

Ethics for do-gooders

NGO, The News 27/9/02

We, as a people, are extremely susceptible to fads, especially if they happen to descend from



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the so-called think tanks of the West. Just a few years back we were introduced to the new meanings of civil society — the body of non-governmental organisations. The gullible segments of our power elite were made to believe that anything not under the influence of these organisations is uncultured, barbarous and retrogressive; and that the future of the uncivilised societies of the third world was dependent upon the wisdom and resources of NGOs, especially the ones operating from industrial countries. They, naturally, will function through the network of local groups, personnel and government departments. Since their hearts go overboard at the sight of misery of the unfortunate people of our countries, and they create jobs and bring money into the starving and doomed countries of the developing world, foreign do-gooders are allowed to entrench themselves freely — unmindful of consequences.

One is not inimical to the existence or activities of non-governmental organisations. Pakistan, since the British days has been having many noble and vigorous NGOs, mostly known as Anjuman. Then there were NGOs flouted by non-Muslims. They comprised people imbued by the spirit and conviction of serving society. They filled crucial gaps in social services for the community. A large number of educational, medical, economic and information related institutions established by these organisations played a significant role in educating the youth, providing health services, and creating social and political awareness among the people. Pakistan, seen dispassionately, owes its very existence to the people produced by Muslim educational institutions run by NGOs located at Aligarh, Lahore, Karachi, Peshawar and Dhaka, besides localised smaller organisations. How can anybody deny the contribution made by these and other NGOs created under the same spirit? None of the managers and functionaries of these bodies ever looked for a reward, recognition or worldly benefits. Even the western social service organisations like the Red Cross, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, YMCA, YWCA, etc. kept their voluntary and public-spirited character intact.

The upsurge in large non-governmental organisations started after the end of World War II. Even the NGOs that had existed before 1939 got invigorated during this period. One way or the other, the upturn was related to economic and social reconstruction endeavour after the War. The task was so gigantic and urgent that governments could not handle it alone. People volunteered to help by organising themselves. Governments also encouraged dependable NGOs to share the burden and provided them with funds and facilities. Their performance was so satisfactory and the people associated with them, drew such a sense of fulfilment and spiritual solace that NGOs were created for meeting every contingency and need that occurred anywhere in the world. The advent of the United Nations showed the way to a new era of global cooperation to eradicate ills afflicting the world. With that, many NGOs working for literacy, education, health, environment, etc. went global. This was the beginning of the phenomenon of international non-governmental organisations, which embraced every aspect of human life.

Then the inevitable happened. International organisations needed bureaucratic mechanisms to direct, operate, monitor and finance these networks. Since the United States had emerged as the major financier of these undertakings, the American corporate management system was adopted as the model, with all its trappings, including the US salaries, benefits and terms of service. It played havoc with the administrative personnel of the developing countries. The biggest harm done by the transfer of the corporate structure of the West to the poor countries is the injection of — by developing countries' standard — huge monetary benefit to local erstwhile social workers. This took away from the NGOs the voluntary spirit, devotion to a cause and self-

less service — the hallmark of the original non-government organisations. It will never come back.

Apprehension lurking behind forceful touting of the newly defined civil society were related to possible explosion in the NGO population.

With prospects of free flow of funds, transport, air conditioners, modern office equipment, computers and a modern way of life, foreign-based NGOs or their satellites could prompt lots of otherwise simple workers to join the league of NGO makers to claim their share of the windfall. Unfortunately, this has happened already. The number of NGOs registered under Voluntary Social Welfare Agencies Ordinance 1961, which a few years back had been reported to be in the vicinity of 8,000, has jumped to around 13,000 and the total registered under all acts to about 78,000. Since there is no strict system for checking their activities, nobody knows about what they have received; from where, and where has it gone. Many of them do not receive funds from abroad; they generate huge amounts by running their institutions as commercial ventures — schools, handicraft emporiums, 'social welfare' and the latest rage - Information Technology. They are not NGOs in the classical sense of being non-profit. But they exist and help their 'owners' to mint money by using weird names and titles, providing frequent trips to capitals of industrial countries.

This has made the whole scene murky. Even sound organisations with notable achievements have been tarnished by being in wrong company of a multitude of makeshift organisations. Bodies which compete with each other for questionable gains and dubious distinctions do not hesitate to pull tricks on their rivals. In their quest to climb the economic and social ladder, they have created a perception in the mind of people that most NGOs are engaged in making money for their managers, and are in the habit of mud-slinging on each other, besides spreading subversive Western messages. Tragedy is that some very useful work has been hindered, if not thwarted, by this image. There is the need to clear misgivings in the minds of the people regarding the objectives and the usefulness of the work being done by the NGOs, especially those not engaged in profit-making for themselves.

To a great extent, the bad name to NGOs in Pakistan has been invited by the organisations themselves as a block. Display of opulence instead of simplicity, high salaries of staff compared to the average income levels for similar qualifications and experience in the market, and the appearances of diplomatic functions and privileges can be deadly for NGOs as a creed. A further blow is struck by following beaten and useless tracks which are adjudged to be important in the Headquarters abroad. Many a time, their choice is hilarious. A terrible example of imbecile activities is the dropping of food packets in Afghanistan by the US planes after heavy carpet-bombing. Not only it was a cruel joke, but also the dropped food was so unfamiliar to Afghan villagers that they could not consume it.

The mushroom growth, lack of imagination and simple arrogance have led to widespread plagiarism among the NGOs. The target population becomes wise to it. As a result they mock at these activities and develop a perception that the NGO sector is trying to push something down their gullet to fulfil some sinister agenda. This practice is harmful not only to the NGOs concerned but also to the cause for which the activity is undertaken; besides being immoral and unethical. It only brings a bad name to the NGO sector, for being unethical and wasters of time and money on similar matters. Even habitual plagiarists make an oblique reference to the originator!

The NGOs have an established place in society. Like most other things, we have succeeded in crippling them and making them controversial. For their sake, and the causes they serve, some regulation is needed. One believes that some move is underway to achieve that. Let it be effective and early.