

No, their role is positive

NGOs Danu 10.5.03 By Asad Siddiqi

THE non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in Pakistan have, on the whole, made a valuable contribution towards developing the social services sector. Besides, they have been moderately successful in creating awareness among people with little or no education, about their human, legal and civil rights and in removing inequalities in access to opportunities for education, health and employment on the basis of sex and religion. The acronym NGO has been in use for a long time now. But what exactly is an NGO?

According to Dr A. Atiq Rahman, Executive Director, Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies, the term "non-government organization" is a misnomer arguing that while it tells us what an NGO is not, it does not in effect say what it is. Although the term NGO correctly differentiates it from a government organization it fails to depict the NGO's purpose or position in society.

The NGOs have had a chequered history in this country. They have existed since independence, working mainly for the rehabilitation and social welfare of the poor and the marginalised. However it was in the '80s and the '90s that there was a major rise in their numbers in the wake and aftermath of the Afghan war against Soviet occupation, a period which also saw the return of popular democracy to Pakistan.

In the eighties, the NGOs from all over the world descended on Pakistan ostensibly to provide relief to the Afghan refugees encamped in the NWFP and Balochistan, but in reality seeking to promote their own private agendas. From the Middle East came funds for the various jihadi organisations, whose brand of militant Islam had a particular fasci-

nation for the frustrated young men living in the refugee camps. They were thus easily inducted into madrassas, being promised additionally better living conditions and cash rewards for their parents. These seminars propagated implementation of Sharia, if necessary by violent means in an Islamic revolution.

Then, there emerged what Oliver Roy in his book *The Failure of Political Islam* calls "neo-fundamentalism", a more orthodox Islam, as was practised by Afghanistan's Taliban regime. The neo-fundamentalists found a not wholly unexpected ally in Zia-ul-Haq. He skillfully exploited the clergy to his advantage by enlisting their support for his Islamization campaign, and thus deflecting opposition from groups such as the Women's Action Forum (WAF) towards the neo-fundamentalists.

The NGOs like the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Shirkat Gah, ASR, the Aurat Foundation, etc., which were already in the forefront of the struggle against Zia-ul-Haq's enforcement of laws that severely infringed the personal rights and freedoms of women and religious minorities, found themselves pitted against the neo-fundos. The agenda of the WAF NGOs thus came into direct conflict with that of the neo-fundos manning the jihadi organisations.

The Asian Development Bank (ADB), in its 1999 study of *NGOs in Pakistan* has not accorded the status of NGO to the jihadi organisations. According to the ADB there are four categories of NGOs: those involved in a) advocacy and lobbying b) policy issues and debates c) emergency relief and rehabilitation, and d) implementation of development projects and programmes. The WAF NGOs are mostly advocacy NGOs focused on

legal rights, literacy, women's issues, children, minorities and human rights.

The report states that many of these NGOs are favoured by foreign funding agencies because their founders are usually very articulate in promoting the causes that are of interest to such agencies. Furthermore, the advocacy NGOs being interested in mass contact know how to use the media well. However these agencies can prove to be fickle. Their focus changes frequently according to "dynamic concerns of international development". When this happens, the NGOs are often abandoned by their sponsors who then devise another programme and promote a new set of NGOs.

At present, their attention appears centred on poverty alleviation through microcredit financing. Kashf, a Lahore-based microfinancing NGO, has been especially successful and has used its lending programme to gain a foothold in rural communities for the spread of primary education among women.

The WAF NGOs maintain a high profile. The Saima and Samia cases made Asma Jehangir a household name, and her fame spread overseas. For her outstanding role in promoting human rights, she has been awarded medals and citations by several international human rights organisations. She has the ability to project issues onto the international arena, much to the discomfort of the reactionary and obscurantist forces who always seek to discredit and defame these NGOs.

Despite this, the government's antipathy towards the advocacy NGOs continues. The governments of NWFP and Balochistan have pledged to outlaw NGOs mainly because of their programmes for promoting education among the female population. Earlier in 1999,

the NGOs defending democracy, human rights, equitable development and pluralism, were scared into paralysis by Shehbaz Sharif in Punjab through his welfare minister, Pir Binyamin. As many as 2,500 NGOs were dissolved.

Binyamin attacked, by name, the HRCF, Shirkat Gah, and Ajoka charging that they were "spreading vulgarity and obscenity in the name of human rights." He accused the HRCF of "trying to promote a 'culture of adultery,'" saying that it "wanted to create a generation which didn't even know about their parents, and when they grew up they would have no love for the country or Islam." Binyamin claimed further that, because the NGOs receive funding from outside Pakistan, they "served foreign masters and worked for some 'vested interests.'" He called "fraudulent" all the human rights and women's rights organisations in urban areas.

These NGOs were also intimidated and pressurised by the government. In May 1999 for example, an enquiry was initiated against Shirkat Gah for embezzling Rs 80 million of World Bank funds and for its involvement in anti-state activities. Shirkat Gah protested that it had never received any funds from the World Bank for any project. The allegation of anti-state activities was equally unsustainable, having arisen from the participation of a Shirkat Gah representative in a British Council seminar on 'Violence against Women'.

The second surge of NGOs came in the early nineties when new organisations were formed to take advantage of new available funding under the People's Works Programme. Many sprang up overnight to grab a share in funding and they subsequently disappeared, the ADB report observes.

The Pakistan Bait ul Maal and its provincial offshoots also provide financial assistance to the NGOs, which have to meet stringent criteria to qualify. However, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) of the Senate found that about Rs 4 billion were released to the NGOs that either did not exist or if they did exist, were not engaged in any welfare work.

Although the advocacy NGOs enjoy wider publicity, they are overwhelmingly outnumbered by those NGOs which are engaged in humanitarian work, such as the Edhi and Fatimid Foundations, the LRBT and the Shaukat Khanum Memorial Trust, and have also not been as successful as the latter in achieving their objectives. But then struggling against military regimes, and combating militant mullahs is no easy task. While Edhi and Imran Khan have become icons, Asma Jehangir and her sister Hina Jilani are hounded. Nevertheless the advocacy NGOs have achieved much more than the few NGOs in the development sector. Of these the community-based Orangi Pilot Project and the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme have been successful.

Susumu Nejima, who conducted a review of the NGO sector in Pakistan for NGO Resource Centre, Aga Khan Foundation, views the NGOs work as uncoordinated and fragmented: mere 'islands of development projects amidst seas of needs'. He also dispels the impression that NGOs in Pakistan are heavily dependent on foreign funds and thus serving foreign interests. Only eight percent of the NGOs/CBOs surveyed were foreign-funded. Local NGOs are influencing policy change at the government level. The late Omar Asghar Khan of Sungi was a minister in the Musharraf government. ■