

Beyond the State:

**NIGERIA'S SEARCH FOR
POSITIVE LEADERSHIP**

Edited by

ADEBAYO OLUKOSHI
ADIGUN A. B. AGBAJE
HUSSAINAH ABDULLAH
CYRIL I. OBI

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LEADERSHIP WITHOUT ACCOUNTABILITY: NGOs AND GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT IN THE SOUTH- WEST

Rasidi Akanji Okunola

Introduction

NGOs are both old and new in Nigeria (Alubo 2001, 109). In their older form, they were essentially community-based organizations responding to various developmental needs. Such initiatives were, however, often of an ad-hoc nature, with structures hardly surviving particular projects. Up to the late 1970s, many of the NGOs in Nigeria were religious, with efforts revolving around growing in the faith. In more contemporary forms, NGOs in Nigeria are new and their emergence to prominence can be traced to four major factors, including the chronic failure of official development plans; political instability, leading to a harvest of abandoned projects; the ability of NGOs to undertake manageable and focused projects which tackle immediate social problems; and the high value now placed on the catalytic role of democracy in new development thinking (Onoge 1995, 26).

This chapter examines the role of NGO field staff in providing leadership for development at the grassroots in south-western Nigeria. The chapter's specific objectives include:

- § investigating the perception, by people at the grassroots, of the leadership role of the field staff of the NGOs working in their country;
- § examining the extent to which people at the grassroots have developed intimate social relations with the NGO staff; and
- § discovering the extent to which people at the grassroots see such field staff as sincere and efficient.

Methods

This study is basically qualitative. Much of its data derive from field notes built up over time during various field assessments of the activities of NGOs in grassroots development in the south-west zone of Nigeria¹. Other data were drawn from two communities selected from Ondo and Ogun states. The first, 'Bamikemo' community, located in Ile-Oluji Local Government Area (LGA) of Ondo state, is one of the focal communities of a local NGO known as Community Women Association of Nigeria (COWAN), with national headquarters at Akure. The NGO, registered under the Land Perpetual Act of Nigeria, is mainly concerned with poverty alleviation amongst women, especially those in the countryside. Aside from micro-credit schemes (which are partly financed by foreign grants), the NGO also assists beneficiary communities to source for 'external' assistance in the form of development projects.

The second community, 'Ehin-Etiri Baale', is a satellite settlement to Ago-Iwoye in Ijebu-North LGA of Ogun State. Located about 16 kilometers from Ago-Iwoye, with a population of about 500 persons as at the time of this study, the community has had a lot of assistance from both local and international NGOs. Examples include Rotary International, UNICEF, World Health Organization and UNDP. The main development focus in the community is a N34.2 million oil palm processing plant financed by UNDP and facilitated by a local NGO known as Women's Management Training Outreach Programme (WMTOP) with its national headquarters at Shagamu (Ogun-state).

Four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held with stakeholders in each of the two communities. The Focus Group Discussions were organized along gender lines even though the two NGOs and the projects under focus were women-centred. Discussions centred on the leadership styles of the field staff as well as the level of their interaction with beneficiaries. The goal here was to determine the level of trust, influence pattern, as well as the likely emergence of reciprocity of relationship between the field staff and the beneficiaries of the development projects. The assumption was that, with mutual trust, the influence needed for change, in the form of positive development, would follow.

A training programme² for NGOs on participatory tools and techniques in development, conducted in 2001 by the Food Basket Foundation International (FBFI) an NGO, provided an opportunity

to conduct six in-depth interviews (IDI) with some NGO field staff on some of the issues raised in the FGD sessions in the communities. Data from the IDI are used here to supplement the data collected from the field, including that of structured observations. Data analysis, basically descriptive, followed from the content analyses of the FGDs and the IDIs.

Results/Discussion

This section presents data from both the FGD and IDI sessions. First, we present data from the FGD sessions in the two communities.

Respondents generally perceived the NGO field staff as 'knowing better' in terms of what development should be and therefore look up to them to *lead* the community towards it. Said a female respondent in Bamikemo

They are the people that are learned and exposed and we look up to them to assist us. They are closer to government and to those other people outside that can assist us.

This high status accorded the NGO field staff no doubt puts them on a high pedestal in terms of the influence process which leadership implies. But how much time do they have to exercise this influence? The assumption here is that the more the time spent with the people, the greater the influence process. A female respondent from Ehin-Etiri Baale submitted here:

....They come on visits occasionally, especially when the project is going on ... they come to check how work is going. They hardly sleep in the community ... The only time they stayed long with us was when they came to train some members of the community on how to manage the project. That time they stayed three days.

A Community Development Association Secretary in Ehin-Etiri volunteered:

We are sometimes invited to meetings in town to consult with them. They do come here too, but they

are always in a hurry to leave when they come ... you know that the '*Alakowes*' don't have much time.

With dispositions such as this, the much-needed interaction between the leader and the led to engender the influence process is, no doubt, lacking. At one of the FGD sessions in Bamikemo, an elderly man noted:

Given that they do not have much time to spend with us, most of the sessions are used for briefings. We hardly can have time to really discuss because in discussions, questions and explanations are bound to arise ... but there is hardly any time each time they come around.

The submission above raises the issue of inputs of the beneficiaries into the development project and process. As indicated earlier, the grassroots see the NGO field staff as the 'torch' to illuminate the way to development in their community. Perhaps another comment on this will suffice:

Well, the government has not looked towards our direction for a long time. Our roads are hardly motorable and we do not have any social amenities. We have to thank God for various non-governmental bodies. They have assisted us a lot; we have to thank them. (An elderly female in Ehin-Etiri)

But how much input do the people have into the development process? According to an informant:

We formally instituted our COWAN body here in the community and we attend meetings regularly at the headquarters in Akure...Over time we were introduced to TechnoServe...credit scheme in Lagos. This NGO facilitated the credit scheme with which our mill was built.

The Ehin-Etiri case was not as participatory as that of Bamikemo. According to an elderly informant who describes the matter of assistance from NGOs in Ehin-Etiri:

We just find them in our midst often times. They consult our elders and in some cases hold meetings with our CDA.... Where they meet our expectations and needs, we are happy and give thanks to Good...Well, where they do not ..What do we do? ... They are not obliged to do, after all the government people we hardly see.

The emerging pattern is one in which the NGOs, on behalf of the people, source for projects and get in touch with the communities through the existing CBOs or cause the formation of CBOs to implement the projects. Sometimes the 'connection' comes from sons and daughters of the community who are resident in the towns and cities. A discussant in Ehin Etiri commented:

The Local Government contacted us as a Community Development Association (CDA) and we mobilized the Palm Oil Women's Association...

In the two communities, though with slight modifications in the case of Bamikemo, there is still a continuation of the top-to-bottom strategy in which 'better informed' persons (experts) living outside the community shop for development aids/projects and in turn distribute such aids/projects to the grassroots through the NGOs.

Thus, there is very little input of the beneficiaries into the decision process for the projects. The participation is more of consultation than dialogue. As a woman in Bamileke noted, "We attended meetings, as association members, to agree to take the loan to buy the milling machine." In the case of Ehin-Etiri "The experts brought in the engine and installed it at the site provided by us."

Situations such as these no doubt affect the interaction process as decisions are arrived at without the actual participation of the people at the grassroots. Thus in most cases the goal is hardly clear to the people at the grassroots. In the case of the Ehin-Etiri, for example:

The mill was completed and commissioned. It worked for about four months ... but has been shut for some

time now ... people do not bring their palm fruits here for processing.

This becomes a classic case of where leaders in development failed to carry along the beneficiaries, resulting in the non-sustainability of the project – a situation that the NGOs were supposed to correct or be seen to be correcting

In the area of trust, respondents have more of this for the NGO field staff relative to state officials in the context of project implementation. A young female respondent in Bamikemo commented on this:

As far as the NGOs are concerned, they are better than the government officials. You can trust them to complete the projects.

However,

We cannot really say from our end here, we do not know how the money is spent, they do not render any account to us o. They finished the project and handed it over to us.

(Leader of the Palm-oil Women's Association in Ehin-Etiri)

From Bamikemo,

We opened our own account and they come to inspect it regularly. In turn we are servicing the loan given to us, and the officials that come here regularly write reports ... but that is not given to us to read o ... They are sent to their other offices and 'Ogas' although if we have any problem we report to our facilitating body in Akure.

In other words, the NGO field staff are not primarily responsible to the host community. They have to render account to the donors, not to the people. On adjustments to projects, it is reported that

We have to await the approval of the outside body ... where the field staff is informed, our views have to be

taken to the headquarters and it depends on how it fits into their our plan.

(Ehin-Etiri female respondent)

The Bamikemo experience corroborates this:

We wish for some expansion but we have to go at the pace of our benefactor.

(Bamikemo woman leader)

In-depth interview sessions were held with some sampled NGO field staff in order to address some issues raised above by respondents. First, the field staff generally accepted that the grassroots look up to them to bring desired change in the living conditions of the people. A female discussant puts it thus:

Each time I have had the opportunity to discuss with the people at the grassroot I have not failed to notice the hope on their faces and the great expectation from me as a person and the organization that I represent

A male discussant:

Of course, they often see us as having the key that opens the door of solutions to their problems.

However, another discussant argues thus:

Our time and resources are limited. There are other places to visit ... besides, most projects that we undertake have to be completed within some specified period ... We oftentimes have no choice.

Aside from this externally imposed constraint on time, the development practitioners often have difficulties reconciling themselves with some of the cultural ways of the people they have come to develop:

You know that our people have so many customs and beliefs that often make things difficult for us when we go out there to meet them.

As such, I want to stay for as short a time as possible ... because I do not want to disrupt their normal way of life.

In other words, the field staff 'do not have time' for a proper understanding and dialogue with the grassroots, especially those in the rural areas, because of differences in cultural orientation. While the rural dwellers are still 'fixated' in their old ways, the NGO elites are forward looking to the western world. Rather than be integrated into the group, they go into their midst as outsiders, both in attitude and in action (even when they speak the same language and belong to same cultural origin):

Well, I have to go with my water, because I am afraid of typhoid ... I also go with some drugs to protect my health ... Not that I am proud but you know you cannot be too sure of the sources and dangers in some of the food items they give to you.

In this attitude of 'us' and 'them' lies the inhibition to the influence process in the development drive that the NGOs are expected to foster and facilitate.

Furthermore, the NGO field staff were questioned on the issue of feedback in terms of lessons learnt on project implementation, especially as it concerns the beneficiaries. A respondent's input:

Normally our report is meant for our donors and of course for our own records and administration. It is not for the people in the beneficiary communities.

But how about post-project visits by the field staff to further cement the relationship and thus enhance the influence process? The answer:

While one appreciates the need for post-project visits to the communities, if this is not budgeted for, where do we have the money ... besides after the end of a project in any community, we have to move on to other places ... we have other schedules or one's organization might still be busy battling to get another grant

However,

Some of us do try at our own private level to do post-project visits ... but that is often personal. For me I try to avoid it because the people make so many requests that you are not in a position to grant.

Thus, the NGO field staff as development practitioner delivers the goods (the development project) and finds his/her way back to headquarters (generally the city centre). The end users of the goods find little or no "customer services" from the "sales men and women" of grassroots development. Trust becomes the victim here:

We are left with little choice here. We know the people look up to us, but we are constrained also ... it would appear that the structure and nature of the NGOs as presently constituted and funded cannot afford us the opportunity for *that* form of leadership in grassroot development that is prescribed under the participatory methodologies and techniques.

Conclusion

NGOs are being called upon to help reduce the gap between the rich and the poor and to help solve ecological and social problems in order to sustain development at a point when, as indicated above, the field staff of these NGOs (as facilitators of development) do not appear ready for the type of leadership required under a people-centred and community-driven developmental paradigm. They are still fixated in the old top-bottom orientation and elitist practices in development work. To change this orientation will require a well-articulated conscientization programme that goes beyond technical skill building to build skills in building trust and effective communication with the people.

Finally, as the chapter has shown, NGO field staff wield a lot of power in the distribution of development resources. By their intervention, they make changes possible especially at the grassroots level in the rural areas where the absence of the state is most felt. Ironically, the NGOs generally do not render account to the people, thus negating the reciprocity that should inform the leadership process.

ENDNOTES

- ¹The assessment was done for UNICEF in 1996.
²Conducted by Food Basket Foundation International, Ibadan.

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