



Wider community: civil awareness is an important ingredient of capacity building.

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A team of US visitors are impressed with what they found in South Africa's non-governmental sector, but they caution that more needs to be done on development issues.

NGOs get tentative thumbs-up

REPRESENTATIVES of several United States foundations who conducted a fact-finding tour of a range of South African non-governmental organisations (NGOs) late in 1992 have released a report which describes the sector as 'strong and vibrant'.

However, they caution that due to the country's still tentative political future, and given the legacy of apartheid, there is a dearth of comprehensive development planning and expertise.

The decades of isolation from the international community have left South Africans lacking confidence in the merits of their own development efforts and experience.'

Although the group brought an outsiders' perspective, we could do well to heed some of their observations and recommendations about the culture and practice of NGOs in South Africa.

The delegation was impressed by the self-help ethos among the historically dispossessed and the symbiosis between NGOs and communities, adding that these were areas where the world could learn from South Africa.

The keen awareness of the concept of accountability among South African NGOs was also noteworthy, but there were 'some questions as to how much of the talk reflects good intentions and how much can be translated into practice'.

The NGO sector in South Africa tended to be strongest in the area of 'welfare' – often providing services which should be the responsibility of the local authority. This raised questions about whether NGOs should continue such work or become devel-

opment agencies. A further option was to develop the concept of 'advocacy' – pressurising government and local authorities into providing services and development programmes.

The concept of 'advocacy' was largely absent from South African NGOs. Although there was a long tradition of political activism in South Africa, the absence of any tradition of democratic government meant that there was little appreciation of 'public policy advocacy'.

The visitors suggested that given the extensive American experience in this field, South Africans could benefit from discussion on the potential 'advocacy role' of the philanthropic and NGO sectors.

'By delaying focusing on the nuts and bolts of development planning NGOs run the risk of losing the initiative'

Advocacy was of particular importance when trying to influence government development policies. However, the group noted that while South Africans seemed very comfortable debating definitions of 'development' and 'empowerment', discussion around the characteristics of a national development policy remained tentative.

They warned that 'by delaying focusing on the nuts and bolts of development planning in South Africa', NGOs ran the risk of losing the initiative.

'South Africa's isolation from the interna-

tional development community has created a level of unrealistic idealism among South African development leaders about the extent to which indigenous NGOs can compete with and/or shape the operating procedures of major international development organisations.

'There is little insight among South Africans into the experience of other developing countries at the hands of international agencies and very little understanding of the workings of the international development industry.'

According to the US delegates, the major impetus for South African economic development will undoubtedly be government-driven. This raises questions, already being considered in certain circles, about the role a new democratic government will allow existing NGOs.

Such a new government will be under pressure to deliver substantial results quickly, whereas the existing NGO sector in South Africa is currently best equipped to tackle small, localised projects. International donors will also be impatient for rapid results, but, say the US delegates, an initial 'gush' of international development funding which might materialise at the appropriate political moment may not be sustained beyond a few years.

A bigger question was how the advent of bilateral donor arrangements (ie government-to-government aid) would affect the local NGO development sector. Some scenarios suggest that NGOs could collectively constitute themselves as fiscal intermediaries

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She suggested that a distinction be drawn between the state and the regime. Civil society organisations could simultaneously confront a particular (undemocratic) regime occupying the state, while reinforcing the legitimacy of the state as an institution.

Diamond's definition was challenged by Mahmoud Mamdani of the Centre for Basic Research in Uganda who warned that the exclusion of certain sectors from the definition could result in their marginalisation. He emphasised the incomplete nature of the concept of civil society and pointed out that an uncritical application of it to Africa could lead to the exclusion of large and important segments of societies, such as the peasantry.

It became clear that while it is relatively easy to define the state, with its constitution, institutions, bill of rights, etc and to determine its character (democratic or undemocratic), civil society is more flexible, informal, unstable and diffuse (or may not exist at all).

At the same time, various processes clearly take place in civil society, such as mobilisation, protest, engagement, negotiation, communication, opposition, partnership, division, education, culture, development, movement, co-operation, advocacy, research and religion.

Although activists tended to put forward an organisational definition of civil society, it became clear in debate that they perceived it more as a terrain of struggle and an understanding began to develop, picked up by the



Workshop participants with the Imam of Gorée Island and village head, Bocar Dia.

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academics, of a more inclusive concept that recognised that civil society was not always democratic and that organisations could exist within it which could be anti-democratic.

In this respect civil society could be seen as the terrain in which people strive to protect and represent their interests, whether or not this is democratic.

Participants also considered the growing dependency of civil society organisations on foreign donors and governments and the need for self-reliance where possible; the relationship between civil society institutions and the state or regime, and how that affects democracy; accountability, ethics and corruption in both civil society and the state; the need to draw South Africa into the debate about civil society on the continent and, arising out of the above, the need for greater pan-African networking among civil society organisations.

The networking which has already been done on the continent by Idasa was cemented by reinforcing existing contacts and developing new acquaintances. Given the marginalisation of Africa, and how this will affect South Africa, it is crucial that the network develops self-reliance among civil society organisations in Africa.

A booklet to be released from the workshop will form the basis for a training programme for civil society practitioners. The first training workshop will be held in June when the training modules will be designed.

The workshop on civil society and democracy was part of a three-part series exploring civil society, the economy and the state and their relationship to democracy and development in Africa. The economy workshop, entitled Democracy, Development and Growth in Africa, will be held from May 24-26 on Gorée Island.

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between government and the NGO sector. Another option was for the NGO sector to organise itself into a collective voice in government development planning.

The new buzz word in South African NGOs, noted the visitors, was 'capacity building'. They said it was also a favourite among funders because training courses were 'neatly packaged' activities which were easily quantifiable and which donors felt comfortable funding.

However, the group asked whether capacity building was only a matter of providing more skilled personnel for NGOs or whether it was primarily a question of vision. For example, an organisation could have excellent administrative capacity but lack the

capacity to envisage the necessary steps to become a player in the national development arena.

A further question was whether capacity building referred only to NGOs or whether it extended to the communities within which NGOs worked. The delegates noted that 'community mobilisation and education - so-called civil awareness - around development seemed to be an equally important ingredient.

'Perhaps the more fundamental question is whether South African NGOs still have the time to develop the necessary capacity or whether they may be sidetracked by an over-hasty government and the domineering ethos of international aid agencies.'

Yet another consideration was whether current NGO leaders would be absorbed into

the civil service with the advent of a new democratic government, which was not necessarily seen as problematic by the visitors.

They repeatedly remarked on the number of 'incredibly impressive' women who were playing key roles within NGOs yet who seldom headed the organisations. The group noted that private US foundations could be influential in this regard by looking beyond first-tier NGO leadership in order to advance new leaders and, particularly, women.

Traditionally 'indigenous philanthropy' has come from a handful of major South African corporations. But, the report notes, 'despite the pockets of extraordinary wealth in South Africa, there is no established tradition of individual philanthropy, principally because the South African tax codes have never favoured this type of activity'.