections of society. As I understand it, the analysis, which they have used to come to this conclusion, is mostly based on traditional approach/knowledge and Government facts and figures. We also believe the process, which they normally follow, is not participatory enough and does not reflect the views of the majority Dalit community. In the process the programmers and strategies for Marginalized sections and non-Marginalized sections are not clearly distinguishable. Different kind of policies and strategies are required for Marginalized sections and non-Marginalized sections as issues and problems are different. Right policy, focused approach and relevant programmers are crucial in the policies. Further research will shed light on this.

We therefore recommend that all the Northern Governments, non-governmental development aid agencies, Multi and Bi-lateral agencies and other groups that give aid to India's poverty alleviation programmed should review their policies and strategies to explicitly reflect the Dalit issues in their papers.

We also recommend that at least 50% of aid to poverty alleviation programmed should be allocated to programmers that focus on Marginalized sections. This is because out of 345 million poor people in India 90% of Marginalized sections fall under this category and a majority of bonded and child labor are also Marginalized sections.

4. In the North when recruiting staff for the South Asia or India desk one of the main criteria for person specification is good knowledge of Indian or South Asian development issues for the job. Another general requirement used is gender sensitivity.

We recommend that any staff recruited to India or South Asia desks in the north, besides the main person specifications, should also have a good knowledge and sensitivity to Dalit issues as main criteria for selection. We also recommend that all staff in the North responsible for India aid programmed at decision making level should undergo a special training or exposure to Dalit issues.

5. Human Rights Watch, a Washington based Human Rights organization, in its report titled "Broken people: caste violence against India's untouchables" has made specific recommendations to the United Nations, to the World Bank and other International lending Institutions, India's donors and trading partners.

We endorse these specific recommendations of the Human Rights Watch and ask the northern agencies to implement these recommendations without delay.

In India

6. Most of the International Multi and Bi-lateral agencies, UN organizations, Northern Governments, International non-Governmental organizations work in India through India based offices and local Consultants. They help their head offices in the north to develop policies and help in monitoring their development aid programmers in the country. These offices/consultants play an important role in shaping their policies, strategies and programmers in India. There is a strong feeling among the Marginalized sections and others that Marginalized sections are not sufficiently represented in these offices at the decision making level. A common concern is that the staffs at senior level in these offices are often from a higher caste/class or westernized individuals with professional degrees. There is a feeling that their perspective on Dalit issues may be different from that of Marginalized sections themselves and therefore the Dalit issue may not be reflected in their aid programmed. We acknowledge that individuals of all communities and classes can contribute to development efforts for the poor and oppressed, and staff cannot be selected on the basis of caste in International agencies. However, given that a large proportion of development aid is targeted at the poor, the majority of whom are still Marginalized sections, then it is important the views of Dalit community is heard and involved in planning and implementing such programmers. The vast majority of agencies expects staff at senior level to be gender sensitive but may not necessarily require sensitivity to Dalit issues. We believe that Marginalized sections have their own perspective on their particular problems and how they should be tackled and that this perspective should be voiced.

We therefore recommend that adequate representation should be given to Marginalized sections at senior levels. We also recommend that in house training programmers should have in-built Dalit sensitization aspects so that current staff may gain a proper Dalit perspective. We recommend that adequate support and funds should be allocated in developing leadership skills, capacity and professionalism among the Dalit youth with a view that they may be in a position to fill posts at a senior level in the future. As development consultants play a big role in advising the international agencies, we recommend that adequate representation should be given to Marginalized sections in selecting consultants.

7. At the moment the support from International non-Governmental aid agencies is given to the local NGOs with the understanding that they work with the poor who make up 34.6% of the total population (346 million). Not only are the vast majority of the poor from Dalit communities but also the majority of Marginalized sections are poor. From our knowledge many of the NGO programmers which are aimed at helping the Dalit community are service-oriented such as education, health, income generation, housing etc. but very little on social and cultural aspects.

Also it is a known fact that many NGOs who manage such programmers lack proper perspective, policies and strategies and in the process the approach is poverty centered approach rather than rights based approach. As a result the status quo of Marginalized sections is maintained and discrimination and human rights violations of Marginalised sections continue at the same levels. Though service programmers are important for bringing Marginalized sections into the main stream of development what is equally crucial is a rights based approach.

Community organization and empowerment programmers are central to their development. This is equally true of other international agencies and northern governments who direct their aid budgets mainly through the Indian Government, whose approach is mainly, service and target oriented.

We recommend that International agencies and Governments review their development programmers in India towards poverty reduction, include an integrated rights based and service-oriented approaches. Equally important is that there is a focus in their aid programmed budget in India to Dalit development and empowerment process by allocating substantial proposition of their aid. This should be one of the conditionality's of northern Governments and agencies while negotiating with Indian Government or local NGOs for their support.

8. The caste system is still a strong feature of Indian society and maintains the gap between the rich and the marginalized. Such division exists more in rural areas than urban areas, as identity of lower castes is easily distinguishable in rural areas. If the caste system has to be minimized, human rights violations against Marginalised sections have to be stopped and Dalit empowerment realized, it is vital that middle and upper class society, boys and girls of all caste/class are part of this process. They have to be educated on the evils of caste systems and Dalit issues not from their parents and grant parents but from their friends and civil society. Integration and communal harmony among different castes is a necessary step towards bridging the gap between rich and poor. The role of civil society is crucial if any substantial changes are to take place in India. We have evidence of similar approaches producing good results (e.g. child labor).

We recommend that aid agencies and international bodies allocate money for development education programmers in India and programmers that help strengthen civil society. The international bodies should negotiate with the Indian Government for such initiatives to be inbuilt into their systems. Civil society bodies should campaign with political parties to include human rights issues with particular reference to caste discrimination in their election manifestos.

Conclusion

Marginalised sections continue to be marginalized in terms of education, globalizations, economic development, professional courses, IT and other abilities such as presentation skills, speaking at international forums, media and advocacy skills, links with national and international policy bodies etc that are essential to play an active leadership roles in influencing the policies of various bodies. There are many NGOs in India that work for Dalit causes but lack Dalit leadership. There are various Government committees in India that lack Dalit participation. There is a scarcity of Dalit consultants in the market available to International agencies to help them shape their policies. In short there is shortage of skilled Dalit leadership at various levels.

We recommend that the aid agencies and international bodies give priority to building the capacity of Dalit leadership at various levels. We encourage agencies to support south-south, south-north exchange programmers to learn from each other's experiences and help build networks among similar groups/initiatives at national, regional and international levels. There are many different approaches the NGOs follow with

regard to Dalit programmers in India. Some follow integrated approach; some rights based approach, some people's movement approach and some economic development approach. Some are successful and some have not produced any results. We need to learn from each other where there is an impact and where there are problems. We need to analyze the nature and context of cast conflicts and solutions to such conflicts, assess the political dimensions of Dalit empowerment, and assess the different models and ways of working on Dalit issues and sustainability of Dalit organizations.

We recommend that agencies initiate research and impact assessment studies of various Dalit programmers in the country with a view to learn from experience and to build into their future policies and strategies. One of the terms of reference in any evaluation or study should be on the impact of their aid

programmed on Dalit cause. This is an ongoing exercise that should be built into their programmers.

References

1. Suresh Rao 1997 "Daliths and NGOs in India", Journal of Social Research, Vol.23, No 1, 1977, pp 12-23
2. Keshvan 1991, Poverty and Development Organisations in India Bangalore: TRC Publishers pp132-134
3. Biju 1998, Marginal sections and Development New Delhi: Atlanta Publisher pp23-56
4. Menu Roy 2002 Foreign Aid and NGOs, EPW, Vol.32, No .12.
5. Mohan 2002 "Developmental Originations in India", Journal of Social Science Review, Vol.11.No 4, pp-45-57.
6. Velsos 2001 "Charities and Daliths in India" Asian Development Review, Vol. XXI, No .3, pp.34-54.