Chapter 3
Towards an Understanding of Non-governmental Organisations

This chapter conceptualises the role of NGOs as catalysts of social change and explores the potential of NGOs as actors in public policy formulation and implementation in the country. In order to develop insight into the roles of NGOs, an attempt has been made in this chapter to understand and analyse NGOs, their types, functions, advantages and disadvantages in relation to the governmental agencies. My purpose is to highlight the role that NGOs perform in society especially in the context of the articulation between civil society, state and the market.

NGOs are modern institutions to address to a particular problem and cannot be misinterpreted with traditional institutions like temple trusts, caste panchayats, etc. They are new institutions trying to solve old problems. If the social structure is unable to provide certain objectives regarded as necessary, then these NGOs are established which are goal-oriented organisations. However, such organisations do not work in a vacuum, they need the existing social structure for their functioning.

There is dialectic between the state and NGOs. The state finds it necessary to use NGOs when its organisations cannot deliver goods, or when sensitive data have to be collected or to do things that may prove controversial. On the other hand, if the NGOs succeed, that itself is a comment on the ineffectiveness of the state and the masses may get alienated from the state. From some experience, it can also be said that
NGOs may come up against vested exploitative interests that have the protection of the state.

A major reappraisal of the role of the state is currently under way throughout the world – in the developed countries of North America, Europe, and Asia; in the developing societies of Asia, Africa, and Latin America; and in the former Soviet bloc. Prompted by dissatisfaction with the cost and effectiveness of exclusive reliance on government to address the social welfare and developmental challenges of our time, efforts have been launched to find alternative ways to respond. With globalisation and privatisation of the economy world over, the state has started withdrawing from some of the core sectors of public services like education, health, employment or other basic infrastructure. The changing social and economic realities coupled with declining confidence in the capabilities of government have recently placed new demands on the civil society institutions especially NGOs.

In the political domain, civil society development is now deemed crucial to stimulating the public pressure and participation necessary to force poorly functioning state institutions to become more responsive and accountable. In the social and economic domains, a more diverse, active civil society is now held out as necessary to cushion the effects of restructuring to ensure public understanding and support for market reforms, to ensure that privatisation does not lapse into cronyism and to connect newly empowered local governments to citizens.

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1. Civil Society and State

It is imperative here to understand the concept of civil society and the debate on the state and civil society. The term 'civil society' has been debated around the world as it has aroused both hope and confusion. The hopes generated by civil society is an outcome of a common understanding that it can promote, further and sustain 'public good'. On the other hand, confusion abounds because there is a lack of consensus about what constitutes civil society, the typology and its relationship with numerous other societal actors.

The recent popularity of the term – civil society – can be seen in conjunction with a marked shift in the perceived and actual roles of the state. Not only have the state and its various arms undergone major shift in terms of roles and functional outlook, the market has also been undergoing major shift in terms of focus leading to realignments and new ethical underpinnings. While the state and the market occupy two different spheres in society, the third space is increasingly being viewed as 'civil society'.

The idea of civil society is both western and modern. Andre Beteille stresses the importance of citizenship in the conception of civil society. According to him both are complementary and civil society cannot amount to very much where citizenship is absent or weakly developed.\(^2\) Civil society is a distinctively a modern phenomenon because citizenship itself is a modern idea and value. There is a great importance of the individual as an autonomous moral and legal agent in the development of civil society. It is the legal recognition and protection of the natural

rights of individuals that transforms a political society into a civil society.3

The French Revolution marked a watershed in the emergence of citizenship as a socially acknowledged category. But it did not transform the subject into a citizen overnight. Not was it simply a question of the replacement of the monarchy by a republic. In Britain, where the state underwent a more gradual transformation, citizenship evolved over a longer period of time with changes not only in the laws but also in customs, sentiments and attitudes. The point to be stressed here is that the emergence of citizenship and, with it, of civil society, depends on changes not only in the distribution of power but also in ideas, beliefs and values.4

Beteille points out that not every kind of state, but only the modern constitutional state is relevant to the development of civil society. However, the relationship between state and civil society is ambivalent. The state can play a constructive role in the evolution of civil society, as it has done in Britain and the Netherlands; it can also play a destructive role, as it did in Germany and the Soviet Union.5

If one closely looks at the dominant conptualisation surrounding civil society, it becomes discernible that the term is used for associations and institutions that have a formal character e.g., voluntary development organisations.6 It also denotes a non-political space between the household and the state. Here, it is important to stress that civil society

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5 ibid.
is a political concept in as much as it is concerned with exercising power to advance and defend the economic, social and political interests of citizens.

Civil society requires for its sustenance a body of rational impersonal rules, and that only the state can be the ultimate guarantor of those rules. State and civil society have to be viewed together, and that very little will be gained if one begins with a negative attitude towards the state. In the words of Beteille, "nothing can be more destructive of civil society ... than the idea that the best way to create and invigorate civil society is to empower the people at the expense of the state". State performs certain indispensable functions, and if those are subverted or undermined, civil society will wither in the bud. Thus, state and civil society are complementary; they are not alternatives of each other.

2. NGOs: Concept, Types and Functions

From the above discussion it is clear that the civil society has functioned as a new secular ideology, becoming the building block for a good society which values people, regardless of age, gender, race, disability or other aspects of social background. Advocates of civil society go on to the extent of saying that civil society, if harnessed and nurtured, would transform democracy and reshape the balance of power in favour of greater social inclusion, justice, dignity, equality of opportunity and respect. According to Beteille, civil society would complement the

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market, creating ‘social capital’ - the glue that binds people together in relationships - and adding a meaning to people’s lives over and above their role as economic producers or consumers.9

But the important question that arises here, is how would this civil society be delivered, and the answer lies in Lester Salamon’s ‘associational revolution’10, the striking upsurge in organised voluntary activity in almost every part of the globe, with NGOs delivering human services, promoting grassroots development, preventing environmental degradation and protecting civil rights. While talking of the associational revolution, it is worthwhile to mention here in passing that American life is so strikingly characterised by voluntary associations that De Tocqueville had remarked, “In no country in the world has the principle of association been more successfully used, or applied to a greater multitude of objects, than in America”.11 According to him, presence of such associations is mark of an egalitarian and dynamic democratic society.

A whole range of such organisations variously called as Voluntary Agencies, Action Groups, Grass Root Organisations, Nongovernmental Organisations, are now flourishing at a global level. The significance and political clout of these agencies have grown to such an extent that a large number of them enjoy a ‘consultative status’, with the United Nations (UN) and its specialised agencies. The UN Department of Public Information that directly deals with these agencies term them NGOs and define them as follows. “Non-governmental Organisations are any of

those organisations which are not part of government and which have not been established as a result of an agreement between governments. NGOs can be research institutions, professional association, trade union, chambers of commerce, youth organisations, religious institutions, senior citizens' associations, tourist bodies, private foundation, political parties, zionist organisations, funding or development-international and indigenous agencies, and any other organisation of a nongovernmental nature".

The purpose of this definition was to broaden the scope and space for 'voluntary action' at a global level. The voluntary action covers a wide range of activities such as charity, welfare, relief and rehabilitation, provision of services, socio-economic development of poor, human resource development, etc. Inequality among individuals is a perennial source of motivation for voluntary action in every society. Social services are initiated to help eradicate the inequality and to uplift the underprivileged. The term volunteer is normally used to denote some one who offers unpaid service to a good cause. Philanthropy appears to be an essential motivating factor in the voluntary action. When a sense of social responsibility is being inculcated in the individuals, they take up various steps to improve the condition of the people all around.

Voluntary action, if it is to be socially effective, must acquire some kind of organisational form. Here, it is pertinent to examine the processes through which voluntary associations become established as the institutional expressions of social movements. (According to T.K. Oommen12, social movements imply the projection of a desirable set of values; it is a project addressed to the future. The rise and fall of social

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movements indicate that human beings cannot be permanently imprisoned in the present social structure and no eternal moratorium can be imposed on creativity). Wendell King, for example, has identified three phases in the “life cycle” of social movements: the incipient phase, in which a handful of believers works toward a goal established by the founder (often a charismatic leader); the organisational phase, in which voluntary associations are established; and the stable phase, in which the voluntary associations (if they survive) become increasingly professionalised, bureaucratic and conservative.\(^\text{13}\)

The development of at least a semi-permanent organisational structure is often essential to the realisation of the goals of a movement. However, such organisation often sets in motion influences, which defeat the ideals that gave birth to it. Contemporary sociologists have often pointed out how the idealism and missionary zeal of spontaneous emotional commitment to a cause tends to be “corrupted” by the tendency of all organisations to become “ends in themselves”. Max Weber’s doctrine\(^\text{14}\) of the routinization of charisma, is the leading theoretical statement of this view.

Thus, the basic problem that all social movements face is the inevitable tension between mobilisation and institutionalisation. Movements crystallize when men share beliefs and activities. But what distinguishes them from other similar kinds of social behaviour is institutionalisation - the process of development of a network of relatively


stable interaction, normative structure, gradation of participants. Without institution no movement can attain its stability; yet the logical corollary of institution may be the very demise of movement - they may become mere organisations or associations. Therefore, movements may be viewed as institutionalised collective actions, guided by an ideology and supported by an organisational structure. Without mobilisation, no movement can sustain itself, but if these mobilisations are uninformed by an ideology and an organisational basis, they cannot be distinguished from elementary forms of collective behaviour, like panic response. This intermediary stage between clearly formalised structures and vaguely articulated directionless process is that which distinguishes movements from organisations on the one hand and elementary forms of collective behaviour on the other.

There are four essential elements in any voluntary association: (a) method of formation which is voluntary on the part of a group of people, (b) method of government, with self-governing organisation to decide on its constitution, its servicing, its policy and its clients, (c) method of financing, with at least some of its revenues drawn from voluntary sources and (d) motives of profit excluded. Organisations having all the four elements are rare and perhaps are the ideal forms.

Defined in broad terms, voluntary associations include all non-state organisation-churches, business firms, labour unions, foundations, private schools and universities, cooperatives and political parties. Although all non-state, common-purpose organisations with voluntary memberships are voluntary associations, that is, organisations whose existence is dependent upon freedom of association, David L. Sills in the

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Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences, focussed upon organisations that meet both of two additional criteria. First, the major activity of the organisation is not related to the business of making a living, that is, to the economic activities of its members (as in the case of professional associations, trade unions, or cooperatives). Second, the volunteer (i.e., non-salaried) members constitute a majority of the participants (as they do not in corporations, universities, or foundation, in which the directors or trustees are in a minority vis-a-vis the employees, faculty or students).

However, in this thesis the term NGOs is defined as a non-political, non-profit, non-religious community organisation governed by its own rules and regulations without external control and initiated for community development. Therefore, all non-governmental and voluntary organisations like those involved in cultural, sports and religious activities or professional and political organisations (like hospitals, university, trade-unions, recreational and sports clubs, religious outfits like Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh, churches) need not necessarily be included in the category of NGOs.

As mentioned earlier, the term NGO is very broad and can be applied to any organisation, which is operationally distinct from government. In the field of development, NGOs range from large, northern-based charities such as OXFAM to local self-help organisations in the South. Some large NGOs are an arm of the government, for instance, the Department of International Development (DFID) of the British Government, or Canadian International Development Association (CIDA) of the Canadian Government. Some, on the other hand are extensions of the government, for instance Indian Government has set

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16 Overseas Development Institute, "NGOs in Development", Briefing Paper, August 1988, p. 1.
up development societies using the government fund, as also there are committees to harness watershed management which are part government. NGOs may include research institutes like Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and Coordinating for Development Action (ICDA) as well as lobby groups such as the World Development Movement.

The last decade of the 20th century may be described as the decade of the NGO since there has been such a massive growth of NGOs in this decade.17 The upsurge of NGOs is a worldwide phenomenon, although it has become particularly conspicuous in the less developed countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. In some of these countries, the NGO is seen as the main driving force in economic development and social change. NGOs are now active in practically every field: literacy, education, health, sanitation, child-care, nutrition, habitation, environment and so on.

They are coming to be represented as the Third Sector of society in which the state and the market are viewed as the first and the second sectors. However, this is a very large claim since, there are a great many things in the life of a society that are not covered by the state or the market, and it is doubtful that NGOs, no matter how numerous or versatile, can do all the things that are not done by the state or the market.18

The NGO is distinct from the state because it is a 'non-governmental organisation'; it is distinct from the market because it is a 'non-profit organisation'. But there are many institutions in

18 ibid.
contemporary societies, such as universities, hospitals, religious organisations, etc that cannot be justly described as creatures of either the state or the market. To the extent that it is inferred that the functions of such institutions can be better performed by NGOs that inference is false and needs to be repudiated. 19

It is true that because the government has failed to protect a citizen’s right to basic needs that the NGOs have stepped in. But there are times when an NGO itself becomes unaccountable, and then it becomes necessary to ask what justification it has to claim to be an interlocutor for the disadvantaged. Given the intricacies involved in actually getting access to funding, a number of NGOs have been set up by ex-government officials or their families. Most of these are NGO only in name; their real purpose is to exploit the jet-setting lifestyle and perks that come with the territory.

There are instances of NGOs functioning under the guidelines of foreign funders at the risk of offending local sensibilities. In a recent instance, an NGO booklet on AIDS used language that was so sexually explicit that the matter went to court. This gave politicians with an eye to the main chance an opportunity to cast themselves in the role of preservers of local culture and heap calumny on all NGOs working in the area.

This is not to say all NGOs are spurious. There are many NGOs in India that work in conditions of extreme adversity to bring succour to the underprivileged. No one can forget the example of Sanjoy Ghose who paid

with his life for attempting to better conditions for the poor in Assam.\textsuperscript{20}

However, an excess of zeal for their actual or possible contributions to the extreme of a wholesale denigration of the work done by the agencies of the government and by autonomous and semi-autonomous institutions or of the withdrawal of public support and sympathy from them is against the well-being of society.

To have a decent society we have to have a balance between three things: the state, the market and civil society. What we need, in the words of Anthony Giddens, is “a society which has the centrality of the market as a means of producing the most effective economy, but which also has an aggressive, supply-side policy, with government playing a central role in investment in education and in the necessary infrastructure of communications, transport and so forth, making the society able to respond effectively in a more globalised economy. At the same time, a more active, reflective citizenry is very important because it means one can draw upon these wellsprings of activity to produce new relationships between the third sector and the renewed, reconstructed government and the economy”\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{20} Sanjoy Ghose, General Secretary of Association of Voluntary Agencies for Rural development-North East (AVARD-NE) and his dedicated band had addressed themselves to the problem of soil erosion, in the Majuli island of Assam, directly. They had built teams of volunteers to place sandbags along the banks. Only by such concerted community effort could there be some hope of arresting the devastating floods. All sections of the community got involved, from teachers and the elite to youth who would otherwise be looking to migrate to the nearest town, or at least find a regular job there. This followed other long-term actions – more sustainable ways of building houses, growing different crops, storing food and other belongings differently.

It was this alternative vision that angered the cadre of ULFA. They had established a base in Majuli because of its inaccessibility. They would have drawn supporters from the same alienated youth who were now being attracted to a different path altogether, one that was constructive and not violent. By showing people how they could rely on themselves, Sanjoy altered the status quo and this is what probably led to his abduction and subsequent killing.

\textsuperscript{21} Anthony Giddens, “The Role of the Third Sector in the Third Way”, \textit{Focus}, CAF, September 1999.

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3. Advantages in Relation to Government Agencies

We have mentioned that NGOs have the potential of being more effective agents of development than government agencies, at least among the poorer and weaker sections. We now see in what respects NGOs are superior to government organisations.

As against the governmental action, voluntary actions are considered to be more effective in the implementation of developmental programmes as they use a participatory method to raise awareness, mobilise local personnel and resources and they are well aware of the local needs and demands. They are closer to the people and therefore, better understand them. Proximity to the people ensures their involvement in projects. It is also possible for NGOs to monitor the implementation of projects closely and if necessary make corrections in midstream.

Compared to the government agencies, they are informal, humane, less bureaucratic, rapid and to certain extent cost effective. They have also the added advantages of flexibility in their structure and operation on the one hand and availability of trained, experienced and dedicated workers on the other. Participation of voluntary organisations in the developmental and welfare endeavours has also the effect of reducing administrative costs as well as checking the wastes of the limited governmental resources.

Because of its relative smallness of scale, the voluntary body is able to experiment, by doing old things in new ways or trying out quite new services, and in doing so takes the risks which might be more difficult for a large and essentially more bureaucratic state concern. This
independence in trying out new strategies, as well as the opportunity to concentrate more single-mindedly on particular issues or needs, puts the organisation into a strong position to be a watch-dog in the field in which it specialises. This also gives it a chance to develop and promote creative suggestions for statutory policy.

NGOs also have certain strengths peculiar to themselves. They are by definition, at least in their early days, motivated by personal enthusiasms. They count amongst their supporters, those who are concerned to help individuals with specific disabilities, or who have a particular cause at heart, such as certain legislative or administrative change and find it more congenial or consider it likely to be more effective, to work within a specialist group.

For all these reasons, voluntary bodies have an important potential for the future but the potential is not always realised because of several constraints in its ways.

4. Constraints of NGOs

In spite of their relative advantages, the NGOs also work in a constraining set up. K.K. Kuriakose has listed some of the limitations on a fuller NGO participation in development, which are as follows:

1. Multiplicity of numbers and absence of mutual cooperation: Even the smallest of countries boast of the presence of hundreds of NGOs ranging from village based self-help groups to national level organisations. In larger countries like India, Indonesia and the Philippines, the number of NGOs runs into thousands. Not only are

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the numbers large, they also represent a wide spectrum of interests and subjects. One can rationalise this diversity and spread by saying that the phenomenon represents the richness and diversity of human aspirations at any given moment in the life of a society. However, it makes it very difficult to operationalise a policy of cooperation with NGOs. This constraint is in-built into the situation. When several NGOs are competing for the limited resources, cooperation is bound to take a back seat. Moreover, charismatic individuals who, therefore, tend to develop a certain "vested" interest in preserving the identity of their creations start many small NGOs. They tend to view suggestions for cooperation with suspicion. Development activities today have become more complex, requiring a multi-sectoral and sometimes a macro approach. This is not possible without NGOs cooperating with each other and since they are not so open to cooperation, their ability to play a major role as agents of development also remains restricted.

2. Scarcity of resources: The existence of large numbers of NGOs, each trying to obtain as much support as possible, from a limited support base, adds to the problem. Most of the NGOs working at the grassroots level lack the technical expertise, professional competence, organisational infrastructure and capabilities, which restrict their endeavour. They also face conflict inside the organisation among diverse set of people on the question of roles and responsibilities.

3. Political problems: A third constraint is the political aspect of development. The emphasis on participatory development has brought into sharp focus the limitations of many NGOs even though they are amongst the most vocal in stressing the importance of participation. Extreme poverty and highly exploitative structures in the developing countries make it impossible for people to exercise their options.
Empowerment of people is a precondition to participation. Empowerment of people implies helping people to organise themselves to develop action programmes that will give them confidence in their capacity to be change agents. Unfortunately, such a course of action is fraught with many risks because of the opposition it is likely to raise. The slightest hint of resistance tends to invite retaliatory action by the rich and the powerful against those who challenge them. Consequently, unless the NGO leaders are ready to pay the heavy price that may become inevitable, very little progress is possible.

4. Government reluctance: Yet another constraint is the reluctance of governments to accept NGOs as partners in development. Most discussions on development emphasise the need for the participation of people in the entire development process. It will be difficult to find a government in the developing world, which raises any serious reservations about the role of NGOs to mobilise people to participate in the development process. However, if one took a closer look at the amount of money these very governments make available to NGOs, the findings will be quite disheartening. This less than enthusiastic attitude towards NGOs is not only because of many shortcomings of NGOs but also because of governments’ unwillingness to strengthen NGOs especially those which are likely to help people in their quest for empowerment.

For instance, in India, governments for over a decade now, have been professing the importance of civil society but precious little has been done to empower them. A key area, for example, is the funding of the sector. At the moment, the sector remains heavily funded by foreign organisations and is supervised under the Foreign Contributions Regulations Act (FCRA), which was promulgated during the Emergency
period (1976) to monitor and ensure that foreign funds are not used for anti-national activities. NGOs for long have been lobbying against the Act and have termed it as undemocratic and violative of human rights. They say that as of now the threat perception has changed, and so to restrict the free-flow of foreign funds to the sector on the grounds that it could be used for anti-national activity is absurd. The persistence of the Act shows that it is there to keep NGOs in control.23

5. Lack of professionalism: As a rule except for a limited number of large NGOs, the smaller NGOs lack professionalism in their programming. Quite often professionalism is confused with careerism or full time paid work. That a person can be a volunteer, full time or part time, and yet do a professional job is often not understood by many NGO leaders themselves. Sometimes this lack of professionalism is due to the fact that an NGO is the creation of a charismatic leader who is afraid of losing control of the organisation. This lack of professionalism results in the inability of most NGOs to plan and implement programmes in an efficient manner.

6. Inability to transform micro-projects to macro-projects: It is generally recognised that NGOs are successful in carrying out small projects. Often these projects deal with one special area of concern such as poultry training, dressmaking, mother and childcare, drinking water supply, etc. However, when the same NGO has to undertake a much larger project, it seems to falter and fail. Moreover, the needs of development of a local community today cannot be compartmentalised. It is necessary to have an integrated approach, which also most NGOs are unable to establish.

Some other constraints to the working of NGOs are as follows:

1. There are some obstacles, which often come in NGOs way of proper delivery of services to the people. Although, they might have the best intentions, they often lack the basic preparation, familiarity with the environment, technical knowledge and experience in delivery of services. In many instances, they lack an overall strategy and methodology in evolving and implementing programmes or activities in which they are involved. Also, at times they fail to adapt their strategy/strategies to changing circumstances in the areas where they work.

They enjoy their autonomy or independence and often refuse to cooperate with other non-governmental organisations or with local officials. The local follow-up of their actions is generally improper and insufficient due to lack of personnel or financial resources.

2. Very often voluntary organisations work in a very small scale or in a small area and their resources are too meager to meet the widespread social needs of the people for whom they work.

3. Further, most of the voluntary organisations are unstable as they are set up with much enthusiasm and commitment but they fail for one reason or another. In such circumstances, they may not easily be relied upon for their continuous work over a number of years.

4. There is also no surety of continuity to work and employment of the staff in the NGOs; therefore, it cannot really attract the qualified workers. More often a qualified person seeks employment in the voluntary organisation only if he has economic security form other sources or is devoted to its aims and objectives.
5. These organisations are thus ill equipped in terms of sufficient number of qualified staff. Hence, they are unable to maintain the minimum standard of work. This is more evident in the lack of adequate and sustained financial resources. Consequently, they can neither plan their programmes properly nor can they prepare budget estimates to plan their expenditures.

6. The stability of NGOs is questionable also because in most cases they depend on external sources of funding for their existence. The problem of dependency remains because the sources of funds are time-bound. Support is usually given on a project-to-project or year-to-year basis and could easily be withdrawn. In such cases, the ultimate stability of the voluntary sector seems to depend on dedication. Those groups, which persevere, survive from year to year as long as they have the spirit. But in many cases the spirit breaks. Perhaps a special spiritual, philosophical and moral ethos is needed to sustain the inspiration of voluntary groups because the grosser material base is certainly absent.

6. NGO-Government Relationship

Apart from the problem of dependency, NGOs face another problem that of the antagonistic relationship with the government. The conflict exists at the working levels of government in virtually all countries. In countries where the political and top administrative echelons are supportive of the NGO sector (India and Sri Lanka as is evident from the flourishing business of NGOs here), large segments of the field administration resent NGOs. Several reasons are given for it.

Government officials state that NGOs come into a village and establish their programmes, often without discussing and usually
without any attempt to integrate with the government's activities. On the other hand many NGOs believe that governments wish to control them and that the NGOs will lose their autonomy if they integrate more closely. A number of NGOs expressly identify government staff and related officials (from the rural areas, major cooperatives or extension authorities) as one means through which the rural elite gains a disproportionate share of the project funds. Some NGOs are also concerned that close integration with government may appear to give a commitment to political party, or provide NGO support to a development agenda which they would wish to change.

The cause behind the lack of understanding and willingness to cooperate arises from both sides. In a few countries, the conflict is more severe than solely a lack of cooperation. Here, a policy of cooperation may be the official government position, but it is a policy, which is not observed at political or senior administrative levels. Difficult NGO registration, slow approval of NGO projects, insistence that NGO funding be 'additional' to an aid agency's regular programme, a refusal to accept finance for bilateral or multilateral projects that includes an NGO component, legislation with power to prevent NGO amalgamation or to deregister NGOs, are evidence of a de facto government policy of non-cooperation.

There are several possible reasons behind governmental rejection of NGOs. Many NGOs actively criticise government. The resentment created in the lower levels of the bureaucracy is also reflected in the attitude of senior officials. More importantly, however, is that some NGOs are seen to present an alternative political voice in the country. Many governments are unwilling to grant a high degree of freedom to such organisations. Also of concern to politicians and senior administrators is
that NGOs are capturing an increasing share of aid funding, thereby diluting the control that governments have over development programmes.

Despite, the constraints in the way, NGOs have become an important force in today's world. In this era of globalisation, NGOs operate both at global and at local levels. The global NGOs are transnational influencing policies of countries. Further, the NGOs are networking with each other; thereby they have created a space for themselves in the global power structure and are emerging as the third force shaping events in the world. This is evident from the protests by the NGOs at the recent World Trade Organisation (WTO) meet at Seattle (December 1999). What NGO demonstrators did outside the Seattle meeting of the WTO was perhaps more important than what ministers did inside. The demonstrators prevented the inaugural session of the meeting from being held, smashed local shops and obliged the authorities to declare a curfew. In the old days, governments would have denounced them as thugs. But this time the United States and several other delegations lauded their idealism, and said the demonstrators had a point in wanting WTO to be more open and more concerned about labour and environmental standards in trade.

This confirms that a great new force has emerged on the world scene. No longer are economic issues debated and decided mainly by governments and corporations. Global networks of NGOs have emerged as a new force that is multinational in corporations and globalised in vision.

Thus, NGOs matter more and more in world affairs. But they are often far from being “non-governmental”, as they claim. And they are not
always a force for good. This comes out clearly from the following paragraphs.

As already stated, the tag "Non-governmental Organisation", was used first at the founding of the UN. It implies that NGOs keep their distance from officialdom; they do things that governments will not, or cannot, do. In fact, NGOs have a great deal to do with governments and not all of it is healthy.

Here we may mention the example of aid agencies. A growing share of development spending, emergency relief and aid transfers passes through them. According to Carol Lancaster, a former deputy director of USAID, America's development body, NGOs have become "the most important constituency for the activities of development aid agencies". Much of the food delivered by the World Food Programme, a UN body, in Albania during 1999 was actually handed out by NGOs working in the refugee camps. Between 1990 and 1994, the proportion of the European Union's (EU) relief aid channelled through NGOs rose from 47 percent to 67 percent.24

Governments are also happy to provide that money. Of OXFAM's 162 million pounds income in 1998, a quarter, i.e. 24 million pounds was given by the British government and the EU. Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF), the winner of Nobel peace prize in 1999, gets 46 percent of its income from government sources.25 In Africa, where international help has the greatest influence, western governments have long been shifting their aid towards NGOs. Europe's donors also say that bilateral aid should go to NGOs, which are generally more open and efficient than

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governments. For the UN, too, they are now seen as indispensable. Most such agencies now have hundreds of NGO partners.

So, the principal reason for the recent boom in NGOs worldwide is that the western governments finance them. Many NGOs are becoming contractors for governments. Governments prefer to pass aid through NGOs because it is cheaper, more efficient- and more at arm's length- than direct official aid.

Western governments also use NGOs (mostly multilateral NGOs) for bringing back useful information. Outfits such as the International Crisis Group and Global Witness publish detailed and opinionated reports from places beset by war or other disasters. The work of Global Witness in Angola is actually paid for by the British Foreign Office. In some benighted parts of the world, sometimes only NGOs can nowadays reveal what is going on. For instance, human rights, the business of one of the biggest of the campaigning NGOs, Amnesty International. Amnesty has around one million members in over 162 countries and its campaigns against political repression, in particular against unfair imprisonment, are known around the world.

The most potent sign of the closeness between NGOs and the governments, aside from their financial links, is the exchange of personnel. In developing countries, where the civil service is poor, some governments ask NGOs to help with the paperwork requested by the World Bank and other international institutions. OXFAM has former staff members not only in the British government, but also in Finance Ministry of Uganda. This symbiotic relationship of some of the
Multilateral NGOs with western government shows that the former are hardly independent.

One may argue that it does not matter even if NGOs are losing their independence, becoming just another arm of government, since many do achieve great things: they may represent the last hope for civilians caught in civil wars, for those imprisoned unfairly and for millions of desperate refugees. But there are also problems. NGOs may be assumed to be less bureaucratic, wasteful or corrupt than governments, but under-scrutinised groups can suffer from the same chief failing: they can get into bad ways because they are not accountable to anyone. They may themselves become vested interest, may use funds to fatten themselves. Since, aid agencies are far away, they use NGOs to translate their objectives into practice, but some NGOs misappropriate the funds and devise their own methodology of writing false reports. Thus, NGOs can become self-perpetuating. When the problem for which they were founded is solved, they seek new campaigns and new funds. The old anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, when its job completed, did not disband, but instead became another lobby group for southern Africa. As NGOs become steadily more powerful on the world scene, the best antidote to institutionalisation would be disband when the job is done. Thus, the chief aim of NGOs should be their own abolition.

The above discussion does not lead us to conclude that NGOs should resist opportunities to work with governments and official aid agencies. But NGOs should approach these invitations as potential negotiating opportunities to forward their vision of development.
The critical question is whether the overall project in hand is in the interests of the poor. The NGO might well see that it can do a good job making a project component more efficient, perhaps more socially responsive, but it must guard against strengthening a system which works against the poor.

To conclude, we can together with John Clark say that voluntary organisations will only achieve their full potential if they develop a more strategic, coordinated way of working. Their projects are important and will remain so, but in themselves do no more than create islands of relative prosperity within an increasingly hostile sea. These projects should not be seen as ends in themselves, but as starting points. They are demonstrations, catalysts, and vantage points. Using them as their base of experience and knowledge, voluntary organisations should help to challenge governments, official aid agencies, international companies and others to change their ways. They should do what they can to promote the evolution of people's organisations and grass roots democracy. And they should lobby developed nations to make the changes necessary for international justice.

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