**This article provides information about the Relationship between NGOs and Government – Explained !**

The relationship between NGOs and the government has been rather very complex in recent years. While on the one hand there have been more and more recognition and encouragement for the NGOs’ activism by the government, there have been severe criticisms of the government agencies by the NGOs for their rigid bureaucratic and traditional outlook.

The government has also been trying to make the NGOs accountable to its, and to the law of the land, to ensure transparency in financial dealings, etc. The NGOs are also trying to make government officials, accountable to the people, to ensure impartial functioning of state organs at the grassroots level. However, notwithstanding the contradictory position, there have been several areas of cooperation between the government and NGOs.

NGOs are mostly working on the legalised issues and on a small scale. The state policies on area development, desert development, tribal development, women’s development etc., which are addressed at a local level need a vast body of local inputs and resources. The experience and the expertise of the localised NGOs usually come to help in a big way for the successful implementation of these polices.

Again the NGOs also formulate innovative projects on these issues receiving expert help from government agencies. According to an estimate, there are over 30,000 NGOs in India. The Indian state was initially indifferent if not hostile to NGOs’ activism. The situation has changed since the Eighth Five-Year Plan 1992-1997, and now the government openly encourages the participation of NGOs in development sphere.

However, NGOs’ relationship with the state has widely been dichotomous in nature. Though many of them supplement government plans and programmes, they are also simultaneously critical of government policies. Again, while on the one hand they have been defined in terms of negation of the state, on the other they have remained widely dependent on the state for funds. Policies of the NGOs are also at times guided and framed by state policies.

In recent decades there has been a process of internationalisation of NGOs’ activism. While working on local and national issues, the NGOs have started getting serious attention and recognition from international agencies. At the international level, many NGOs also take part in the transnational campaign against various social evils like drug addiction, poverty, illiteracy, HIV/AIDS, child abuse, women’s rights, environment protection, disarmament, violation of human rights, etc. NGOs also educate people in influencing government policies on several international issues. In the process of undertaking all these initiatives, NGOs have been part of global networking.

Over the years there has been a phenomenal growth of the transaction NGOs, with more working at the global level with larger issues. One of the reasons for such growth has been the crisis in the State caused by massive state deficits, financial crisis and economic restructuring. As the state functioning is going to be restructured along the lines of the corporate market model, and it is also withdrawing from the social sector, NGOs are emerging as important stakeholders and providers of services to the marginalised people.

In the developing countries many NGOs function by receiving funds from foreign agencies. There has also been a tendency to ignore the law of the land by these NGOs. Here serious questions are raised not only by academicians and policy planners but also by the common people on their accountability and mode of spending.

**NGO relations with the government and communities in Afghanistan**

by Emilie JelinekMay 2009

This article explores the relationship between NGOs and the Afghan government, and communities perceptions of both. The research on which it is based was principally undertaken in three provinces, Herat, Balkh and Kabul. The article also draws on the authors experience in other parts of the country, specifically the south-east. The core of the study highlights the issues shaping relations between the Afghan government and NGOs, with a view to improving them, and identifying areas where they can better appreciate each others respective merits. A clarification of roles and greater communication between NGOs and the government would help to foster a more effective relationship in an environment where, at present, neither can work properly without the other.

**The working environment in Afghanistan**

Afghanistan is one of the most difficult countries for NGOs to work in. The security situation is getting progressively worse, with aid workers subjected to a growing number of direct attacks, threats and intimidation. In 2008, 40 humanitarian aid convoys and 47 aid facilities were attacked, ambushed or looted, and 112 aid workers were kidnapped (five of whom were killed). In some areas, infrastructure and services are almost non-existent. The military presence is high, and in some areas NGOs are compelled to share operational space with the military, affecting how NGOs are perceived locally and raising difficult issues of independence, neutrality and impartiality. Social and political systems are not uniform across the country, requiring organisations to adopt very specific local approaches to the areas in which they are working. The complex and multi-faceted nature of the conflict in Afghanistan has brought together a host of different actors, ostensibly working together to meet a variety of objectives and often required to produce immediate results despite the fact that objectives, actors and initiatives are not always complementary. Political imperatives often lead to programmes that are not responsive to local needs.

**Relations with the government**

Although influencing the political and security environment is beyond the scope of agencies working in the field, certain aspects of NGO work, specifically relations with the government, could be improved. While coordination between the government and aid agencies has arguably improved over the past few years, particularly in Kabul, more could be done.

Currently, coordination between NGOs and the government takes place at various levels, both in Kabul and in the provinces. NGOs are required to submit regular reports to line ministries (as well as the ministries of economy and finance). Provincial Development Committees were set up in each province in 2005 in order to improve coordination between the centre and the provinces; there are also specific sectoral meetings (involving line ministries and UN and NGO representatives), held monthly. To some extent, the effectiveness of these meetings depends on the personalities involved; some participants are more active than others, and attendances vary.

The government currently has the ability to facilitate or obstruct NGO operations. A number of NGOs working in Afghanistan today operated prior to and during the Taliban era. Although their work was highly regulated, they nonetheless had the space they needed to operate. Now, however, NGOs must work alongside a government intent on regulating, planning and managing their projects and activities. This is in part due to the fact that the current administration in Kabul claims service provision as one of its main objectives. According to a law designed to ensure NGO accountability and transparency, and ostensibly to enhance coordination, NGOs must consult with the government and sign a Memorandum of Understanding before they can implement projects. NGOs must also report to the government on all their activities, unlike other actors such as private contractors or Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Whilst enabling the government to keep track of what NGOs are doing, this system makes it difficult for them to implement projects in a timely manner.

Despite tensions, the government and NGOs have at times worked together to produce some remarkable and widely recognised achievements, such as the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), the Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS) programme and even some evolving community-based education programmes. Yet the fact that so many different actors are involved in development and humanitarian activities, including the UN and the military, means that relations are inevitably complex. Concepts of impartiality and independence sit uneasily amidst this growing need for increased coordination, if not collaboration. By the same token, government views on NGOs are often negative and contradictory. Provincial government respondents accused NGOs of wasting funds and using donor money to pay for extravagant, luxurious lifestyles. At the same time, however, they admitted that they relied heavily on NGOs to carry out work and deliver services which they did not have the resources or the capacity to deliver themselves.

The most effective working relations have been established where NGOs have worked to involve the government in their research efforts, providing them with information about their programmes and plans and inviting them to various events, training sessions and project inaugurations. In Herat, for example, one international NGO is careful not to hire qualified agronomists away from the government, so as not to undermine government capacity. The organisation also recognises that capacity is low and resources are scarce, and so helps out by providing the government with transport to field sites. It also seconds staff to government offices. Relations also tend to be better with agencies that have had a long-standing presence in their area. As one NGO staff member in Herat stated:

*Both NGOs and the government have responsibilities. The government should focus more on a coordinating role to bring NGOs together. NGOs should build government capacity. Their roles should be complementary  The government is the biggest development agency in the country and NGOs should realise this. Their role should be to create models for development, which the government can follow. The NGO field level worker cannot simply take decisions, but should advise and inform. However, the role NGOs have is crucial. They can identify why and how a system is failing. But many NGOs dont involve the government in their work.*

There is considerable frustration within the provincial government over its inability to reach communities due to a lack of resources. In a country where the road and communications infrastructure is severely under-developed, outreach to communities takes on greater meaning. Not having the resources to access districts and communities severely undermines reconstruction efforts, and in many cases exacerbates tensions with NGOs, which generally can afford to make visits to local communities and establish relations with local people. Several provincial government respondents mentioned that they felt disempowered and resentful as a result. This again poses a particular challenge to NGOgovernment relations, as NGOs will undoubtedly want to maintain their distance and independence from the government in their work. However, they may want to consider approaching local government representatives when conducting field or site visits, so that the government can increase its presence and legitimacy with local communities. Interviews conducted in Balkh and in areas of south-eastern Afghanistan revealed great community dissatisfaction with the minimal government presence in their area, which of course is compounded by the worsening security situation.

**Community perceptions of the government and NGOs**

Views of the government differed among the local population in Herat and in Balkh. In the former, there appeared to be growing resentment towards the government for its lack of engagement in communities, some of its policies (notably the banning of poppy cultivation, which adversely affected peoples livelihoods) and its inability to provide services. Whilst a desire to see a government rather than NGO presence was voiced numerous times, respondents in several communities in Balkh indicated that the provision of security, which seemed to be the main expectation from the government, made up for the lack of basic services. All community members interviewed in Herat, for example, brought up the weakness of the government. One villager stated: Our government is very weak and we need the support of foreigners. We need them and they should be here to support us. However, NGOs should consider what really needs to be done and they should be more attentive to what communities are asking for.

The most frequent complaint against the government by communities concerns rampant corruption, which has become endemic and is severely undermining state- building efforts. Meetings held over the course of the last six months with community members in Paktia and Khost provinces in the south-east reveal mounting indignation and anger against a government which, two years or so ago, people were still willing to support.

As for NGOs, a recurrent complaint was that they implemented projects regardless of what villagers had asked of them. An organisation came to our village to ask us for our views on what type of assistance we needed, but then they did what they wanted. In another village, however, a village council representative stated that NGOs come here and they are very straightforward; they tell us what they can provide us with, and are honest with us. They are hard-working and regularly supervise the projects they are implementing. There still appears to be a general misunderstanding among both the government and people regarding who and what NGOs are. According to a research consultant who undertook an extensive study of large private contractors working in Afghanistan, many of the people spoken to often referred to these contractors as NGOs. The military often employ contractors, which communities confuse for NGOs, to carry out projects which are not properly supervised and lack accountability.

According to a senior advisor working in Kabul, perceptions of NGOs are linked to the outcomes of the projects they implement: where decent, professionally staffed and well trained NGOs have been operating, results have been good. This contrasts with the South, where NSP projects have been implemented through private contractors. Outcomes have been negligible. Vast amounts of funding are being tied up in these contractors overheads. Good qualified and well respected NGOs are doing a tremendous job and where outcomes are good, NGOs are viewed favourably by the local population.

Such outcomes are undoubtedly linked to the amount of time spent engaging directly with communities. As one member of a national NGO working in the south-east stressed, NGOs must engage with all local actors, not just with the government, and invest time in getting to know tribal elders and influential community members in areas where they are working. According to this representative, it was vitally important for NGOs to establish their presence and legitimacy and engage in projects such as building mosques (a common request). Donors must understand the local context and give NGOs the freedom to engage in such activities.

**Where next?**

Greater clarity regarding the purpose, authority and membership of the various agencies working in humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan is required. NGOs must make clear who they are and what they do, as their ability to deliver aid to those in need may be severely compromised in the long term if these lines become blurred. Furthermore, the contradictory nature of the governments often negative perceptions of NGOs suggests that the government is perhaps unsure as to the type of partnership it wants, and should define what must ultimately be a strategic partnership, realising and making use of the expertise and wealth of knowledge and information NGOs can bring.

In summary, the study found that government perceptions of NGOs were good where:

* NGOs had involved the government by providing it with information about their programmes, activities and future plans.
* NGOs had invited the government to events, training sessions, workshops and project inaugurations, and helped ease government logistical constraints.
* NGOs had a long-standing presence in an area and had spent time and effort in getting to know the local population and community leaders.
* NGOs had made efforts to coordinate their activities with the government and keep the government up to date with their work.

The most important determinant of how NGOs were perceived was government capacity. In ministries where capacity was low, standard perceptions of NGOs were overwhelmingly negative. Where it was apparent that government staff were more experienced and qualified, perceptions of NGOs were much more balanced, and there was generally a recognition of their value and expertise and the wealth of information they can offer.

Relations between the government and NGOs are likely to be more constructive in cases where the government is confident and capable. The government of Afghanistan is however neither of those things. Working in Afghanistan will undoubtedly remain frustrating, and government capacity will take time to build. In certain cases, NGOs may not even want to be associated with what they perceive to be corrupt and unaccountable bodies. However, by identifying exactly what each others respective roles are and should be, there is the potential to achieve an effective and complementary relationship.

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**Nongovernmental Organizations-Local Governments Relations: A Snapshot from Lebanon**

Surveys explore the relationship between local governments and NGOs

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Creating and sustaining democracy remains an elusive quest for many nations. Across the globe, countries are experimenting with an array of structures, institutions, and rules intended to democratize their governmental systems. Many of these efforts involve decentralization. Much of the decentralization is a top-down process, that is, it is driven by central governments seeking to push responsibility out of the capital and into lower level governments.  Some of it is bottom-up promoted by local governments intent upon expanding their operational sphere and discretionary authority or incentivized by civil society organizations and nonprofits acting as partners in public service delivery at the local level. Regardless of the impetus, decentralization is considered by most to be the *sine qua non* for democratization.

In developing countries, the quest to create and sustain democracy is even more compelling. Governments search for the optimal administrative system that suits the country’s conditions, social culture and political system, and at the same time, comports with the urgency of development.

Successful decentralization, however, involves more than governments. Here, we are talking about non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are supposed to serve citizens, build local ownership, strengthen civic engagement, and work for the public interest/good. Mounting public demands for increasingly-complicated and diversified services favor a facilitator, partner state rather than a controlling state. The boundaries that once separated the public sector from that of the private and nonprofit sectors have become so fuzzy that no one sector is solely seen as being responsible for local public services.

While government and civil society work together and, due to their limited organizational capacities, these collaborations tend to focus on partnerships  to provide certain goods and services. These local partnerships or exchanges are thought to deliver more effective and innovative services at lower costs to government, to be more representative of community preferences, and promote broader civic engagement and are often tools of democratization.

Clearly, the local level is increasingly one of numerous and complex cross-sectoral interactions that need to be understood better. While decentralization entails a devolution of the nation state’s authority and the NGOs are playing a central role in the development process, there has been growing concern in the international donor community and development circles about the effectiveness of aid, sustainability of development, and results management. International donors have come to realize that, at the local level in developing countries, NGOs should complement or supplement the work of local governments in arrangements more akin to partnerships. This realization is now reflected in several donor-funded initiatives that encourage or incentivize collaboration between local governments and NGOs.

The results of[**two recent surveys conducted in Lebanon**](https://www.american.edu/spa/news/ngo-government.cfm) talk to these issues and can be relevant for policy makers and practitioners in other developing countries. The two surveys were completed by a total of 248 local government officials and 223 NGO executives, respectively, and investigated respondents’ perceptions on issues ranging from how they are collaborating with one another to how decisions are made.

Based on perceptions of these officials in NGOs and local governments in Lebanon, it appears that significant cross-sectoral interaction is taking place at the local level. Yet, the underlying reasons for working together—or not, thereof—vary. While both agree on improving the quality of local services, building a stronger sense of community is an important reason for local government officials; NGOs are more motivated by gaining additional resources or funding. Lack of opportunities and interest from NGOs as the most common barriers to engagement according to local government officials while NGO leaders cite the absence of perceived benefits in working with local governments as the main barrier.

Other observations from the studies on relations between NGOs and local governments in Lebanon are noteworthy. First, women are not necessarily more likely to lead their own organizations to work with others; as a matter of fact, male leaders of local governments are more encouraged to work with NGOs than their female counterparts. This observation needs some attention especially in the presence of several programs and initiatives that focus on women empowerment and representation in public office.

Another interesting finding is that some aspects of NGO relationships are vertical rather than horizontal, with NGOs overwhelmingly considering their relations with international organizations better than those with local governments; that is why international organizations are called upon to motivate NGOs’ relations with local governments to ensure effectiveness of implementation and sustainability of results.

Finally, ‘social services’ remains to be the service area in which local governments and NGOs are most likely to work together. Delivering services to populations in need is the essence of development, but local governments and NGOs should also be working on other areas in order to ensure a more comprehensive approach and sustainability of results. This is where donors and international organizations can play a role, especially since relations with the latter are more favorably perceived by NGOs in comparison to those with local governments.

As such, in line with their long-term development objectives, donors and international organizations would be well-served to stimulate relationships between NGOs and local government, but need to do so in a way that does not necessarily divert those interactions toward donors’ immediate priorities and agendas. Development agencies can  empower the two sides to work together, not just by providing the seed money for collaboration, but, first, by increasing their own tolerance of failure and second by investing in the organizational capacity of the collaborators. In other words, give local governments and NGOs the space and tools to work together. Then possibly, NGOs and local governments could be encouraged to explore working together—and possibly fail and, then learn from their failure, how and when they can collaborate. Hopefully by doing so they can consider working together beyond just delivering services, since the potential benefits from collaboration between local governments and NGOs extend beyond the immediate benefits brought about service delivery partnerships.

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