



The Developmental Roles of Non-Governmental Organizations: A Sociological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are usually distinguishable from other organizations in Civil Society in seven ways. They are voluntary, financially independent, managed by independent volunteer board of directors elected periodically by the membership, have a clearly defined constituency and are accountable to that constituency, have formal legal status, have permanent headquarters and employ professional or volunteer staff, are self serving but geared towards humanitarian objectives and programmes. It is in the light of this that we are going to discuss the developmental roles of NGOs in Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

There is no government in the world that possesses all necessary capacity to fulfill the developmental needs of her people. In areas where government's attention is inadequate due to lack of resources, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have always filled the gap by contributing towards the development of such areas. The outstanding contribution of NGO's worldwide, particularly in Africa, can never be over-emphasized. Nowadays, much of Africa depends on NGOs within and outside the continent. The efforts to address hunger, poverty, illiteracy, disease, draught and so on are fought vigorously by NGOs.

This paper attempts to explain the roles of NGOs in the development of Nigeria, especially in the health sector. The theoretical foundation of the paper is based on the sociological perspective. The paper argues that the developmental roles of NGOs are actually in tandem with sociological perspective.

MEANING OF NON GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (NGOs)

NGOs are organizations which are not serving the self-interests of members, but are concerned in one way or another with disadvantage and or the disadvantaged, or with concerns and issues which are detrimental to the well-being, circumstances or prospects of `people or society as a whole” according to Ball and Dunn (1996:20). This definition makes it easily possible for us to situate NGOs with development industry posits Otite and Albert (2004:41).

The leading object of any NGO is to cause positive changes in the lives of its targeted population by providing them with those essential services that the government finds difficult or unwilling to provide. Generally, speaking, NGOs operate on the principle that members of civil society have the right to shape their lives the way they want, independent of the government (SINA 1996). On the importance of NGOs Ball and Dunn observed that, NGOs are also an expression of people’s belief that through their own initiative they can better fulfill their potential by working together, and in doing so reduce the opportunity gap which exists between the advantaged and disadvantaged in society. This means involving and empowering people, rather than either leaving them to fend for themselves or consigning them to the role of the helpless client of institutions. Between the global trends towards powerful institutions and individualism, NGOs thus represent a third force, for collectivism (1996:9-10).

Conceptual clarifications

Development is an ideological loaded concept that lacks a water-tight definition. Its perception, conceptualization and operationalization differ from scholar to scholar. Therefore any definition offered by any scholar could be quite contentious. For instance, there are those who look at development as mere provision of social amenities; like road, water etc. This may not be correct, because you can take health institutions to an area without giving health to the people, especially if there are no medical staff and no drugs to promote the health of the people, (Olisa and Obiukwu, 1992). Rodney (1979) posited that development implies increased skilled capacity, responsibility and material well-being. Essentially, the ultimate purpose of development must be the development of man, the realization of human potentials and liberation of man from poverty.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are voluntary organizations whose actions are exercised by individuals or group of individuals without coercion or compulsion. Some NGOs with world-wide influence include; Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Melinda and Bill Gate Foundation, Melvin Jones Primary Health Foundation and so on.

Health: There are many definitions of health, in this paper, the World Health Organization’s definition is considered appropriate. According to WHO, health is

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A state of complete physical, mental, and social well being and not merely the absent of diseases or infirmity. The employment of the highest attainable fundamental rights of human being; without distinction or race, religion, political belief, economic or social condition (Kalagbor, 2004).

Sociology, could be defined as the scientific study of human society and social interaction. Sociological perspective refers to the “lens used by sociologist to construct social reality. This is otherwise, known as critical thinking or sociological imagination. There are many perspectives in sociology. These include functionalism, Marxism, symbolic interactionism, etc. A larger focus of some perspective are refers to as paradigm (Chuku, 2008).

A paradigm is a fundamental image of the subject matter within a science. It serves to define what should be studied, what question should be asked, how they should be asked, and what rules should be followed in interpreting the answer obtained. The paradigm is the broadest unit of consensus within a science and services to differentiate one scientific community from another. it subsumes, defines, and interrelates the examples, theories, and methods and instruments that exist within it (Ritzer, 2000).

Developmental roles of NGOs

The history of NGOs dates back to 1839. The growth of NGOs was so rapid that, between 1904 to 1914, when the Rotary International was formed, there were an estimated 1,083 NGOs (Amadi, 2010). International NGOs were important in the anti-slavery movement and the movement for women’s suffrage, and got to a remarkable height at the time of the World Disarmament Conference. However, the word or phrase NGOs came into popular use with the establishment of the United Nation’s Organization in 1945, with the provisions in article (71) of chapter 10, of the UNO charter. This provision provided for a consultative role of organizations which are neither governmental nor intra-state. From this point on, NGOs were recognized as being in position to play vital roles in sustainable development.

In Nigerian, the history of NGOs dates back to early days of independence. It was occasioned by the colonial rule. But at post independence, many events such as military rule, dictatorship, religious violence, ethnicity and corruption led to the upsurge of NGOs in Nigeria (Iheme, 2000). The aims and objectives of NGOs are mainly to reduce poverty- (a concept which is in-line with the focus of development); to provide social amenities, advance education, harmony, religious tolerance, provision of grants; healthy facilities. NGOs advocate for awareness and enlightenments to the masses on government policies, social and environmental issues. The NGOs, through their activities and partnership with different levels of government are able to achieve development through the use of advocacy, workshops, enlightenment and education of the civil society. Also through partnership and collaborations with the government

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and its agencies, NGOs can influence government decision for the well being of the citizens.

In addition to this, NGOs campaign against authoritarian/totalitarian regimes; they criticize corruption in civil society and in government. They agitate for human rights, civil rights and against practices targeted at women. In a nutshell, NGOs are pressure groups with a developmental concerns. Some concrete example shall be mentioned to help illuminate the aims and objectives of NGOs in Nigeria. For instance, NGOs fought against military dictatorship and human rights abuse and in fact have been in the forefront of the campaigns for good governance, gender equality, improved public health, protection of environment and have shown interest in a host of other economic, social and religious issues. Unequivocally, Nigerian democracy benefited from the activities of pro-democracy groups like NADECO (National Alliance for Democratic Coalition).

During the 2010 International Women's Day Celebration, women based NGOs such as Gender and Development Action and Women Human Right based NGOs campaigned for the achievement of 30% affirmative action in government and decision making. They also lamented the absence of a national law against domestic violence in Nigeria and high level of maternal mortality rate (Amadi, 2010).

In addition, the National Council for Women Societies (NCWS) has been in the forefront for the agitation for increases in the number of women appointed to public offices and political positions in conformity with the United Nations Affirmation Action. The achievement made by NCWS and Women in Nigeria (WIN) are quite remarkable as the girl child education is treated equally with that of the male child. Today, many women now occupy political and managerial positions. These are few examples to illustrate the developmental orientations of NGOs, but by far, the NGOs from pre-colonial era to the present appear to have contributed in the health sector more than any other area.

Theoretical foundation of NGOS

The history of activities of NGOs in Nigeria dates back to the work of Mary Selessor in Calabar. She fought vigorously to ensure that twins were no longer considered as evil and killed. Today, people long to have twins, courtesy of Mary Selessor. In 1901, McGregor organized the Lagos Ladies League to supply quinine to schools. This was a type of NGO, though not registered one as such, but it functioned like an NGO in all respects. The first hospital in Nigeria, Sacred Heart Hospital in Abeokuta, was the effort of a Non-governmental (Faith-based) Organization, the Catholic Mission in Nigeria (MCFubara, 2009). In addition to establishing a hospital, they also trained the medical practitioners. During the Nigerian civil war, many NGOs came to the rescue of the war victims. Prominent among these were the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), established in 1963. This body derived its mandate from the Geneva Conventions of 1949. As a

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humanitarian organization, committed to the implementation of International law, the ICRC works to protect the victims of armed conflicts and strife the ICRC is one of the components of the International Red Cross. The other two, the League of Red Cross and Red Cross Crescent Societies RCCS, provide expertise and assistance in the field of war, surgery, and emergency care in conflicts, first aid, basic pharmaceutical and medical materials for emergencies, physiotherapy and orthopedic rehabilitation of people disabled by war (Kalagbor, 2004).

At the end of the Nigerian civil war, medicine San-Frontieres, a French health NGO, was established. This organization is currently running a free clinic in Port Harcourt for acute orthopedic patients. Save the Children Fund (of UK) was also very active during the Nigerian Civil War in providing food and health materials (MCFubara, 2002).

The National Home for Orphan Babies was founded by Mrs. R. O. Sholanke in 1961. It is one of the early established indigenous Health NGOs in Nigeria. Rotary International is a Non-Governmental Organization of over 120 years old. It has also contributed significantly to the health sector. It is currently making a silent but powerful impact in the Nigerian health system, particularly in polio eradication. Funds provided by Rotary for the project are channeled through WHO and UNICEF in direct support of immunization activities. Rotary is also involved in Safe Blood Bank Project. The first Safe Blood Bank was launched in 2004. Presently, there are about 14 such banks in the country, each at a cost of \$3543,000.00.

Kanu Heart Foundation is sponsoring treatment for abnormalities of the heart. The foundation was established in 2004 by Kanu Nwankwo, after he had successfully undergone heart surgery. This enabled him to continue his football career. Dr. Samuel Onikhodio a Paediatric cardiologist at the University College Hospital, Ibadan started a Save a Child's Heart (SACH) project, a Nigerian replica of SACH-Israel. Also, Lifestream, a Lagos based NGO has been sponsoring journey to Israel for treatment of children with heart defects. Grassroots Health Organization of Nigeria was founded in 1993. It is based in the North and it is dedicated to eradicating vaginal fistula, a problem associated with some women during child birth.

Health in School Project (HISPRO) founded in 2003, is a Port Harcourt based NGO that focuses on good health. Same as SERWA Rural health Initiative organized by Dr. Edmund Anuforo. Its primary purpose is to create awareness on the need for good health with emphasis on eradicating malaria. In Africa, voluntary action (NGOS) is rooted in the communitarian philosophy (MCFubara, 2002). These NGOs are not registered as it were, but they are recognized by the people because it has become an integral part of the culture of the people.

Sociological perspective

Sociology as an academic discipline is concerned with human behaviour and human society. As a discipline in the social sciences, there is no one single

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perspective to explain social realities. As earlier explained, there are so many perspectives and paradigms in sociology. However, for the purpose of this paper, the functionalist perspective was adopted. This perspective is as old as sociology. The central theme of this theory is that society is seen as a system of interrelated parts which together form a whole. This theory/perspectives posits that there are certain basic needs or requirements which must be met for any society to survive. These requirements are sometimes known as functional pre-requisites. In concrete terms every society needs the health institution, political institutions, religious, economic institutions and so on.

The above assumption pre-supposes that the basic concern of mainstream sociology is on the people. Unequivocally, it is also the very essence of development, because, development cannot be conceived without the people. For instance, there are different environments and as such, the developmental needs of people differ from place to place. The needs of mountain dwellers certainly differ from that of forest dwellers, so are the needs of coastal dwellers different from forest dwellers. Therefore, true development has to be people-oriented; it has to be directed at the fulfillment of human potentials and the improvement of the social and economic well being of the people. With this simple illustration, it is clear that sociological perspective is in tandem with the objectives of development as both focus on realization of human potentials.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, therefore, the vital role of NGOs particularly, the Health based ones can never be glossed-over. The history of modern health system in Nigeria owns its origin to the activities of NGOs. Finally, Nigeria should not dismiss our traditional “NGOs”, because much of our developmental efforts in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial era were made by our belief in communitarian philosophy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Sequel to the brief exposition of the activities of NGOs in Nigeria and the outstanding contributions made by these noble organizations, the following recommendations are made;

That the only way the NGOs can continue to play their vital role in development is through the creation of enabling environment;

Government at all levels need to create an enabling environment for NGOs to thrive. The government can do this by assisting the NGOs to organize their programmes in government establishments without cost. Of course, most of what NGOs do is to assist the government govern the citizens or help

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propagate government policies or even enlighten the masses on certain government policies.

The government can also provide funds to genuine health NGOs, like SERWA, contribute meaningfully to their noble objectives. Government can also offer assistance to NGOs by providing them with resources. For instance, health-based NGOs could be provided with first aid materials, malaria medicine etc. The Ministry of Health needs to identify and partner with health based NGOs. Governments are often too far to be reached by the ordinary man on the streets and NGOs can help to reach these people and by so doing they could feel the impacts of the government through the NGOs, which appear to be closer to the people than the government. NGOs are veritable instruments which the first ladies in the country could rely on. This submission is predicated on the fact that, most of the projects embarked by the first ladies are indeed areas where the NGOs operate most.

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