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THE CHALLENGE OF A NEW NGO PARTNERSHIP IN AFRICA

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July 1987

Over the past few years, NGOs and other observers across the Third World have noted the deteriorating condition of life among the poor populations of their respective countries. There are estimates that in some parts of the world these conditions have reverted to the level of the early 1960s. In Africa, this economic and social crisis has included a serious famine in certain areas which has caused many to reflect upon the underlying factors that have made the continent vulnerable to such suffering.

Despite their relatively small numbers and more recent origin relative to their counterparts in Latin America and Asia, African NGOs have played an increasingly important role in analyzing, from both a grassroots and historical perspective, the failures of the development process on the continent. To the voices of important academics, government and other African officials, and spokespersons from individual non-governmental organizations has been added the clear articulation of views from new networks of NGOs -- religious, secular and environmental in nature. While individual churches and church councils, as well as the All-African Conference of Churches, have spoken out through the years on important issues, the Church Drought/Development Action in Africa (CDAA) network of Protestant and Catholic churches last year completed a significant, multi-country study of the root causes of the crisis. At the same time, a new network of African secular NGOs was developing, stimulated by their members' participation at the United Nations Special Session on Africa in 1986 and formalized in a new coalition, The Forum of African Voluntary Development Organizations (FAVDO), in Dakar last month.

The Views of African NGO Networks

Without excusing the failures of their own governments in the post-independence period, these networks have set forth an analysis of the factors that have made progress extremely difficult over the past 25 years. Some of these relate to international capital flows, terms of trade and the practices of transnational corporations, as well as the militarization of parts of the continent and the activities of northern powers in

carrying out their respective foreign policies. Others include the destruction of African institutions during the colonial period and the ongoing destruction of the natural environment through the overemphasis on cash crops and inappropriate farming practices. In the meantime, traditional practices and local knowledge, in general, have not been shown their due respect. All of these and other factors have blocked Africans at local levels from recapturing the economic space that they have lost.

This analysis leads African NGOs to advocate a development approach very much geared toward increased reliance on the experience, expertise and energies of people at the local level. In economic terms this translates into a greater emphasis on food over export crops; a reorientation of national production and distribution, in both agriculture and industry, away from an export focus and more toward the needs of national and regional markets; the greater integration of agriculture and industry to meet these needs; and the mobilization of local populations through their own organizations in order to achieve these ends.

For African NGOs to participate effectively in this process there is a growing consensus that their analysis must be much broader, as must be the activities that they undertake. There is a call for greater research and reflection and the placing of activities within a structural framework, an analytical context, and/or a development strategy. Atomized projects are not sufficient; their impact within the process of change should be projected and appropriate linkages to this process made.

These linkages are of various types. They include links with other activities and organizations operating on the ground; the building of a lobbying capacity with local and national governments; networking with other African NGOs across the continent (and with southern NGOs across the Third World) for the purposes of sharing information, experiences and expertise; and the formation of supportive relationships with northern NGOs willing to follow an African-defined agenda.

As African NGOs struggle to redefine development in African terms and, with the people of the continent, to recapture control of the development process, they are looking for partners who are willing and able to help build local capacity to do so. As they look out and see Western institutions once again determining what is good and necessary for Africa and prescribing and enforcing solutions, they seek partners to whom control is not an essential part of a relationship.

The Challenge to Northern NGOs

What does this mean for northern NGOs? Some are more aware of the changing expectations. For others, particularly those who

insist on operational control, on a purely project approach, and on a strong field focus and presence, a significant transformation is in order. At the 1986 U.N. Session, African NGOs proposed that northern and international NGOs increasingly concentrate on "development education, advocacy, fund-raising and [facilitating] the North-North, South-South, and South-North information flows." They also stressed the need for their northern counterparts to strive for greater independence from any undue influence from governments in the North. In subsequent forums, African NGOs have requested that while they must ensure their own accountability to the poor populations that they attempt to represent, northern NGOs should make clear what limitations the sources of their funds explicitly or implicitly place on their activities.

It is clear that African NGOs are asking for a very different type of partnership than has been the norm to date, particularly with much of the non-sectarian NGO community. In the field in Africa the principal priority among African NGOs, as consistently communicated to northern organizations, has been local institution building and strengthening. It is possible, however, that the breadth of this activity as defined by Africans has not been fully understood in the North. It is not merely a matter of management upgrading or the provision of Western technical assistance and training. Of at least equal importance is the request from the African NGO community for support to its members in developing their capacity to research and analyze information that would allow them to program activities within a more structured and relevant context.

To ensure the relevance and an increased impact of their programming, African NGOs need access to information. Northern NGOs have access to information on the activities of their countries' public and private institutions that affect the development process in many parts of Africa. African NGOs also require the resources to tap local knowledge about local conditions and to come to an understanding, ideally in conjunction with northern counterparts, of the political, economic, social and environmental factors, at both the national and international levels, that affect their work and the poor with whom they work. Finally, there has been a call for the sharing of information, knowledge and expertise within Africa and among southern NGOs worldwide that has important implications for the funding priorities of northern NGOs.

Northern NGOs will be called upon increasingly to support southern information flows, exchanges among African groups, the transfer of African and other Third World expertise, and the development and operation of African NGO networks. There is increasing recognition that there is a critical need for support for centers of reflection and analysis across the continent that directly link these activities to training, development

programming and evaluation. Northern NGOs will increasingly receive requests for support for such activities and institutions that do not fall neatly within the parameters of a conventional project. Donor NGOs will be faced with the challenge of broadening the scope of fundable activities, while other NGOs will be faced with the need to advocate changes in the basis upon which they receive their own finances and/or to shift to new funding sources. In turn, this has serious implications for many NGOs in how they view themselves and their roles and for the size of their overall operations.

While NGOs could choose to avoid these challenges, they run the very real risk of confrontations with Africans and on becoming increasingly peripheral to the process of meaningful development in Africa. Those that attempt direct or subtle control of development projects, who are not flexible in defining what is a worthwhile development activity, who create local institutions that are reflections of their own values and needs, and that create small project pockets unrelated to broader indigenous processes of change will be increasingly isolated. On the other hand, those that help build African institutional capacity to take effective leadership and direction over the development process and are willing to follow that direction within the parameters of a responsible and accountable partnership will find themselves involved in a critically important movement toward genuinely African development. The clear implication in making these changes is that U.S. PVOs will devolve their operational roles to Africans and their institutions.

In short, there is a growing consensus within the African NGO community that this new form of partnership must be the antithesis of the processes in which many U.S. PVOs are presently involved. Rather than support Western imposition of development models, African NGOs in both the secular and church sectors look toward current and future northern counterparts to:

- engage in a joint process of analysis leading to an understanding of the local political reality and the historical roots of the poverty of a particular region or country before development activities are initiated;
- frame their strategy in Africa around an African NGO agenda through a process of ongoing consultation;
- support the process of NGO institution building in its broadest sense, including the institutional capacity to access relevant knowledge, analyze and otherwise prepare for the identification and design of relevant development programming;

- support the exchange of information, experience and expertise, particularly within Africa and the Third World;
- establish timetables and clear processes and mechanisms for the devolution of control over project and other development activities to local-level African institutions as part of a process of diminishing external operational involvement;
- exercise their responsibility to educate their respective publics and policymakers about the needs and views of the people of Africa at grassroots levels and work toward changes in the institutions that impose Western prescriptions on the continent.

Implications for Northern NGOs

As NGOs in the North attempt to respond to the initiatives taken by African NGOs to redefine relationships with northern institutions, there are numerous implications for the former's internal policies and operations. Some of these issues have been raised in this paper: sources of funds, independence of action, operational control, funding parameters, sources of knowledge and expertise, and public education responsibilities. Others relate to the internal decision-making processes involved in project identification, design, review, reporting and evaluation. The development of analytical frameworks, the design of appropriate project criteria, the use of local sources of information and the establishment of local channels of consultation become critical issues in this regard.

For PACT and its members this may necessitate significant changes in a number of areas. They include:

1. a significant shift in the allocation of financial resources to support non-project activities;
2. more thorough analysis in the course of development programming and the choice of institutional partners;
3. greater and more sustained dialogue with African partners and their networks;
4. the involvement of African grassroots practitioners in the design and expansion of development education and public advocacy activities, as well as in the allocation of institutional resources and the establishment of funding criteria; and
5. a gradual contraction in institutional size to accommodate the new reality.

