



## **Participatory Development and Non-Governmental Organisations in Sudan: Expectations and Realities**

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### **Abstract**

This article describes and analyses the roles and contributions of non-governmental organisations in Sudan. There is a strong belief that involving local people in development activities would be achieved through community organisations. As a result, when implementing participatory development interventions, there is a tendency to rely on non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at national and regional levels, and support the formation of community organisations at grassroots level. To understand the concepts of these practices, this article will provide a brief review of NGOs' theories and in-depth analysis of Sudanese NGOs' performance and contributions. It suggests that there is a need to encourage and support the establishment of effective networks and links between government institutions local community organisations, private sectors and international organisations. Moreover, the article argues that international organisations with genuine intentions to reach the impoverished communities should be aware of their local partners' vision and investigate how genuine democratic and accountable non-governmental organisations are promoting participatory development approaches. Information about NGOs is based on a field research conducted 2007. I used focus group discussion and semi-structured interviews to explore the participants' perceptions and experiences.

### **Résumé**

Cet article décrit et analyse les rôles et contributions des organisations non-gouvernementales au Soudan. Il existe une forte conviction selon laquelle impliquer les populations locales dans les activités de développement est réalisable à travers les organisations communautaires. Ainsi, dans la mise en œuvre des interventions de développement participatif, on observe une tendance à se reposer sur les organisations non-gouvernementales (ONG) au niveau national et régional et appuyer la formation d'organisations communautaire au

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niveau de la base. Pour comprendre les concepts de ces pratiques, cet article offre une brève revue des théories des ONG et une analyse en profondeur de la performance et des contributions des ONG soudanaises. Il suggère qu'il existe un besoin d'encourager et d'appuyer l'établissement de réseaux et liens efficaces entre les organisations communautaires locales, les institutions gouvernementales, les secteurs privés et les organisations internationales. En outre, l'article défend le point de vue selon lequel les organisations internationales, ayant des intentions réelles de toucher les communautés vivant dans la pauvreté, devraient avoir conscience de la vision de leurs partenaires locaux et s'assurer que les organisations non-gouvernementales encouragent réellement des approches de développement participatif d'une manière démocratique et en toute transparence. Les informations sur les ONG sont basées sur une recherche de terrain conduite en 2007. Nous avons utilisé des discussions de groupes et des interviews semi-structurées pour explorer les perceptions et les expériences des participants.

### **A Conceptual Framework**

Many authors and theorists highlight the important role of community organisations as a mechanism for implementing successful participatory development (Uphoff 1991:495-97; Warren 1998; Hailey 2001; Kabeer 2003). Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have been seen as participatory development pioneers and have gained the respect and trust of donors and other development agencies. They have been identified as the most qualified instruments that can involve people in development processes (Rahnema 1992). Brohman (1996) asserts that NGOs, through participatory fieldwork, succeeded in providing local communities with some innovative solutions to their problems. Brohman explains that NGOs have advantages over other development agencies because of their flexibility, speed of operation, and ability to respond quickly when there are special circumstances. NGOs were given special status of being non-governmental organisations so that bureaucratic barriers could not trap them (Rahnema 1992). Willis (2005) points out those NGOs that rely on indigenous knowledge are considered more efficient and effective in providing services.

In complex socio-political environments the concept and practice of participatory development calls for including local organisations and civil society in decision-making processes (Warren 1998:122). Moreover, the involvement of local people in various forms of decentralised decision-making has become the focus of the neo-liberal approaches, which dominate the current development trends in many countries. According to Willis (2005:97) this involvement is associated with growth of NGOs. Willis (2005:98) argues that NGOs, whether international or national, are often regarded as channels for facilitating development for a range of reasons. 'Firstly, it is assumed that NGOs could provide services that are much more appropriate to the

local community. Secondly, they relied on local knowledge and used local material; therefore they were able to provide such services more efficiently and effectively.

On the other hand, within the field of development there has been a continuous critique and debate about some groups who have been excluded because of gender, ethnicity, class or religion (Kothari and Minogue, 2002). Chambers (1991:533) suggests that to put people first, and to put poorer people first of all, requires organisations that are strong and sustainable, and policies to support them. In this regards, local community organisations are seen as one of the mechanisms that could give impetus to participatory development (Weekes-Vagliani 1995). Accordingly, the formation of organisations and making reforms within local structures has been extensively highlighted in the literature. However, Black (1991:160) points out that because the current fashion calls for promotion of community organisations and the involvement of communities in the assessment of needs and planning of projects, all development agencies identify this as their objective, but clearly, there are only few that have put this process into practice. Brohman (1996) adds that alternative development programmes and projects had adopted the top-down administrative structure and did not afford any opportunities to local organisations to participate in decision-making processes.

### **Concerns about NGOs' Structures and Performance**

Many development interventions intend to establish community structures similar to the arrangements of bureaucratic structures (Clever 2001:42), which might result in creating a complicated or unproductive system. Rahman (1995:29) points out that NGOs have succeeded in delivering development at grassroots level but in several countries have created new professional elites who enjoy status and benefits, which are equivalent to, or exceed, senior government officials'. Pretty and Scoones (1995:163) point out that many NGOs in the developing world, especially the non-membership organisations, are not accountable. Moreover, it was evident that those NGOs have wasted resources and time of local people (Pretty and Scoones 1995:164).

### ***Involving Women in Community Organisations***

As mentioned earlier, the gender dimension of development activities has gained a lot of attention and focus from development agencies. Involving women in community organisations at various levels has received more efforts and inputs. However, whether it is better to form separate organisations for men and women or to have both in same organisation is

still under debate. Uphoff (1991) argues that separate organisations for women would enhance solidarity and outcomes, but in some circumstances, such as the availability of funds, it may not be viable to have separate organisations. However, in this case, there is a risk of placing women's participation under the control of men (Schneider and Libercier 1985). Cornwall (2003) argues that although it might be necessary to open up space for women's voices by installing them in the existing committees, this may not be enough if female participants are not concerned about other women, or their perceptions and concerns are not valued by male members. Clearly, within this framework there would be a power dimension. Evans (2003) notes that any set of organisation includes power relations, which entail a distribution of gains and losses. This means that there is a possibility of emergence of conflict, which requires an understanding of socio-cultural environments and adopting dialogue and negotiations.

### **The Sudanese NGOs**

In Sudan there are no legal obstacles to people's rights of association and the Sudanese law has guaranteed the people's right to create their own organisations. The Societies Registration Act was passed in 1957 and since that time up to the 1980s, the registered NGOs were largely confined to charity and relief works (Sudan Government, 1997).

For the time being, in Sudan, there are different forms of community organisations, which can be classified into five categories according to their ideological background and roles. First are social-oriented organisations, which focus on providing social and public services, such as adult education and health services both in cities and rural areas. Second are politically affiliated organisations which are supported and funded by political parties and operate as social services providers. Third are the trade unions (work-based organisations); fourth are the academic and technically oriented organisations which mainly exist in the capital or some cities where there are research or academic institutions. Finally, there are religious organisations that offer both social services and spiritual support. All these forms of organisation exist at national and regional levels; while social and religious organisations exist only at the grassroots level.

In 1979, the government established the Sudan Council of Voluntary Agencies (SCOVA) to develop voluntary activities; record and exchange information; network between specialised groups, build capacity through training and sensitisation, cooperate with relevant government bodies; and strengthen bilateral relations at the regional and international levels. SCOVA was assumed to embrace non-governmental organisations, foundations and commissions that had been officially registered in the Humanitarian Aid

Commission. This, however, led to conflict of interest among the different NGOs because SCOVA cannot practically represent all the national NGOs since it was initiated and supported by the government. SCOVA records show that about 400 organisations that are registered as members. It thus appears that members of local NGOs have the skills and knowledge of how to attract and mobilise resources and develop connections with donors and development agencies, particularly those agencies that believe in participation and are interested in building relations with local NGOs rather than deal with government institutions. The failure of NGOs in establishing any form of effective networks among themselves has great influence on their performance and outcomes. This results in waste of time and opportunities to make a real contribution in developing and improving the living standard of the majority who lack the skills and knowledge to initiate interventions and access the resources' providers.

According to Sudan's First National Human Development Report (1998), the number of unions decreased from 104 in 1989 to 26 in 1998. In fact, all trade unions were dissolved in 1989 when the present regime took power and a new law governing the structure and activities of trade unions was passed. This would explain why the number of trade unions declined during 1990s. Mohammed (2001:55) asserts that variations and contradictions in interests have influenced the unions and largely transformed them into political organisations controlled, co-opted or suppressed by government. This could be due to the fact that throughout the political history of Sudan trade unions had played an important part in changing the military regimes. The present government has made some protective measures to reduce or control the trade unions' role, particularly in the political arena.

However, other technical and social organisations have a wide space of freedom. The national NGOs have their own linkages with international NGOs, development agencies, and donors. Different organisations are involved in partnership or have relationships with external institutions. In this context the most important issue is freedom of association, which is a condition for successful participatory development (Egger 1995:110).

In 1992, the government launched the Comprehensive Development Strategy (CDS) (1992-2002) with a focus on creating self-reliance, satisfying human quest for dignity and freedom alongside advancement in economic, social and cultural life emanating from Sudan's national heritage. To achieve these objectives, the strategy identified the need to mobilise the Sudanese and forge new partnerships between government, NGOs, grassroots organisations and the private sector. The CDS (Sudan Government 1992:59) also states that 'social development is a joint effort involving the government and citizens, theoretically this means that people have the full right to

participate in decision-making processes through different ways. This strategy calls for more involvement of people in all fields of development'. However, it seems the CDS statement had no room for practical expression. The Sudan's first *Human National Development Report* (1998) points out that the laws governing NGOs made it difficult for them to register, although they managed to survive and make some achievements.

After signing the peace agreement between the North and the South of Sudan in January 2005, the government opened more space for civil society organisations to develop more relationships with international NGOs and donors. It also allowed the political parties to operate and trade unions were formed, in what it appears to be democratic. However, there are concerns regarding the transparency of election process. The critical question relates to whether these NGOs are capable of playing a significant role in any development interventions? In practice, most civil society organisations are not engaged in governance or local community issues and mainly work at a central level. There are negative public opinions and perceptions about NGOs. Many of them have been linked with certain powerful people or political parties during the last three decades and even the professional NGOs did not escape this trap.

Arising from this scenario, therefore, national and regional organisations are almost not existent at grassroots level. National and regional NGOs are simply not available to serve the ordinary people in rural areas where they are mostly needed. During a focus group discussion, a female academic who had previous working experience in rural areas explained:

Rural women are suffering because of illiteracy and lack of services. ... those local NGOs who always talk about gender issues and rural women never go there and make real contribution to change that situation (FA-Al-Azhary University/*Khartoum*).

Hence, despite the large number of national and regional NGOs in Sudan, it appears the rural people are not aware of their existence. People who are not involved directly or indirectly with these NGOs often criticise their orientation, the behaviour of their members and their connection with outsiders. Participants from different backgrounds, journalists, academics and specialists have recorded these perceptions and views, some of which are extracted below:

The civil society organizations are controlled by elites, who seem to be permanent employees with unknown employers, speak foreign languages, stay in the capital or big cities and are very good in organizing workshops and meetings. In fact, being a civil society activist is a very profitable job (Male Journalist-SSI/*Khartoum*).

A gender specialist from the Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry commented thus:

Many members of the NGOs are spies, working against their country and looking after their personal benefits. They rent the best houses in the town, drive cars, travel abroad and organize conferences and workshops. They know how to please the donors and the international agencies which finance them. They are just good at complaining and criticizing government, but who is going to criticize them? (GAD-FGD/ *Khartoum*).

Through a semi-structured interview a male academic from the University of Khartoum commented:

One of the problems of this country [is that] most of these NGOs claim that they are concerned about development, but they are not. They are either supporting this political party or that one, or have other hidden agendas. Unfortunately, it becomes a personal business. Many national organisations have been led by the same persons or group of people for the last two or three decades. (MAI-SSI/ *Khartoum*).

### **Formation of Community Organisations by Development Projects**

Based on local practices, local communities usually select their representatives for voluntary grassroots organisations through consultation and negotiation. Through this process no one would be hurt or excluded. This also means that the communities avoid the perceptions of 'losers' and 'winners' in a decision (Burayidi 2000:7). Many international organisations are getting involved in development processes through development projects; these projects place the formation of new organisations, through democratic procedure, at the centre of their interventions. Through this 'democratic process', projects introduced new ways of selecting community representatives rather than following the local selection procedure. It was evident that these new procedures created divisions and tensions in some rural areas as those who were not selected felt rejected and decided to stay away. This raises a concern about how development providers should deal with local systems.

For example the North Kordofan Rural Development project (implemented by IFAD and the Sudanese Government between 2001 and 2008) created new structures, which were called Village Development Organisations (VDOs). These VDOs were formed at village level through general village assembly where, according to the size of the village, six to eleven members were elected to form the executive committee. According to the VDO's

constitution, women should make up 30 per cent of the committees' membership. Each committee consisted of a chairperson, secretary, treasurer and assistant treasurer, nomads' representative, village *Sheikh* (leader) and extension workers. Some of the members who were made extension workers led the sub-committees that dealt with agricultural, livestock, crop production and horticulture, women's development, agro-forestry and rangeland activities. The project fieldworkers were responsible of the formation of VDOs. They followed a democratic process of choosing the members and the president. However, local communities usually selected the members of grassroots organisations through consultations and negotiations, a procedure that protected their internal solidarity.

According to IFAD (2002), the main objectives of the Village Development Organisations (VDOs) were to:

1. Enhance the concept of solidarity, consultation and participation; motivate the community, local and national institutions to contribute to the establishment of social service, protection of the environment and the development of natural resources;
2. Carry out social and economic activities in order to improve the social and economic status of people at the village level;
3. Improve the productivity of crops and livestock;
4. Plan and implement capacity building programmes through self-help and gender mainstreaming approaches;
5. Establish partnership and seek support from the government and other development institutions;
6. Provide its members with loans from the organisation's resources or through the facilitation of banks' loans; and
7. Coordinate the sustainable development efforts provided by different development agencies.

The VDO and its committees are responsible to the general assembly. According to its constitution, the village general assembly, which is formed of registered members, elects the board of directors and the head of the committees, and approves the annual plan, budget and report. The responsibility of the board of directors is to resolve conflicts, maintain solidarity, invite and welcome state officials and other dignitaries, participate in preparing the annual plan and budget, and invite the village assembly for general meetings. The VDO constitution states clearly that only registered members can benefit from the bank facilities and the profits from VDOs' assets. Other people have the right to benefit from other social services according to the conditions that would be specified by VDO committees.

These social services include training, literacy programmes, pest management and health services by trained service providers, such as midwives, and so on.

The VDO's assets are reviewed and calculated at the year end during which profits accruing from the credit fund is shared as follows: 40 per cent for the members; 20 per cent for the board of directors; 20 per cent added to the capital; 10 per cent reserved for the village services; and the last 10 per cent budgeted for unseen services (IFAD 2002:2). Other undeclared benefits are participation in meetings, discussions and selection of community representatives, which are guaranteed to registered members only. The poorest groups, who could not afford to pay the membership fees, have no rights, according to the constitution, to attend meetings, nominate or be nominated for a VDO position in its committees. This means that the poorest are deprived of the right to voice out their opinions, select their representatives, or have a chance to be selected.

These new organisations were to replace the traditional community-based organisations and to take over their responsibility. It was also expected that their members would be empowered through training and interaction with financial institutions. In general, the project has created new complicated structures that were neither understood by the members nor by ordinary people. Moreover, it was evident that it created tension, especially in some villages, where there was more than one leader (*Sheikh*). The VDOs were not represented clearly in the projects Board of Directors; the project had adopted the top-down administrative structure, which did not offer opportunities to local organisations to participate in the decision-making process (Brohman 1996). Meanwhile, it cannot be claimed that the members of these organisations were empowered to criticise or evaluate major decisions concerning project staff, objectives or finance. Moreover, the existence of these new structures neither replaced the old organisations nor empowered its members. Instead, it deprived the traditional organisations of the opportunity to be empowered. Traditional associations, such as education association, native administration and *El-Goodeya* council (mediation and reconciliation council) continued to conduct their duties, while the new village development organisations only dealt with issues related to the project, such as credit, calling for meetings and welcoming missions and project staff.

Moreover, little attempt was made to streamline the operations of the VDO vis-a-vis the traditional societies that preceded it. For instance, even though the *El-Goodeya* was a recognised community-based organisation established through consultation as a mediation and reconciliation council, yet the constitution of VDOs says 'the VDO at the village level will be

responsible for conflict resolution' (IFAD 2002:4). So what was *El-Goodeya* supposed to do after VDO was created – disband?

Also, in reality, these VDOs represent the project' participants who paid the fees and enrolled as members. This means those who are not members cannot be ruled by the new organisation (VDO). Nevertheless, the VDO constitution did not specify whether the VDO would handle conflicts between its members or deal with all the community and what would be the case if there were conflicts between the project participants and non-participants. In view of this confusion, however, the observable pattern has been that the locals remain attached to *El-Goodeya* Council and committed to its rules for the following reasons: (i) the council's members are the most respected and trusted in the community, partly because their selection is not arbitrary but based on certain inherent qualities; (ii) the council represents all the community members without exception. Apparently, many felt shut out by the creation of the VDO membership on subscription basis (Lane 1995).

The VDOs made their alienation of the people keenest by excluding the poorest households. As a result, members of communities kept the project committees and activities away from their traditional institutions. This resulted in clear demarcation between the indigenous or grassroots organisations and the 'project's committees' with one representing the community and the other representing the project. Nevertheless, the project committees tried to rise above this divisive tendency by involving all the people in their general meetings whether they are VDO members or not. In various villages, it was observed that when the project staff asked the members of the VDO committee to invite the members for meetings they tended to send children to call the people. The invitation is always extended to everyone. Even those who are not members can attend. This is a traditional right. Local communities used to organise their meetings in the open air, and everyone who sees people gathering will just turn up and join the group. In fact, the people are the ones who spontaneously brought the project within the communities' indigenous framework.

### **Reflection on NGOs' Accountability**

The national and regional NGOs, at present, are involved with international organisations in shaping development processes. However, most of these NGOs, particularly in Khartoum and the state capitals have failed to implement sound and visible projects or programmes that will alleviate poverty, develop communities and combat corruption. Moreover, these NGOs themselves are not above suspicion. Despite the donor trust and operational freedom allowed them, many NGOs at national or state level apparently lack leaders and members with strong moral commitment to the welfare of the local

people.. Most of the national NGOs engaged in political conflicts, lack co-ordination capacities and good reputation. Overall, the regional and national NGOs lack the requisite values and commitments that are needed to make them truly accountable to those they claim to assist. This proves that freedom of association alone cannot be a sufficient guarantee for acquiring accountable and efficient community organisations. The credibility and commitment of the leaders of the NGOs are also important. Grassroots organisations at the village level may lack the capacity to create changes needed by the local communities, yet most of the voluntary grassroots associations in North Kordofan State where the author conducted this study, have proved to be good at achieving people's aspirations and are more capable of mobilising the local communities. Naturally, people only find themselves in a truly participatory organisation when they share common concerns and volunteer to act collectively (Brohman 1996:265-66).

### **Challenges Facing NGOs in Sudan**

I observed that the national and regional NGOs had intensive presence and publicity. Their large numbers at national and regional levels and their cosy relationship with international NGOs and other development agencies are clearly evident. The signing of the peace process between the North and the South of Sudan appear to have polished up this perception a bit. International NGOs and other development agencies rely very much on these national NGOs to promote their policies, access information and provide services. They are all sold on the assumption that these NGOs are more reliable than the government institutions

The emerging reality seems to show, however, that the credibility of these local NGOs (national and regional) is quite questionable. In contrast to the common perceptions in the literature, the NGOs are facing increasing doubt and distrust. Their members have been accused of mobilising resources for themselves rather than the community they claim to be helping. For example, most people in the villages of North Kordofan State know nothing of the existence or roles of the over 250 regional NGOs supposedly working in that state alone.

All NGOs working in the development sector in Sudan (that is virtually all without exception) need to put their theoretical claim about development into practice. They also need to develop a greater sense of commitment to the communities and be accountable to the people they claim to serve. Likewise they need to build transparent structures and networks as recent evidence suggests that the federation can improve the capacity of local organisations (Mitlin 2004:176). Since existing government policies have opened social space for participation and free dialogue, the NGOs now have all the opportunities they need to develop relationships, attract more resources, and

contribute genuinely to the promotion of a nationwide, participatory development process.

### **Conclusion**

Development theorists (Chambers 1991; Rahnema 1992; Brohman 1996; Cleaver 2001; Henkel et al 2001; Willis 2005) placed emphasis on the importance of civil society groups and their role in providing services and advocacy. Apparently, there is an assumption that local groups and NGOs would respond more quickly to people's needs and mobilise more resources than government institutions. This understanding has opened more space for local NGOs to interact with international development partners and attract more resources.

In practice, however, this participatory development approach has received increasingly strong criticism. Indeed, many have identified key challenges with the participatory development approach especially in the areas of community mobilisation, capacity building, planning, partnerships and sustainability. To overcome these challenges, Kelly and Caputo (2006:234) suggest that greater attention should be directed at the role of government and non-governmental agencies. Based on Sudan's experience, we may include the need to provide financial and technical support to community organisations that represent the diverse interest groups and make them fully accountable to the poor and marginalised people.

The most important role that national and regional NGOs could play in the development process is to help grassroots organisations emerge from their isolation, interact with one another and build allies with other international and state institutions. The Sudanese culture could be described as a 'participatory culture', the values, beliefs and practices encourage cooperation, fellowship and good neighbourliness. NGOs must use these cultural tools to motivate people to participate in development interventions, and raise their awareness about citizens' rights and obligations. On the other hand, the international organisations need to acquire an in-depth understanding of prevailing social, economic, political and physical environments to make maximum impact in their development programmes.

### **Note**

Information about Sudanese NGOs is based on the PhD research which was conducted in 2007 by the author of this article.

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