

Are NGOs serving West's interests?

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NGOs

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In the decade of 1980s, the phenomenon of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) surfaced in Pakistan and within a short span of time rapidly spread throughout the country. The time was most appropriate for these organisations to grow as General Ziaul Haq had, by the time, consolidated his dictatorship after overthrowing Z.A.Bhutto's government and the democratic order.

The undemocratic nature of state and growing social, economic and political unrest provided enough space to the NGOs to act as agents of change and attracted a number of liberal and enlightened young people in their fold who wanted to reform society. International climate also helped them to grow and flourish, as it was the period when the ideology of free market economy was gaining ground in various parts of the world under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

Donor agencies generously doled out financial aid to those NGOs which volunteered to work for their agenda and on their terms. The focus, in most cases, was on issues such as gender discrimination, environmental degradation, human rights, child labour, honour killing, poverty alleviation, civil society, and good governance. Apparently, there was a great appeal in these programmes which led a section of energetic youth to believe that to work for these causes was the only way to bring about a radical change in society. Campaigns launched on these social issues established, for a while, the genuineness of the NGOs among educated, liberal and westernized circles.

However, after having watched their performance for two decades we are now in a position to analyse and assess their impact on society and causes of their failure to bring about any change in the social and political structure. There are two ways to look at the NGOs phenomenon: One, the way conservative and religious circles view their activities and; Two, the view that liberal and enlightened groups hold about their role and contribution to society.

The conservatives are of the opinion that these NGOs, like Christian missionaries of the past, are foreign agents and are trying to subvert our traditional and religious value system. In its place, they want to introduce western cultural practices and values some aspects of which, according to the conservatives, are obscene and vulgar, and therefore a threat to our way of life.

Many liberals and progressives argue that these NGOs, being financially assisted by the

western donor agencies, are working for the long-term interests of the multinational corporations which do not enjoy a good image in the Third World. Hence, they are indirectly preparing the Pakistani society to come to terms with the inevitability of the advent of globalisation. Needless to stress, the free market system — an essential vehicle of globalisation — would interfere with and ultimately wipe out local culture and national identity and make the developing countries dependent on the West in every respect. Moreover, there are different opinions about long-term agenda of the NGOs and their principal motive. Some intellectuals think that it is to weaken the institution of state.

Meanwhile, many NGOs have sprung up in the West which actively campaign to expose the 'dirty designs' of the multinationals, the IMF, World Bank and the WTO.

The NGOs are answerable only to their donor agencies and not to the communities among which they work. Their main concern is to satisfy the former and not be necessarily sincere in their efforts to promote the interests of the local people. Hence, the money spent on the Pakistani people by the NGOs cannot be intended to enhance their welfare; this money can only enhance donors' unknown objectives in this country.

They frequently hold protest rallies in front of the conference venues of these multilateral institutions. Recently, they were able to organise huge anti-war demonstrations and marches in more than a hundred cities to denounce US war designs against Iraq. These NGOs appear genuinely committed to bring about a change in society and compel their governments to end exploitation of the Third World countries. But such NGOs are scarcely present in our part of the world.

It is, however, a wrong impression that the NGOs are anti-state. On the contrary, they support state and would like it to be more powerful and coercive. For example, it is the responsibility of state to take care of education, health, and employment. The NGOs, in the name of 'self-help', tend to free state from all these responsibilities and convince people to meet these needs on their own by organising themselves under their projects. If the government fails to collect waste, construct roads, and set up schools, they should not depend on government and manage

their affairs by themselves.

If state is free from all its obligations, it will use all its resources to make its structure more powerful and coercive. However, state comes into conflict with the NGOs only when the latter interfere in matters pertaining to certain policies which the government thinks would damage its stability and popularity. For example, when Nawaz Sharif's government carried out nuclear tests, several NGOs denounced these tests. The government, in turn, threatened to keep a check on the NGOs' foreign donations. This alarmed these organisations as it was their vulnerable point. When Nawaz Sharif was ousted and General Musharraf assumed power, many of them heaved a sigh of relief and welcomed him. Most of the NGOs support the army rule arguing that the army's was a liberal and secular

causes of their problems.

For instance, they divide issues relating to children into different categories such as child labour, children's health, children's education, and sexual exploitation of children. In this way, they treat the children like commodities and to be examined after breaking them into different pieces. Her argument is that when knowledge is broken into pieces, it becomes difficult to have a grasp of the problems because all social, economic and political issues are linked together and cannot be understood separately.

The NGOs do not talk historically because then they will have to talk about a change in the system which is exploitative and class-based. She further points out that the NGOs look at all issues in the present context and not historically. For example, if we examine the issue of human rights historically, we will have to condemn the western powers for committing frequent violation of human rights during the period of colonisation. Today, the same western powers are using it, as in case of China, to get economic concessions.

As a result, the NGOs have failed to build any political or social movement that could bring about awareness and political consciousness among the people. Though they claim to have 'grass roots' contact, they do not essentially work for the interests of the common man. Whenever they hold workshops or seminars they divide the participants into two groups: those whom they call educators, resource persons, and animators; and the others whom they regard as uneducated, untrained, illiterate and passive participants.

The NGOs are answerable only to their donor agencies and not to those communities among whom they work. Their main concern is to satisfy the former about their performance and not be necessarily sincere in their efforts to care about the concerns and interests of the local people. Another reason why many people are suspicious about the NGOs and their activities is that they get donations from those countries which are imperialistic and aggressive in their policies and known for interfering in internal affairs of the developing countries for selfish motives. Hence, the money spent on Pakistani people by the NGOs cannot be intended to enhance their welfare; this money can only enhance donors' unknown objectives in this country. ■

Those who wish to join the debate should email their write-ups (1,400 words) to encounter@dawn.com — Ed.