

## **North/South Partnerships: Different responsibilities and Opportunities – The role of NGOs in Meeting the MDGs**

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### **Introduction**

In May 1998 the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) held a session on the Integrated Follow-up of Major UN Conferences and Summits. The President of the Council, Ambassador Juan Somavía, reported that “in order to effectively monitor progress in the implementation of conferences at the country level, there is an urgent need for the multilateral system to develop a coherent set of basic indicators, as well as the need to strengthen the capacity of the UN system and of countries to collect and analyze statistics.” He also emphasised that “involvement of civil society in an effective way in the intergovernmental conference follow-up process is essential in view of the significant role members of civil society have played in the conferences themselves as well as in their follow-up and implementation, particularly at the country level.”

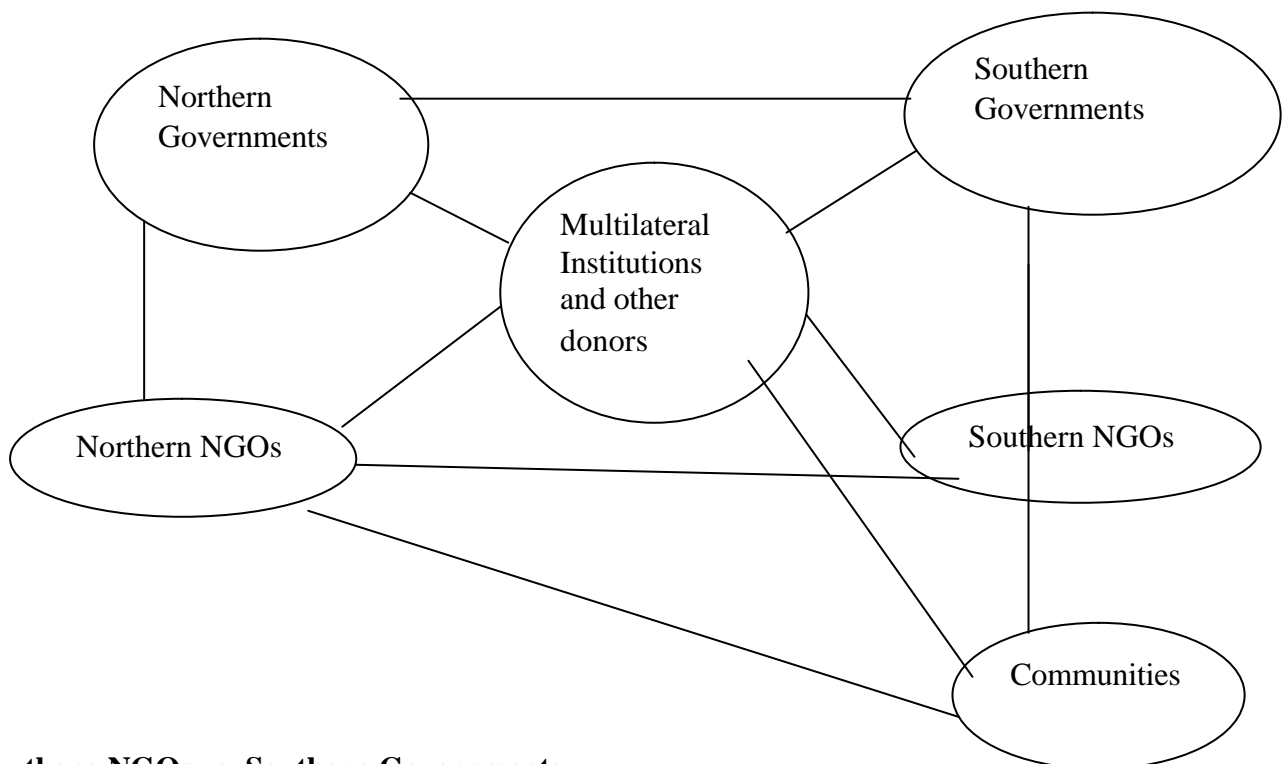
With regard to NGOs, the Declaration commits governments “to develop strong partnerships with the private sector and with civil society organizations in pursuit of development and poverty eradication” and “to give greater opportunities to the private sector, non-governmental organizations to contribute to the realization of the Organization’s goals and programmes.” NGOs now have access to most meetings at the international and regional level and, in some cases, have also interacted with their governments at national levels, commenting on and even helping to draft the national reports about implementation of the conference resolutions. Groups, whether local or part of international networks and associations, feel empowered by the UN agenda and participate in different ways in the monitoring and implementation of conference resolutions or international human rights obligations. Both the Northern and the Southern NGOs are confronted with the need to focus on the poorest of the poor and the need to widen their constituencies to support the MDGs.

## North and South Partnerships

There are essentially numerous types of partnerships that can be described both at the regional, within the global arena and international levels: South – South, North – North, and South–North partnerships. These can be between and among different players like governments in the south and its people and those in the North and its people, NGOs in the South and those in the North and between and among themselves in their respective spaces. All these forms of clusters have either a direct or indirect link to the multilateral institutions and other donors.

There is an illusion that developing global partnerships as stipulated by Goal 8 would enhance the achievements of the MDGs. We need to investigate further the quality of these partnerships and how they enhance Goal 8. I will attempt to highlight some shortcomings in some and not all of these interactions:

### Diagram I: Forms of Partnerships



### Southern NGOs vs. Southern Governments

There is a gradual recognition by Southern governments that NGOs are key stakeholders in the development process although the space for engagement still remains limited and highly conditional. This has been necessitated by the introduction of poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs), which demands for, among other things, broad participation and consultation

by the government of civil society groups. A consultative and participatory framework is essential for national ownership and commitment of stakeholders to the development process. PRSP process gave an opportunity to some CSOs to interact with their governments but to a large extent the participation in most African countries was cosmetic (AFRODAD PRSP Series, 2003). The participation on CSO in the development process should not be a condition but a “Given” democratic right in any development process as otherwise, people will participate but there would be no real transformation in the policies and the lives of the majority of the poor people.

On the other hand, we have seen deliberate efforts by the African Union (AU) to establish structures through which CSOs can engage with their governments through AU-ECOSOC (adopted during the AU Summit, July 2004).

Civil society’s key role is to be effective advocates of national development, as well as strengthen the capacity of communities to realize the MDG vision at the grassroots level in partnership with local authorities.

### **Southern Governments vs. Northern Governments and multilateral institutions**

The “external economic environment”, (comprising global economic structures and trends, and the policies determined or influenced by international agencies such as the IMF, World Bank, WTO, UN and developed country groupings such as the G-8, Paris Club, OECD and bilateral aid agencies) does impact tremendously on developing countries (M. Khor, 2003).

In the context of the MDGs, the extent to which a developing country is able to make progress on many of the goals (especially Goal 1: to eradicate poverty and hunger, but also Goals 4, 5 and 6 relating to health, and Goal 7 on environmental sustainability) depends not only on the domestic policy choices, but also on how “friendly” or “hostile” the external economic environment is to that country.

The prospects for Africa to achieve the MDGs will depend largely on the extent to which they promote economic and political regional integration and also how they increase their participation in the global economy. The continuous fall in export commodity prices has caused huge (approx. US\$75 billion annually in trade losses for sub-Saharan Africa) income

and foreign exchange losses to many developing countries and is one of the major causes of the persistence or increased levels of indebtedness and poverty.

Owing to the small size of the markets of most African countries, increasing external trade from a diversified export base is essential to regain high rates of economic growth

On the debt issue, there still exists a serious power imbalance between the Debtors and creditors when it comes to the resolution of the Debt crisis. There is no global mechanism that seeks redress of the illegitimate debts of third world countries. The donors, who constitute the creditors continue to dominate the decision making process when it comes to debt issues.

Fairer trading arrangements and sustainable debt management mechanisms must be agreed upon to help developing countries integrate into the world economy.

### **Southern Governments vs. its people/communities**

The government remains the main custodian of people's aspirations and desires in society. They have been given the mandate by the people to rule them and deliver on all their promises. The communities look up to the government as a primary giver/provider of basic needs such as health, education, security, water and sanitation although the market is rapidly replacing this role of the state.

This partnership between the government and its people need to be strengthened. It should be based on transparency and mutual respect. The government need to exercise committed leadership for poverty reduction and for the achievement of MDGs which would include efforts to redirect national resources towards community activities.

The key role of communities, households and individuals is to become self motivated to contribute to development in general and to improving their general welfare. It is far easier to work with a motivated community, than one that has resigned to poverty.

### **Opportunities for NGOs (Both North and South) in MDGs Process**

The role of civil society within developing and developed countries is crucial if the goals are to be achieved as the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

### *Demand political and economic accountability*

Over the past decades there has been a welcomed growth in civil society movements within the “south”. They are demanding higher standards of political accountability and good governance of their governments. They have built social and human capital within their communities and, are still supplementing the frequently inadequate public services provided by their governments. The expansion of civil society in the last 15 years has been instrumental in the realisation of these goals. The expansion of Civil Society and a growth of a degree of specialized NGOs have enhanced the fight against poverty.

However, there is some contradiction and duplication among Civil Society. Most NGOs both in the North and South are usually derailed in their work because of the constant emergency of new issues other from the North or South to an extent that they forget about their core business. Right now, almost all NGOs are working on MDGs and are demanding that research studies be conducted. This duplication of work among NGOs can be attributed largely to the nature of the funding relationship that they have with the Northern donors who in most cases would detect what issues are “hot” and thus should take the lead in global discussions. There is need to create coherence among civil society and NGOs work. Noting that civil society to date is not well connected; interaction and networking should be expanded. Donors should allow for flexibility in their funding so that NGOs can undertake work that is relevant to their local realities.

*Need to monitor, evaluate and implement local programmes and projects*

NGOs not only have to play a bigger role in monitoring the delivery of development assistance to people at the grassroots but also must be supported and encouraged by all governments to do so. In Kenya for example, NGOs played an important role in the assessment team on the hunger situation that has now been since declared a national disaster in that part of the region. NGOs still perform the crucial role of distribution of food relief in close collaboration with the government in Kenya. However, for greater achievements to be realised, standards of governance within developing countries must improve. Developed countries and their donor agencies must increase aid flows with less stringent conditionalities if the targets are to be met.

On the other hand, civil society has to demonstrate their professionalism and capacity to deliver. It is the responsibility of civil society to hold government accountable for the implementation of these MDGs. One particular critical element is to establish the rights of poor through realisation of these goals by ensuring that governments setup/ or strengthen institutions and policies that support the implementation of the MDGs goals. It would not be appropriate for governments to adopt policies such as the ones imposed by the international financial institutions such market liberalization that places “the market before the people”. Human beings should be placed at the center of any development process, failure to which all efforts towards meeting the MDGs will be a mere illusion.

The challenge in Africa today is how to achieve an enabling environment in which CSOs/NGOs can work well. Legislation around CSOs engagement with Government and other stakeholders in society must be flexible in a way that NGOs are allowed to work freely, use media channels as appropriate tools for sensitising the masses on key policy issues that affect them without fear of victimization by the state. Governments should therefore be committed to creating an attractive and enabling environment for supporting the development and operations of the civil society organizations and NGOs in the country. Thus, the process integral to the MDGs is to galvanize support and to hold govt accountable on the implementation of the goals.

The second most important role of civil society organizations is in monitoring the implementation of programs, projects and activities on MDGs. NGOs have strong grassroots

networks that can be effective in monitoring the implementation of MDGs. Every year organisations such as Social Watch, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch group publish global reports on what has and has not been achieved in the area of social development and human rights respectively. Such efforts could be replicated in other regions as a monitoring instrument of the implementation of the MDGs. This is especially important for the verification of the efforts on the ground vis a vis those reported in the international conferences by governments as well as international organisations.

Although governments are the sole signatories to the MDGs and thus being the implementers of these Goals, civil society organizations have the capacity to implement some of the MDG projects, which can be funded by government, private sector and international organizations. It is however sad to note that cuts from governments' budget and other international development agencies greatly affect their operations. There is therefore a need to increase funding that is channelled towards the NGOs so that they can intensify and scale up the implementation of the MDGs in developing countries. Governments in developing countries too need to see NGOs as partners and consider funding the local NGOs that are directly involved in the implementation of MDGs.

Civil society has in the past attempted to translate some of the international development commitments analysing the WSSD outcomes, NEPAD and MDGs in an integrative manner towards achieving sustainable development. Civil society plays a critical role in shaping and implementing participatory sustainable development, however, support to mobilize civil society networks in areas of community participation needs to be broadened. This may require extensive research and discussion by citizens, community leaders, community organizations and the Government hence moving towards a more coordinated and complimentary approach. This will result in avoiding the generalizations of comprehensive planning and the pitfalls of single issue or narrow scope planning are avoided. Approving the sector plan minimizes the inconsistencies resulting from parcel-by-parcel decisions.

MDGs will need to be monitored at the policy, institutional and technical levels. This will require capacity strengthening in policy monitoring, technical and statistical capacity and institutional capacity development to deliver on the MDGs.

Management of programmes in the communities needs to be led by the communities themselves. Decision making on the planning and implementation should not only involve them but they should actively participate to ensure that when all else is done they are able to share lessons learnt and manage other programmes that come into their communities.

### *Sustained and consistent advocacy campaigns for MDGs*

The most important role that civil society organizations can play for the success in the MDGs is to maintain consistent and sustained advocacy and campaign for MDGs. In most countries, they are able to convince governments, private sector and international organizations to engage in projects for MDGs. The northern civil society organisations should continue to demand for further allocation of funds towards MDGs and campaign for the realignment of development policies of their countries to reflect the Millennium Development Goals. There still exists a gap between these efforts with the government and public on these issues. More effort is needed to generate interest of the general population, to not only secure their support, but also to help monitor the efforts of governments towards the commitments they made on debt relief, ODA and trade reforms.

While it is appreciated that most support comes from the aid and solidarity related organisations, majority of CSOs that have no direct link with the south show little support towards these goals. In order to consolidate their voice as NGOs in relation to government partnerships, it is important that awareness creation and campaigns are directed to those whose works are not directly related to MDGs. This will greatly scale up the impact of advocating for deeper and faster resources as well as necessary development policy reforms that will address the MDGs. CSOs in the north therefore need to intensify their literacy campaigns as well as awareness campaigns to raise the profile of MDGs in their countries among the general public as well as their counterparts.

In the South, mobilisation of grass-root support is imperative if we are to achieve our targets and for this to happen successfully, there must be sustained political will from the top, broad-based popular support/ social mobilization, and empowered and committed local authorities.

Through social movements and innovations in popular participation, us as citizens we can influence decision-making and be able to hold our authorities accountable for their actions.



### *Nationalise the MDGs*

From the south, the Civil Society Organization should become part of the nationalization process of the MDGs. They need to be involved in setting of national goals, defining national poverty lines, MDG costing and strategies towards poverty eradication. They should also be highly engaged in the necessary process of creating the national indicators and accountability mechanisms on MDGs.

A national agenda should be developed and then assessed in terms of how it measures up against an international framework. It is incorrect to transpose the international framework on national frameworks.

However, it will be important for civil society to pinpoint the gaps in their national agenda, which are leaving out the poor, and how the voices of communities could be strengthened. There is need for efficient and effective use of resources and planning at local level. The poor have to break out of the poverty circle by reworking stock of knowledge on hand and new ways of creating wealth.

The Southern NGOs will need to scale up their MDG linked programs and rally people in developing countries around the goals of MDGs to ensure that governments do not falter in their commitment to fight poverty, improve governance and ensure sustainable development.

It is imperative to develop a social conscience and implement development as an intrinsic right of the poor. And this starts from the individual and change is needed on how people related to other people.

There are indicators of success of improved health status and nutrition, and improved literacy levels as a result of NGO local government partnership in many developing countries. Such partnership and collaborations in areas of comparative advantage not only save resources but also bring about better results. There is therefore a need to scale up efforts that have showed remarkable results as a result of these partnerships.

There is need to have effective leadership at all levels to mobilize the nation around the MDGs and national targets. Effective partnerships between national governments, development partners, civil society organizations, private sector and communities are a prerequisite for the achievement of MDGs. In order for the poor to effectively participate in the MDGs agenda, there is need to translate the MDGs message to its simplest form, by using local vernaculars and the arts. Civil society by its nature is better placed to assume this critical role.

This nationalised approach also allows for the Goals and their strategies to be defined and adapted to local contexts. In developing countries, the focus is on the rights of poor people to realize the Goals but critical questions such as these ones will need to be addressed: Are the appropriate policies in place? Are institutions responsive to the legitimate aspirations of poor and marginalised people? Is there adequate public accountability and transparency in budgeting processes?

#### *Forging strategic partnerships*

There is also need for a new form of partnerships between and among the NGOs both in the North and South, governments, and the private sector for the purposes of implementation, sharing of experience and resources towards the MDGs. It was clear from the outset that the credibility of the MDG global campaign hinges on creating pressure on different stakeholders for the achievement of Goal 8 by rich countries.

Northern NGOs need to become more proactive in advocating for policy change through their own governments. They should focus their efforts on building local capacity, at governmental and community level with greater emphasis on advocacy for national and international policy change to deal with structural poverty under the MDG framework.

There should also be a careful partnership between the civil society and the private sector. The private sector is important to the realization of the MDGs. NGOs need to lobby the private sector to meet their commitment to corporate social responsibility. They need to monitor their ethical standards; labour conditions and impact of their activities on environment. NGOs also need to lobby and campaign for the private sector to fund national projects which revolve around MDGs and contribute their knowledge in organization and

management of projects, capacity building, as well as technology. The Private sector's key role is to work consciously within the national interest as they contribute to the creation of national wealth and employment.

The partnership between north and south in need to be strengthened and built on common objectives especially between civil society organisations of North and South.

## **Conclusion**

The MDGs should not be seen as emphasizing only situations of the least developed countries alone. Each stakeholder must pursue strategies that meet their own specific needs. We must however commit ourselves as we did four years ago to honest and effective implementation of these goals. We must intensify advocacy, improve on monitoring and reporting and scale up programmes that have proved successful.

We must commit to all the 8 goals as previously signed, and this entails exploring new possibilities of finding a permanent solution out of the debt crisis that cripple most of developing countries, and make trade work for the poor countries.

The quest for realising the MDGs should take place at all levels, as the goals are inter dependent. The UN should continue support efforts of its member states and all other sectors both in the north and south play their respective roles.

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