

Gate-keepers bar progress

ONE of the ironic and unfortunate legacies of apartheid is the fine distinction drawn between government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). A term borrowed from the lexicon of the international development community, activists in the social arena wanted to make sure that the message about their separation from and opposition to government came through clearly, even vociferously, which is why the “non-governmental” in NGO was so important. Since the government of the day was bad and horrible, it was important to put a loud and clear distance between them and us.

We now have a democratically constituted government, and yet the distinction persists.

In fact, the distinction has acquired a greater significance. It now serves as a critical marker between sections of government – particularly the Reconstruction and Development Programme office – and us, except that the “them” were part of us and some of us think the “us” are part of them. Worse, the “us” in the so-called non-governmental sector are further categorised and sub-categorised. There is the development sub-sector, the human rights sub-sector, and so forth.

Some of us, seduced by the importance of categories but fitting, to our minds and in our work, in none of them, suggested an “advocacy” sub-sector. But there were not enough of us around to make this category stick.

I don’t mean to be flippant. The categories and sub-categories have very serious consequences. They are the basis for issuing invitations to some but not others to attend this or that summit. They could be the basis for giving or withholding funds, distributing aid, and awarding service contracts. And then, most regrettably, categories and sub-categories become a basis for gate-keeping. Some NGOs are – or get themselves – elected to lead coalitions, and those with resources and access get to represent the people’s views at government-organised hearings and discussions.

Something is very wrong here. How is it that organisations and individuals who join – in their minds, heart and work – with government employees in pursuit of the public’s best interest have

difficulty getting good teams together? Must we in the so-called non-governmental sector be gate-keepers, who proclaim on our words of prejudice, in order to define an approach to the economic and development of South Africa? Or do we have control and power, resulting in the exclusion and disappearance – of some organisations – up with them?

The key question is not simply the distinction between inclusion and exclusion, though that is part of the concept that lies behind them.

If the concept is about power and control, then our rationalising civil society, then our exclusion, then our trouble. Government should represent them. If the concept is about finding a way to drive democracy and development through our categories.

Along these lines, I would like to see how an NGO identifies civil society – not just its geography of operation and activities, but also its extensions of government, through its civil society. Moreover, many organisations are increasingly making government itself their category, blurring the line even more.

I suggest that we begin to think of organisations as *public interest groups* rather than some poorly defined sub-sectors of government or community. I know this implies an alternative category, but the concept is one of service to the public without government – the public interest in a manner that upholds democracy and development.

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Idasa’s mission:

► **What** To promote and consolidate democracy and a culture of tolerance