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Reflections on NGOs in Tanzania: What We Are, What We Are Not and What We Ought to Be?

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Reflections on NGOs in Tanzania: What We Are, What We Are Not and What We Ought to Be?[1]

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1. Soul-searching

We do not get many opportunities to sit back and reflect on ourselves as civil society activists. Reflecting on who we are, what are we doing and where we are going does not require any justification. In this day and age of imperial hegemony, transmitted to the peoples of the world through both state and non-state agencies, it is all the more important that we create opportunities to consciously ask ourselves one fundamental question: Are we serving the best interests of our working people? In other words, are we contributing to the great cause of humanity, the cause of emancipation from oppression, exploitation and deprivation, or are we engaged, consciously or unconsciously, in playing to the tune set by others?

It is in the spirit of self-criticism, reflection and soul-searching that I want to offer a few thoughts which I hope we can discuss honestly.

2. Our Limitations

To understand NGOs better, we must start with what we are and what we are not, and our limitations. *Firstly*, most of our NGOs are top-down organizations led by the elite. What is more, most of them are urban based. In our case, NGOs did not start as a response to a perceived need of the large majority of working people. It is true that many of us who work in the NGOs are well-intentioned and would want to contribute to some cause, however we may define it. It is also true that NGOs do address some of the real concerns of the working people. Yet, we must recognize that we did not develop to serve the needs of the mass of the people, nor have we managed to do this. The relationship between us and the masses therefore remains, at best, that of benefactors and beneficiaries. This is not the best of relationships when it comes to genuine activism *with* the people, rather than *for* the people.

Secondly, we are not a constituency or a set of membership based organizations. Even if we have a membership, this is largely made up of fellow members of the elite. Our accountability, therefore, is limited, and limited to a small group of people. As a matter of fact, we end up perhaps being more accountable to the donors, who fund us, than to our own members, much less our people.

Thirdly, we are funded by, and rely almost exclusively on, foreign funding. This is the greatest single limitation. 'Whoever pays the piper plays the tune' holds true, however much we may want to think otherwise. In many direct and subtle ways, those who fund us determine our agendas, place limits on our agendas or reorient them. Very few of us can really resist the pressures that external funding imposes on us.

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[1] This was a Keynote Address to the Gender Festival organized by the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) in September, 2003. I am grateful to Natasha Shivji for reading and commenting on the draft.

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Fourthly, in the NGO-world, we have been brought up to believe that we should act and not theorize. Theorization is detested. The result is that most 'NGO-wallas' do not have any grand vision of society, nor are they guided by large issues and, instead, concentrate on small, day-to-day issues. In the NGOs, we hardly spend any time defining our vision in relation to the overall social and economic context of our societies.

Fifthly, many of us tend to conflate NGOs with civil society organizations, thus undermining the traditional member and class-based organizations of the working people, such as trade unions, peasant associations, etc. We may pay lip-service to people's organizations (or POs), but, in practice, both our benefactors (the so-called 'donor community') and we ourselves *privilege* NGOs, which has had far-reaching consequences, including the undermining of these POs.

In spite of these limitations, I believe NGOs can play a worthy role. But then we have to recognize *what we are not*. I want to suggest that, in the current context in our country, NGOs have been cast in a surrogate role which many of us have come to accept, and, perhaps, even feel flattered by. This is where our limitations have been compounded and there is a danger that we may assume a role which does not belong to us and fail to play the role for which we may be best suited. This will be clearer as I examine some of our recent experience of activism.

3. Participation by Substitution

NGOs, as they developed in the West, were essentially pressure groups to keep those in power, the state and the government, on their toes. In our case, as the donors became disenchanted with states, they took a fancy to NGOs, thus undermining the state and its institutions while, at the same time, placating their own constituencies back at home who demanded civil society involvement. Participation and consultation are supposedly part of the so-called "good governance" insisted upon by donors. They provide the imperial countries with the means to legitimize the neo-liberal policies of hegemonic Western powers and the IFIs (International Financial Institutions) in our countries.

NGOs are cast in the role of "partners": partners of the state; partners of the donor-community; partners in development; and partners in good governance. We get involved in the so-called policy-dialogues in which the triad - NGOs, the government and donor representatives - participates. We attend workshops as stakeholders. Donors, who fund policy-making, and their consultants who make policies, seek us out for consultation. All this goes under the name of people's participation and involvement, or what is called, "good governance". What is the implication of this type of participation on democratic governance in our countries?

First, policy-making, in the interest of its people, is precisely one of the core functions and responsibility of a government. It is not the function of the donors. Donor driven policy-making only shows how much our states and people have lost their right to self-determination under the post-cold war imperialist domination, euphemistically called globalization. By participating in this process, NGOs lend legitimacy to this domination. In fact, the NGOs ought to be playing an exactly opposite role. NGOs cannot possibly be fighting in the interest of the people if they are not in a position to expose and oppose imperial domination. The right to self-determination is our basic right as a people, as a nation and as a country. It is the right for which our independence fighters laid down their lives and now we seem to be legitimizing the process of losing it.

Secondly, by pretending to be partners in policy-making, NGOs let the government off the hook, as the government abdicates its primary responsibility. The role of NGOs ought to be that of a watchdog, critiquing the short-comings in government policies and their implementation.

Thirdly, NGOs simply cannot substitute themselves for the people. They are neither the elected representatives of the people nor mandated to represent them. People's participation in the institutions of the state is their democratic right and ought to be done on a continuous basis, through structuring of appropriate legal, institutional and social frameworks. As pressure and advocacy groups, our prime duty is to pressurize the powers-that-be to create conditions for enabling the participation of the people themselves in the institutions of policy-making. This means our role should be to struggle for the expansion of space for the people and people's organizations in the representative institutions of the state, such as parliament, local government councils, village and neighborhood bodies, etc. The process of reforming and reconstituting the state in a democratic direction is the only way to ensure that genuine people's participation can deter the abuse of state power. This is a continuous process of struggle, not some one-off, ad hoc process of stakeholder workshops and policy-dialogues.

If the struggle for democratic reform is conceived thus, then the very strategy of NGOs would differ. Protracted public debates, instead of stakeholders' conferences; and the development of alternative ways of doing things, instead of providing so-called inputs into consultants' drafts of policies. There is a need for demonstrations, protest marches and teach-ins in streets and community centres, to expose serious abuses of power and bad polices, instead of the so-called *policy dialogues* in five-star hotels. Democratic governance is an arena of contestation of power, not some moral dialogue or crusade for goodness against evil, as the meaningless term "good governance" implies. You cannot dialogue with power!

In short, I am urging that we need to re-examine our conceptualization and practices of these new and fancy roles we are being given i.e. those as partners and stakeholders. We cannot possibly be partners of, and hold a stake in, the system which oppresses and dehumanizes the large majority of people

4. Selective Activism

The great strength of the NGOs is supposed to be their *consistent, principled and committed stand* in the interest of the large masses and for human values and causes. We are not a bunch of self-seeking petty bourgeois politicians, who, almost by definition, are inconsistent and driven more by power than principles. We, as activists, are not in the business of brokering power, where expediency and compromise rule. Our business is to resist and expose the ugly face of power. We are guided, and our work is informed by, deeply held human values and causes. It seems to me that consistency of principles and commitment to humanity should inform all our work, thought, activism and advocacy.

Our values and causes may be summed up in three elements, which I have elsewhere called *popular livelihoods, popular participation and popular power*.[3] Whether in the language of democracy or human rights, most of our values and causes can be summed up in these three elements. By 'popular' I refer to the exploited and oppressed classes and groups in our society. This is in contrast to the current, utterly demeaning and singularly useless, neo-liberal discourse in which popular classes are dubbed as the 'poor', to be incessantly researched upon and targeted to receive poverty alleviation funds. The term 'popular' is meant to signify the central place of the working people in the struggle to regain their livelihoods, dignity and power. I shall not go into details of these concepts here. Suffice it to say that I believe these elements signify the values and causes with which many NGOs and activists would identify.

[3] See Issa Shivji, 'Critical Elements of a New Democratic Consensus in Africa' in Othman, H. ed. *Reflections on Leadership in Africa: Forty Years after Independence*, VUB University Press, 2000.

It is my contention that many of our NGOs have failed to stand up for these values consistently and, thereby, have greatly compromised themselves. Let me cite three recent experiences. I am doing this as a matter of critical reflection, rather than to point fingers.

In 2003, the whole world was shaken to the core, and basic human values were cynically challenged, when the United States invaded and occupied Iraq. Millions of people, as individuals, as NGO activists and as simple decent human beings, all over the world, demonstrated and protested in great defiance of this monstrosity. Here, in Dar es Salaam, our NGO world was shamefully silent. A small demonstration organized by the Students Union of the University attracted few NGOs and activists. Well known human rights NGOs and advocates were conspicuous by their absence. The umbrella NGO organizations did not even issue a simple statement either on their own or in solidarity with others. How can we, who espouse democratic values of freedom and self-determination, explain such silence?

Let us take the second example. During the time that the Government was debating the NGO Bill, there was also, on the cards, one of the most draconian bills, the so-called Anti-Terrorism law. The NGO bill was rightly opposed by NGOs. Although one may critique their strategy, that is a matter for another occasion. The point I want to make here is that these same NGOs were utterly silent on the anti-terrorism bill. In countries like South Africa and Kenya, NGOs were in the forefront against the anti-terrorism law. To their credit, our sister NGOs in Kenya have put up such stiff resistance that the bill has not yet been passed. Ours sailed through the parliament. Many people are asking and are entitled to ask: How come? Are we NGOs selective in the freedoms we support? Was our cowardly silence in respect of the anti-terrorism law because our benefactors include the likes of USAID? Is it because we are no better than other self-seeking groups in that we readily challenged the NGO bill which threatened our existence while we conveniently ignored the anti-terrorism law, which delivered a shattering blow to all basic freedoms and rights?

It is true that NGOs cannot do everything and they cannot be everywhere. But the question of Iraq and the spate of anti-terrorism laws and measures thrust down the throats of our government and people is not just anything. It marks an important turning point in the establishment of imperial hegemony of the single superpower, with very far-reaching consequences for the freedoms, rights, dignity and independence of the peoples of the world, particularly the third world. Under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the superpower is involved in changing the world map. It is playing god by deciding for us what is good and what is evil. It is establishing a string of training colleges for spies and new types of police on the continent, including our own country. Yet, the NGO world sleeps soundly. Latin America knows, and has experienced, what happens when you have your forces of 'law and order' trained in methods of disappearances, mysterious murders and pre-emptive killings of those labeled "terrorists". A whole people – what we used to call freedom fighters, liberators and organic intellectuals of the people – become non-people! Witness the atrocities that Central America and Latin America, from El Salvador to Nicaragua, from Argentina to Chile, went through. Many perpetrators of these horrendous crimes where "trained" in the so-called School of the Americas, sponsored by the notorious CIA (Central Intelligence Agency). Surely, no NGO worth its name can ignore these lessons from other continents and simply stand on the sidelines while the seeds of instability are being planted on our continent.

5. Solidarity with People's Organizations

In the 1980s and 1990s, many activists took enthusiastically to the struggle for the opening up of organizational space for the people. This is the time when NGOs mushroomed and the multi-

party system was introduced. Coming from the background of the hegemony of the authoritarian state, which killed and maimed people's independent organizational initiatives, it is quite understandable that we should have been in the forefront of the struggle for the independence of civil society. Yet, in the larger context of the moral and ideological rehabilitation of imperialism in the post-cold war era, NGOs appear to have played the role of undermining traditional people's organization just as human rights ideology seem to have displaced ideologies of national liberation and social emancipation. Many NGOs have failed to realize this and, therefore, without being necessarily conscious, may be lending credence to this process.

Let me refer you to the example of trade unions in our country. The trade union movement was first to be suppressed in 1964, even before political parties in 1965. When freedom to form political parties was reintroduced in 1992, freedom to form trade unions lagged behind. The same came only in 1998. Since then, against very strong odds and under adverse conditions, the trade unions have been struggling to establish themselves as truly class and constituency based organizations. Privatization and globalization have greatly undermined their efforts, as the working class is being decimated through redundancy and impoverished, as public social services, such as water, sanitation, education, electricity and health, are being turned into private commodities for sale on the market to make private profit.

Nonetheless, the fledgling trade unions have been involved in a desperate struggle against the new exploiters, the so-called *wawekezaji*. Among these is the South African capital, which is ferociously moving North, in its second round of primitive accumulation on the continent. Recently, we witnessed the saga of NBC (National Bank of Commerce) workers. What is interesting and inexplicable is that the NGOs played absolutely no role in these struggles, not even that of showing solidarity. While we, the NGOs, participate in stakeholder workshops discussing poverty *reduction* strategy papers, we seem to be oblivious of the *creation* of poverty, through redundancy and robbery of public goods in the name of privatizing social services. When the NBC workers were holding their mass meetings, sister trade unions sent delegations to express solidarity. I did not see or hear any NGO doing the same.

Lack of correct understanding of our place and role as NGOs in the struggles of the working people, manifests itself on other levels as well. There have been massive anti-globalization and anti-capitalist movements in the West. Again, our presence in this is not very prominent. In our own situation, there is the Lawyers' Environmental Action Team (LEAT), which has been involved in a protracted exposure of abuses of the mining companies. Our NGOs and their umbrella organizations, have been quiet. We have not uttered even a word of solidarity, let alone held demonstrations and protests in militant solidarity.

6. Conclusion: Articulating an Activist World View and Choosing Sides

I want to suggest that we, the NGOs and activists, need to give ourselves a hard look. We need to take stock of our activities. We need to evaluate ourselves in the light of our values and principles and our mission to create a better world. If, indeed, an alternative world is possible, and it is, we need to know our existing world. And we must not only know the existing world, but also know who keeps the existing world going. Why and how does the existing world keep reproducing itself, in whose interest and for what purpose? And we have to choose sides: the side of those who are struggling for a better world and against those who want to maintain the existing world. We simply cannot be neutral.

The question before us is: Can we really understand the existing world better, so as to create a better world, without a grand vision, a grand theory, a world view rooted in the experiences of the working people? Can we really eschew *thinking* and *theorizing* and *knowing*? The hegemonic powers and their spokespersons talk about the 'end of history' and 'end of ideology'. They tell us the age of solidarity of the oppressed peoples is gone. We are told now is the age of economics, not politics. Our leaders tell us there is only one world, the existing world, the globalized world, the hegemonic world. 'We either swim with it, or we shall sink', they say. The truth of the matter is that it is the working people who are sinking in the globalized world while the elite swim in it. It is clear, therefore, that here there is a contest between two world views, that which wants to maintain the existing world and that which wants to create an alternative world. Which world view do we share? We should choose and act in accordance with our choice.

Let me end by two very poignant quotations, which broadly represent the two world views in a specific context. A recent story in the *Guardian* (19/08/03) was reporting on the new foreign policy of Tanzania which, it said, stresses economic interests rather than political considerations. At the end of the story there is a quote from what the Ambassador of the United States told the Parliamentary Committee for Foreign Affairs on 29th July, 2003. Commending Tanzania for its new "economic diplomacy", he said:

> The liberation diplomacy of the past, when alliances with socialist nations were paramount and so-called Third World Solidarity dominated foreign policy, must give way to a more realistic approach to dealing with your true friends – those who are working to lift you into the 21st century where poverty is not acceptable and disease must be conquered.

Some thirty years ago Mwalimu Nyerere, talking about changing another 'realistic world' of his time, that of apartheid South Africa, said:

> Humanity has already passed through many phases since man began his evolutionary journey. And nature shows us that not all life evolves in the same way. The chimpanzees - to whom once we were very near - got on to the wrong evolutionary path and they got stuck. And there were other species which became extinct; their teeth were so big, or their bodies so heavy, that they could not adapt to changing circumstances and they died out.
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> I am convinced that, in the history of the human race, imperialists and racialists will also become extinct. They are now very powerful. But they are a very primitive animal. The only difference between them and these other extinct creatures is that their teeth and claws are more elaborate and cause much greater harm - we can see this even now in the terrible use of napalm in Vietnam. But failure to co-operate together is a mark of bestiality; it is not a characteristic of humanity.
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> Imperialists and racialists will go. Vorster, and all like him, will come to an end. Every racialist in the world is an animal of some kind or the other, and all are kinds that have no future. Eventually they will become extinct.
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> Africa must refuse to be humiliated, exploited, and pushed around. And with the same determination we must refuse to humiliate, exploit, or push others around. We must act, not just say words.[4]

[4] Nyerere, J., 1973, *Freedom and Development: A Selection from Writings and Speeches,* London: Oxford, p. 371.

If there is one thing common among all pundits of the status quo, and all dominating classes and hegemonic powers, it is that *their* existing world is the only realistic world and no alternative world is possible. Yet, it is struggling for an alternative world, a better world, which has changed the past and will continue to change the present for a better future. We, the activists, together with the working people, must continue to fight for a better world. An alternative world is possible.

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