

Oxfam Community Aid Abroad (Oxfam Australia), with a particular focus on Guatemala. She is currently a freelance consultant and is preparing a PhD thesis on the Mayan movement in Guatemala from the perspective of women at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). Contact details: <mayal@prodigy.net.mx>.

DOI: 10.1080/0961452042000239823

Reflections on NGOs in Tanzania: what we are, what we are not, and what we ought to be

Issa G. Shivji

Soul-searching

We do not get many opportunities to sit back and reflect on ourselves as civil society activists. But reflecting on who we are, what are we doing, and where we are going does not require any justification. At a time when a hegemonic discourse is being transmitted to the peoples of the world through both state and non-state agencies, it is all the more important that we create opportunities to ask ourselves some fundamental questions: are we serving the best interests of our working people? Are we contributing to the great cause of humanity, the cause of emancipation from oppression, exploitation, and deprivation? Or are we, consciously or unconsciously, dancing to the tune played by others?

It is in the spirit of self-criticism, reflection, and soul-searching that I offer the following thoughts about NGOs in Tanzania, and in the South more generally.

Our limitations

To understand NGOs in Tanzania better, we must start with what we are, what we are not, and what our limitations consist of. First, most of our NGOs are top-down organisations led by elites. What is more, most of them are urban based. In the case of Tanzania, NGOs did not start as a response to the felt need of the majority of working people. It is true that many of us within the NGO community are well intentioned and would want to contribute to some cause, however we may define it. It is also true that many NGOs do address some of the real concerns of the working people. Yet we must recognise that we did not develop as, nor have we as yet managed to become, organic to the mass of the people. The relationship between NGOs and the masses therefore remains, at best, that of benefactors and beneficiaries. This is not the best of relationships when it comes to genuine activism *with*, rather than *for*, the people.

Second, we are not constituency- or membership-based organisations. Even if we have a membership, this is made up largely of fellow members of the elite. Our accountability is therefore limited, and limited to a small group. In fact, we end up perhaps being more accountable to our donors than to our own members, much less to our people.

Third, we are funded by, and rely almost exclusively on, foreign funding. This is the greatest single limitation. 'Whoever pays the piper calls the tune' still holds true, however much we

may want to think otherwise. In many direct and subtle ways, those who fund us determine or place limits on our agendas or reorient them. Very few of us can really resist the pressures that external funding imposes on us.

Fourth, in 'NGO world' we have been brought up to believe that we should act and not theorise. Theorisation is detested. The result is that most 'NGO wallahs' do not have any grand vision of society, nor are they guided by large issues; rather, they concentrate on small, day-to-day matters. In NGOs, we seldom spend time defining our vision in relation to the overall social and economic context of our societies.

Fifth, many of us tend to conflate NGOs with civil society organisations, thus undermining the traditional member- and class-based organisations of working people, such as trade unions, peasant associations, and so on. We may pay lip-service to people's organisations (POs), but in practice both our benefactors (the so-called donor community) and ourselves *privilege* NGOs, something which has had far-reaching consequences, including the undermining of representative mass organisations.

In spite of these limitations, I believe that NGOs can play a worthwhile role. But then we have to recognise *what we are not*. I want to suggest that in the current context of neo-liberal hegemony in our country, NGOs have been cast in a surrogate role which many of us have come to accept, and perhaps even feel flattered by it. This is where our limitations compound each other and there is a danger that we may both assume a role which does not belong to us and fail to play the role for which we may be best suited. This will become clearer as I examine some of our recent experience of activism.

Participation by substitution

NGOs, as they developed in the West, were essentially pressure groups to keep those in power—the state and the government—on their toes. In our case, as the donors became disenchanted with states, they took fancy to NGOs, thus undermining the state and its institutions while at the same time placating their own constituencies back home who demanded 'civil society involvement'. Participation and consultation are part of the so-called 'good governance' insisted upon by donors, and they facilitate the legitimisation of the neo-liberal policies of hegemonic Western powers and the international financial institutions (IFIs) applied in countries of the South.

NGOs are cast in the role of 'partners'—partners of the state and partners of the donor community, partners in development and partners in good governance. We get involved in the so-called policy dialogues in which the triad—NGOs, the government, and donor representatives—participates. We attend workshops as 'stakeholders'. Donors, who fund policy making, and their consultants, who make policies, seek us out for consultation. All this goes under the name of people's participation and involvement, or 'good governance'. What is the implication of this type of participation for democratic governance in our countries?

First, policy making in the interest of its people is precisely one of the core functions and responsibilities of government. It is not the function of the donors. Donor-driven policy making only shows how much our states and our people have lost their right to self-determination under the domination of post-Cold War imperialism, euphemistically called globalisation. By participating in this process, NGOs lend legitimacy to this domination. In fact, NGOs ought to be playing exactly the opposite role. NGOs cannot possibly be fighting for the interests of the people if they are not in a position to expose and oppose imperial domination. The right to self-determination is our basic right as a people, as a nation, and as a country. It is the right for which our independence fighters laid down their lives, and yet now we seem to be legitimising the process of losing it.

Second, by pretending to be partners in policy making, NGOs let the government off the hook as it abdicates its own primary responsibility. The role of NGOs ought to be that of a watchdog, critiquing the shortcomings in government policies and their implementation.

Third, NGOs simply cannot substitute themselves for the people. They are neither the elected representatives of the people nor mandated to represent them. People's participation in the institutions of the state is their democratic right and ought to be expressed on a continuous basis through the structuring of appropriate legal, institutional, and social frameworks.

As pressure and advocacy groups, our prime duty is to put pressure on the powers-that-be to create the conditions that would enable popular participation in the institutions of policy making. This means our role should be to struggle for the expansion of space for the people and people's organisations within the representative institutions of the state such as parliament, local government councils, village and neighbourhood bodies, and so forth. The process of reforming and reconstituting the state in a democratic direction is the only way to ensure genuine people's participation and to deter the abuse of state power. This is a continuous process of struggle, not some one-off, *ad hoc* process of stakeholder workshops and policy dialogues.

If the struggle for democratic reform were conceived thus, then NGOs would adopt a very different strategy: protracted public debates as opposed to stakeholder conferences; the development of alternative ways of doing things, instead of providing 'inputs' into consultants' policy drafts; demonstrations, protest marches, and teach-ins in our streets and community centres to expose serious abuses of power and bad policies rather than 'policy dialogues' in five-star hotels. Democratic governance is an arena of contestation of power, not some moral dialogue or crusade for good against evil, as the meaningless term 'good governance' implies. You cannot dialogue with power!

In short, I am urging us to re-examine the ways in which we conceptualise and practise these fancy new roles as partners and stakeholders. We cannot possibly be partners of, and hold a stake in, the very system which oppresses and dehumanises the large majority.

Selective activism

The great strength of NGOs is supposed to be their *consistent, principled, and committed* stand in support of the large masses and for human values and causes. We are not a bunch of self-seeking petty bourgeois politicians who, almost by definition, are inconsistent and driven more by power than by principles. As activists, we are not in the business of brokering power, where expediency and compromise rule. Our business is to resist and expose the ugly face of power. We are guided, and our work is informed by, deeply held human values and causes. It seems to me that consistency of principles and commitment to humanity should inform all our work, thought, activism, and advocacy.

Our values and causes may be summed up in three elements, which I have elsewhere called popular livelihoods, popular participation, and popular power (Shivji 2000). Whether in the language of democracy or human rights, most of our values and causes can be summed up in these three elements. By 'popular' I refer to the exploited and oppressed classes and groups in our society. This is in contrast to the current demeaning and singularly useless neo-liberal discourse in which popular classes are dubbed the 'poor', to be incessantly researched into and targeted with poverty-alleviation funds. The term 'popular' is meant to signify the central place of the working people in the struggle to regain their livelihoods, dignity, and power. I shall not go into details of these concepts here. Suffice it to say that I believe these elements signify the values and causes with which many NGOs and activists would identify. It is my contention, however, that many NGOs have failed to stand up for these values consistently and have

thereby greatly compromised themselves. Let me cite three recent examples. I do so as a matter of critical reflection rather than to point fingers.

The whole world was shaken to the core and basic human values were challenged in March 2003 when the USA led the invasion and occupation of Iraq. The world over, millions of people, as individuals, as NGO activists, and as decent human beings, demonstrated and protested in defiance of this monstrosity. Here in Dar es Salaam, our NGO world was shamefully silent. A small demonstration organised by the Students Union of the university attracted few NGOs and activists. Well-known human rights NGOs and advocates were conspicuous by their absence. The umbrella NGO organisations did not even issue a simple statement either of their own or in solidarity with others. How can we, who espouse democratic values of freedom and self-determination, explain such silence?

Let us take the second example. During the time that the government of Tanzania was debating the NGO bill, also on the cards was one of the most draconian bills ever, the so-called anti-terrorism law. The former was rightly opposed by NGOs. One may critique their strategy. That is another matter for another occasion. The point I want to make here is that these same NGOs were utterly silent on the anti-terrorism bill. In countries like South Africa and Kenya, NGOs were in the forefront against proposed anti-terrorism laws. To their credit, our sister NGOs in Kenya put up such stiff resistance that the bill has not yet been passed. Ours sailed through parliament. Many people are asking and are entitled to ask: how come? Are we NGOs selective in the freedoms we support? Was our cowardly silence regarding the anti-terrorism law in part due to the fact that our benefactors include the likes of USAID? Is it because we are no better than other self-seeking groups in that we readily challenged the NGO bill, which threatened our own existence, while we conveniently ignored the anti-terrorism law, which delivered a shattering blow to all basic freedoms and rights?

It is true that NGOs cannot do everything and cannot be everywhere. But the question of Iraq and the spate of anti-terrorism laws and measures thrust down the throats of our governments and peoples is just not anything. It marks an important turning point in establishing the hegemony of the single remaining world superpower, with very far-reaching consequences for the freedoms, rights, dignity, and independence of the peoples of the world, particularly in the Third World. Under the pretext of fighting terrorism, the USA is involved in changing the world map. It is 'playing God' by deciding for us what is good and what is evil. It is establishing a string of training colleges for spies and new types of police on the African continent, including Tanzania. Yet the NGO world sleeps soundly. Latin America knows, and has experienced, what happens when you have your forces of 'law and order' trained in methods of disappearances, mysterious murders, and pre-emptive killings of those labelled 'terrorists'. A whole people in that region—what we used to call freedom fighters, liberators, and organic intellectuals—become non-people! Witness the atrocities that Central and Latin America went through, from El Salvador to Nicaragua, from Argentina to Chile. Many perpetrators of these horrendous crimes were 'trained' in the School of the Americas sponsored by the Central Intelligence Agency. Surely no NGO worth its name can ignore these lessons from other continents and simply stand on the sidelines while the seeds of instability are being planted in our continent?

Solidarity with people's organisations

In the 1980s and 1990s many activists took enthusiastically to the struggle to open up organisational space for the people. This is the time when NGOs mushroomed and the multi-party system was introduced. Coming from the background of the hegemony of the authoritarian state, which killed and maimed people's independent organisational initiatives, it

is quite understandable that NGOs should have been in the forefront of the struggle for the independence of civil society. Yet, in the larger context of the moral and ideological rehabilitation of imperialism in the post-Cold War era, NGOs appear to have played the role of undermining traditional people's organisations just as the ideology of human rights seems to have displaced that of national liberation or social emancipation. Many NGOs have failed to realise this and, therefore, without necessarily being conscious of the fact, may be lending credence to this process.

Let me refer you to the example of trade unions in Tanzania. The trade union movement was suppressed in 1964, a year before the suppression of political parties. When the freedom to form political parties was reintroduced in 1992, the freedom to form trade unions lagged behind, being achieved only in 1998. Since then, against very strong odds and under adverse conditions, the trade unions have been struggling to establish themselves as truly class- and constituency-based organisations. Privatisation and globalisation have greatly undermined their efforts, as the working class is being decimated through redundancy and impoverished as public services such as water, sanitation, education, electricity, and health are being turned into private commodities for sale on the market for the purpose of private profit.

Nonetheless, the fledgling trade unions have been involved in a desperate struggle against the new exploiters, the so-called *wawekezaji*. Among these is South African capital, which is ferociously moving north in its second round of primitive accumulation on the continent. Recently we witnessed the saga of workers at the National Bank of Commerce (NBC) as redundancies followed the purchase by Absa, the South African and African banking giant, of a 70 per cent stake in the bank. What is perplexing and inexplicable is that the NGOs played absolutely no role in this struggle, not even that of showing solidarity. While NGOs participate in stakeholder workshops discussing poverty *alleviation* strategy papers, we seem to be oblivious of the *creation* of poverty through redundancy and robbery of public goods in the name of privatising social services. When the NBC workers were holding their mass meetings, sister trade unions sent delegations to express solidarity. I did not see or hear any NGO doing the same.

Lack of correct understanding of our place and role as NGOs in the struggles of the working people manifests itself on other levels too. There have been massive anti-globalisation and anti-capitalist movements in the West. Again, our presence in those has not been very prominent. We also have the Lawyers' Environmental Action Team (LEAT), which has been involved in a protracted exposure of abuses of the mining companies. Our NGOs and their umbrella organisations have, however, been quiet. We have not uttered even a word of solidarity, let alone held demonstrations and protests in militant solidarity.

Conclusion: articulating an activist worldview and choosing sides

I want to suggest that we NGOs and activists need to take a hard look at ourselves. We need to take stock of our activities. We need to evaluate ourselves in the light of our values and principles and mission to create a better world. If indeed an alternative world is possible, and it is, we need to know our existing world. And not only must we know the existing world, but we must also know who keeps this world going. Why and how does this world keep reproducing itself, in whose interest, and for what purpose? And we have to choose sides: the side of those who are struggling for a better world and against those who want to maintain the existing one. We simply cannot be neutral.

The question before us is: can we really understand the existing world better so as to create a better world without having a grand vision, a grand theory, a worldview rooted in the experiences of working people? Can we really eschew *thinking* and *theorising* and *knowing*?

The hegemonic powers and their spokespersons talk about the 'end of history' and the 'end of ideology'. They tell us the age of solidarity among the oppressed peoples is gone. We are told that now is the age of economics, not politics. Our leaders tell us there is only one world, the existing world, the globalised world, the hegemonic world. 'We either swim with it, or we shall sink', they say. The truth of the matter is that it is the working people who are sinking in the globalised world while the elite swim in it. It is clear, therefore, that there is a contest between two worldviews, one that wants to maintain the existing world and another that wants to create an alternative one. Which worldview do we share? We should choose and act in accordance with our choice.

Let me end with two very poignant quotations that broadly represent the two worldviews in a specific context. A story in the *Guardian* (19 August 2003) reported on Tanzania's new foreign policy, which, it said, stresses economic interests rather than political considerations. The story ends with a quote from what the US Ambassador told the Parliamentary Committee for Foreign Affairs on 29 July 2003. Commending Tanzania for its new 'economic diplomacy', he said:

The liberation diplomacy of the past, when alliances with socialist nations were paramount and so-called Third World Solidarity dominated foreign policy, must give way to a more realistic approach to dealing with your true friends—those who are working to lift you into the twenty-first century where poverty is not acceptable and disease must be conquered.

Some 30 years ago, Mwalimu Nyerere, talking about changing another 'realistic world' of his time, that of apartheid South Africa, said:

Humanity has already passed through many phases since man began his evolutionary journey. And nature shows us that not all life evolves in the same way. The chimpanzees—to whom once we were very near—got on to the wrong evolutionary path and they got stuck. And there were other species which became extinct; their teeth were so big, or their bodies so heavy, that they could not adapt to changing circumstances and they died out.

I am convinced that, in the history of the human race, imperialists and racialists will also become extinct. They are now very powerful. But they are a very primitive animal. The only difference between them and these other extinct creatures is that their teeth and claws are more elaborate and cause much greater harm—we can see this even now in the terrible use of napalm in Vietnam. But failure to cooperate together is a mark of bestiality; it is not a characteristic of humanity.

Imperialists and racialists will go. Vorster, and all like him, will come to an end. Every racist in the world is an animal of some kind or the other, and all are kinds that have no future. Eventually they will become extinct.

Africa must refuse to be humiliated, exploited, and pushed around. And with the same determination we must refuse to humiliate, exploit, or push others around. We must act, not just say words. (Nyerere 1973:371)

If there is one thing common among all pundits of the status quo, and all dominating classes and hegemonic powers, it is that *their* existing world is the only realistic world and that no alternative is possible. Yet it is struggling for an alternative world, a better world, which has changed the past and will continue to change the present for a better future. We, the activists, together with the working people, must continue to fight for a better world. An alternative world is possible.

Acknowledgements

This paper was a Keynote Address at the September 2003 Gender Festival organised by the Tanzania Gender Networking Group. I am grateful to Natasha Shivji for reading and commenting on the draft.

References

Nyerere, J. (1973) *Freedom and Development: A Selection from Writings and Speeches*, Oxford: OUP.

Shivji, Issa (2000) 'Critical elements of a new democratic consensus in Africa', in H. Othman (ed.) *Reflections on Leadership in Africa: Forty Years after Independence*, Brussels: VUB University Press.

The author

Issa Shivji is a founder member and former Executive Director of HAKIARDHI (Land Rights Research and Resources Institute) and Professor of Law at the University of Dar es Salaam. He has published widely on issues relating to democracy and human rights in Africa. Contact details: Faculty of Law, University of Dar es Salaam, PO Box 35093, Tanzania. <ishivji@ud.co.tz>.

DOI: 10.1080/0961452042000239832