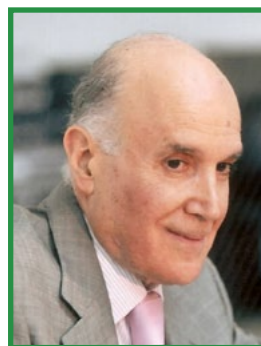


National and International NGOs in Globalization: Partners not Custodians



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General Introduction

The global system faces today two main dilemmas. Despite the unprecedented wealth that the world disposes of, and which motivates the ones who own it to lecture about international accountability, democracy and human rights, we can all realize that our world is dominated by mass poverty and an unprecedented increase in human suffering caused by violent conflicts and natural disasters. The frenetic industrial and technological progress that we witnessed during the past decades, promoted by the consumerist system, led to destructive consumption and life style patterns. The supremacy of the “Western Way of life” in all sectors of societies shows its limits today. As a consequence, we are confronted with an increase in extremist movements, ethnic marginalization and exclusion, caused by the detrimental political, social and economic mutations that have aggravated over the years. Two decades ago, there were 400 million poor people in the world and 10 billionaires. Today, there are 2 billion poor people and 550 billionaires. This only goes to show that the gap is widening between the two; that violence, poverty and marginalization keep rising, and “that our world is not sustainable if ¼ of it is rich and ¾ are poor, if half of it is a Democracy and the other half a Dictatorship, if those who have everything are surrounded by those who have nothing”.

After the end of the Cold war and the “discredit” of socialist movements, neoliberal powers and the market

economy took the lead over societies. We witnessed the weakening of the role of the state in favor of the private sector and the governance of the financial sector. All the social protection warranties acquired during the welfare period were now threatened. Pecuniary interests took over solidarity and equity values. Devoid of ruling power, the leftist entities thought filling the gap left by the state and massively flocked the civil society and NGO sector. These organizations acquired a major role in supporting vulnerable populations to access services, protection and human rights in failed states. Nonetheless, in many cases, they have substituted for the role of the state or local actors, atrophying legitimate nucleus of power.

The NGOs have acquired a planetary importance and have been rightfully called: “the third system”, after the public and private sectors, mainly because of the budgets they are handling (for instance, in the USA, the third system represent more than 6% of the GDP), but also because of the assignments they are in charge of, either independently or missioned by their governments, confessional or political groups. They have evolved from service providers to development agencies and advocates for human rights and social change. Their motivations and ways of action also suffered changes over the years. In this way, long before and during the two World Wars, the missionary humanitarian aid, accompanying the occupiers, was implementing the civilizing mission/ “mission civilisatrice”, aiming at westernizing the savages of the Global south. With the colonization, the populations have integrated what is commonly referred to as “interiorized racism” where locals become convinced that “everything from the West is better” and everything from our own culture is insufficient”. The struggles for national self-determination, civil wars, popular disobedience and rebellion occurring in the 1960s and 1970s made place to the solidary humanitarian aid, with countless activists from around the world participating in liberation movements and promoting a positive vision of a common human destiny. With the rise of neoliberalism, the NGOs have joined the system and adopted the market



economy mechanisms, falling into negative competition and an over professionalization of their work, in detriment to solidarity values and the just cause of peoples. Many of them have unfortunately become Business-oriented NGOs (BONGO) or adepts of charity business. To quote the French Philosopher Régis Debray, I would say that the humanitarian sector was originally leftist and then it turned into a rightist world. There are only a few NGOs who are working against this trend and Amel is part of them.

There is an urgent need for the humanitarian actors to return to the values that prevailed in the late sixties and return to the solidary humanitarian action. It is a fact that many International NGOs are currently acting as simply ambassadors of their own developed countries and through the institutional financing they are receiving export dominant models of development and impose them to the beneficiaries in their area of intervention. A change is possible today, as NGOs are able to negotiate and rework some of the pressures imposed by the donors, given the multiple ways of funding that NGOs can access. **However, the North-South separation between NGOs and the self-attributed supremacy and multi-sectors expertise of the international NGOs is still present and disqualifies the national NGOs as equal and trustful partners. On the opposite, international NGOs, reproducing the colonialist pattern, are still acting as custodians**

and ignore the potential of the national civil societies. International and national NGOs should all have the same goal, “the human, as individual and part of a community and its harmonious development in the society” (Leberet) **The biggest challenge that lies ahead is how to work together as civil society organizations from the North and the South in order to build a fruitful relationship that will become a lobby for a fairer world.**

International NGO-National NGOs Useless rivalries vs Equitable partnerships. Amel’s case:

Lebanon has been the “theater of operation” of humanitarian and development actors during the civil war and the Israeli occupation and has witnessed the evolution of the humanitarian aid and the forms it took through the various crises that affected the country. During the civil war that lasted more than fifteen years, we have witnessed the solidarity and humanist values that animated the international volunteers who came to live with us the tragedy of the situation, risking their lives every day just like us. They did so with no other motivation than the solidarity and generosity, and generally had no pecuniary expectations. After the war (1990), things have changed. We have witnessed a change in the profile of humanitarians who were coming to give us lessons, often highly educated but also very far from the reality of the ground. We have seen a parade of consultants and technical experts from partner International NGOs, often representing the interests of these INGOs, themselves an extension of a foreign power, teaching us how to do our work and claiming, with arrogance, to know better than us what needs to be done on the field and how to do it.

The majority of existing partnerships between national and international NGOs are not based on respect and on an equal sharing of powers. International agencies are often seeing the need to collaborate with national entities as a constraint. When INGOs choose to put aside local actors or do not develop fair partnerships with them, they fuel misperceptions and mistrust in the local communities, and render efforts undertaken by local NGOs useless. Some voices are considering international humanitarian and development interventions as a new form of neo-colonialism. We do not wish to enter into this debate, but generally, the attitude of the international actors tends to validate this assertion. It is also urgent to review the budgets of the international aid agencies, as astronomical

sums are drained in coordination and overhead costs, security and visibility, and only a fraction of it goes to the people in need. Meanwhile, a ballet of coordination bodies, meetings and conferences takes place, developing the humanitarian tourism and spending funds that could otherwise save lives.

It is in this context that many international NGOs take action in Lebanon. There are not many NGOs who care to work in partnership with local NGOs, rather than attempting to overtake the work and recognition of these local organizations by recruiting their staff, dismantling projects to create their own that often do not answer local needs.

Even though the UN system is insisting on the importance of having local partners in their countries of operation, they often adopt a paternalist attitude. For instance, in Lebanon, UNHCR created its own NGOs network instead of reinforcing the existing structures. Consequently, we are not seeking here to build the capacities but to divide the national NGOs between them in order to make sure that none of them will be powerful enough to contest the UN policies.

Since we are here to discuss the role of local NGOs to strengthen the HCTs, I would like first to acknowledge the fact that, in some countries, these bodies include local NGOs. However, this inclusion does not mean that we are treated as equal partners. I would like to share here my experience as a member of the Lebanon HCT. Even though the situation in Lebanon is catastrophic with 1,500,000 Syrian refugees, 50,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria and more than 1,000,000 host community members affected by the crisis, the discussions at the HCT are often too theoretical and focused on UN strategies. Instead of addressing the issues happening in the field and relying on the experience of local NGOs on how to deal with it, the HCT participants are listening to UN political analysis, presentation of studies, etc. However, it is more than important for a local NGO, to be part of the HCT since it is another forum where we can share our vision and challenge the purely technical vision of humanitarian action.

Besides the HCT, we are also trying to create new spaces of discussion and, within this framework; we initiated the Lebanon consultations of the World Humanitarian Summit in coordination with OCHA, ICVA and the Humanitarian Forum. Performing such an exercise, gathering more than 30 local NGOs to share their concrete experience of humanitarian action in Lebanon was not only fruitful in

terms of discussion but has also proven that through their experience, **the local NGOs are a key component of the humanitarian action.**

Finally, convinced that **there cannot be democracy without development**, we always carry out our activities in three phases. First, emergency relief and provision of basic needs to the most vulnerable populations embodied currently by the Syrian Refugee Emergency Response, composed of Health, Education and Child Protection, Livelihoods and Social Cohesion Programs. Second, long-term development projects are implemented to empower vulnerable populations and vitalize economic growth in Lebanon. The Women and Rural Empowerment program is working specifically to achieve that. Third comes the advocacy on human rights and awareness campaigns, carried out by the Amel House of Human Rights and our Migrant Domestic Workers Program.

But all these achievements are over shadowed by a simple fact: in times of peace, no coordination and partnerships exist, simply because INGOs are guided by the funds made available by their governments and foreign politics does not always coincide with humanity and solidarity. Moreover, partnerships are usually created on a project-basis that is limited in time and often has no sustainability. This is why, Amel pleads for the creation of long-term and durable programs, where partnerships are based on fair relations in which the cooperation is ongoing and allows for an even faster response in cases of emergency.

Role of National NGOs

It is not possible to consider civil society initiatives that aim to solve social problems as marginal actions. This means that the non-governmental sector should not be named the “third sector”, but should be the first sector in the society. This would insure that “development plans” decided among governments, economists and international economic and financial organizations and marginalizing civil society should be replaced with “inclusive projects” involving all the members of a society.

For that, NGOs should have a leading role in expressing and bringing forward social needs with clear objectives aiming at finding solutions for the negative consequences of economic growth, lobby towards policy-makers and advocate for social change. Civil society occupies a pole position in turning these dynamics into pressure instruments to influence policies and amend discriminative

laws to serve all people, regardless of their geographic, regional, religious, political and ideological background and beliefs. This would however require a comprehensive vision for development as well as a charter between NGOs and different civil society structures, where the roles would be equally distributed.

In order to achieve these changes, several capacities must be reinforced inside these non-governmental institutions. For instance, at the internal level, each member of an NGO, as well as the NGO itself, should be committed to equity principles, and should list as their priorities, democracy, transparency, participation and independence. At the internal level, each NGO should provide its active members with the means and resources to take initiative, be creative and participate in the fieldwork. NGOs also have the duty to invest in the potential of the staff, by building their capacities and forming leaders in their communities. At the external level, NGOs should be aware that their role is not to take people’s place and decide on their behalf, but to promote people’s participation and their ownership of the actions implemented. Building relations with all the stakeholders in a society, such as syndicates, professional unions, parties, municipalities, local leaders, clubs, governmental bodies, and other institutions both religious and political, in addition to universities, are also essential in order to make a change.

Above all, local NGOs must be directly supported to improve their structures, their governance and transparency in order to become full-fledged partners. This can only be achieved by giving them trust and helping them liberate from the international NGOs custody.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this intervention by raising some issues that are of major concern to us all and that should be tackled with all urgency. First of all, all humanitarian or development actors should be concerned with the following question: **“Will NGOs be a tool in the hand of the government like in many countries or will they be a lobby that will pressure the government to serve the public interest?”** This particularly applies to NGOs from the North that are mainly financed by governments and in a certain way apply their foreign policies and positions. NGOs role is not to implement the state’s policies or be a substitute for it. Their role is once again to be a pressure group, making sure that actions are directed to the people

in need and that the human and development rights of each individual or group are respected.

International NGOs should be summoned to stop the colonialist patterns that they are reproducing and a full and fair partnership should be put in place allowing all involved parties to act for human rights, development, peace and social justice and especially for the Palestinian cause. The goal for us all should be the human and its wellbeing in society. In this sense, INGO should have an altruistic approach and their actions should be directed to empower the national NGOs, who have the legitimacy to act for their people. **The change can only come from down, from the grassroots of a society.** Therefore, **international agencies should build on local existing entities and not build alien ephemeral structures** that are not representative and dismantle immediately after they leave the country. Also, INGO should be consistent in supporting secular local partners, without completely banning the religious NGOs and helping them separate between politics and religion.

Our current global system is showing its limits and the gap is constantly widening between the rich and the poor, while the solidarity values are disappearing in the detriment of profit, efficiency and self-interest motivations. **Is there still a way to return to social solidarity and social well-being, a society/a world that cares for all the beings? How can we act towards a fair distribution of wealth and halt the grabbing of resources from the poor countries?** In fact, there is no democracy, without development. As the former French president François Mitterrand said at the Copenhagen Summit in 1995, it is urgent to change our practice since “*...+ the world cannot continue without development.” Many NGOs and networks are focusing their work on advocacy and lobbying. Even though these actions are necessary, they do not make any sense without specific actions on the ground. In this sense, the whole idea of humanitarian and development action should be reviewed. With the emergence of the international citizenship, the blurring of boundaries and the global village reality, suffering, struggles, successes and the just cause of people’s, starting with Palestine, become globally owned. In this sense, the civil society has to be a catalyzer, it has to capture these forces and produce the global change. It is only by sharing our forces and giving up on useless disputes and conflicts that a sincere and sustainable solidary citizenship can emerge.

NGOs can make the necessary changes for a better world.