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WHEN I began working in low-income settlements in the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was no such thing as NGOs and civil society. Activists in low-income settlements usually formed an association which they got registered under the Societies Act. The activists of the association invited politicians or bureaucrats to their settlement, arranged a meeting for them with tea and samosas, garlanded them, prepared a sipaasnama in their honour (which was read out on the occasion), and put forward their demands, promising to vote for their guests’ party in the forthcoming elections.

The demands were usually related to water, sewage, access to roads and transport. If these demands were fulfilled or promised to be fulfilled, the settlement was named after the politician or bureaucrat who helped fulfil them. If the demands were not fulfilled or were ignored, there would be demonstrations, sometimes violent, before the offices of the relevant authority. For water, communities often got together and tapped the existing water lines ‘illegally’, and connected their self-help sewage lines to the nearest natural outfall such as a nullah. Sometimes, the association also hired a journalist to report on the terrible physical and social conditions in the settlement. Meanwhile, through this process, the authorities were forced to hold negotiations with the associations. Much of Karachi has developed piecemeal in this manner.

Things began to change with globalisation and the concepts of neoliberalism and safety nets for the poor. The donors felt that the funds provided for safety nets should be managed by NGOs to prevent corruption and mismanagement, and many of these NGOs became subservient to donor policies and programmes. It was also felt that, individually, these NGOs did not have much power in determining policies and pressurising governments. As a result, the concept of civil society as a conglomerate of NGOs was promoted.

Earlier, community organisations were part of the development debate.

However, up to the 1990s, community organisations and their leaders were made a part of the debate on development. They participated in the workshops that were held, they gave their opinions which were incorporated in reports and background policy papers (such as for sanitation and housing), but this process slowly came to an end. New policies, such as the social and rehabilitation policy or the Sindh High Density Board Act, do not have background papers, and there was no participation of community organisations or even their leaders in their formulation. The Karachi Diagnostic Workshop was put together by the World Bank to determine a vision for Karachi. However, it consisted almost entirely of NGOs, many of which did not have the relevant involvement in the issues discussed. The diagnostic was prepared in 2017, and to date very little has materialised out of it.

Development-related literature and rep­orting has also changed. Up till the decade of 2010, people’s concerns and the condit­i­ons in their settlements were reported in considerable detail, and community leaders were invited to voice their opinions. Ho­­w­­ever, with the passage of time, writings and reporting have increasingly consisted of opinions and articles by ‘experts’, who talk in terms of statistics and their larger context — in which communities and specific settlements do not exist, except as case studies. Much of this is also because in academia, greater emphasis is now placed on theorisation and on natural phenomena (such as climate change and pandemics) and their repercussions, rather than on communities.

NGOs have now become the spokespeople for communities, and in the process, many communit­i­­es have lost the initiative that they once had. Also, the role of comm­unity activists in the development process has de­­c­r­e­­ased. Although NGO representatives probably pre­­sent the case of the communities better than the activists, they often come under the pressure of donors and the larger NGOs to whom they are subservient. It also happens often that for some reason, the donors stop funding the NGOs, as a result of which their programmes come to a standstill. Pakistan is full of such cases, which have left communities in the lurch. Many internationally funded programmes require community dialogues, but many of them in my experience are more a dialogue between the educated elite of the area and the project staff.

It is becoming increasingly necessary that the community leadership takes over their original role and becomes the direct spokesperson of their people in all negotiations with social- and physical-related development. And the role of NGOs should be to support the creation of such a leadership and walk away. The NRSP and SRSO programmes in Sindh are examples of how this can be done.

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