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NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION (NGOS) SPEARHEADING PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

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Abstract

Development is a continuous process and is essential to enable the population to attain a better standard of life. But it should not be at the cost of the environment. Of late many developmental projects are focused only on tunnel vision that is obvious, but the negative impacts (on the environment), are totally ignored.

It is not development per se, that is wrong, but development without control, without concern about its impact on the environment that is wrong. The masses that are affected are usually ignorant, or are too poor to raise their voice.

Review of literature has shown that Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have played and continue to play an important role in organizing mass movements by creating awareness about the negative impact of the projects on the environment, and the peoples responsibility. There are Environmental NGOs working at international, national and at local levels. The literature surveyed from the Internet, environmental magazines, books, journals and newspapers shows that the Environmental NGOs are able to create a positive impact in protecting the environment and sustaining human growth..

It is concluded from the survey of literature that, inspite of the weaknesses, Environmental NGOs have been able protect the environment and their presence is essential in streamlining “developmental projects” so that the developmental activities are focused on sustainable development.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

“Development”, is the process of producing or creating something new or more advanced; a new or advanced product- according to the Oxford learners’ dictionary, it has gained momentum after the industrial revolution in England. It has spread to different parts of the world, though the scale of development varies with each country. Distances have shrunk, the globe is well linked by advanced

communication systems. Man has eradicated many diseases and longevity has increased. Ambient temperature can be controlled to suit ones needs. Products and goods that provide comfort and pleasure are available in all sorts of forms. Food that tingle the tongue are available a phone call away. All seems fine...

Development of roads, railways, harbours, dams, industries, etc is needed for the growth of the country. Roads and railways interconnect; multipurpose dam projects create hydroelectric power, water is used for irrigation and drinking, inland waterways; industries boost production of goods and provide employment etc. Many inaccessible places have been made accessible by road, rail or air. People in remote areas are also coming in contact with the modern world and are able to partake in its benefits like electricity, medical facilities, education, and employment, etc. Boost in the production and distribution of fertilizers and chemicals have increased crop yield. Industries, small scale and large scale have given employment to many, while producing goods of export quality, improving the economy of the country. Access to education has increased the number of jobs and enhanced the standard of living. Development of tourism has also increased the inflow of foreign exchange.

In the process of development only one side has been focused on. There is another side, a truly ugly side. The other side of the coin is a tale of woe- floods, drought, famine, extinction of flora and fauna, displacement of communities, polluted water, poisoned atmosphere, depletion of natural resources, ever increasing amounts of non decomposable junk and hazardous waste. Demand for jobs and failure of crops drive rural populace to the cities, which do not have the economical infrastructure to accommodate the growing population. The solid waste generated is uncontrolled and the amount is ever increasing, and being dumped into wetlands and water bodies. They become breeding ground for disease causing vectors and microbes. Owning a vehicle has become the trend. Liberal financing available has boosted the number of vehicles in the cities, affecting the quality of air, beyond permissible limits. The growing need for housing in towns and cities require clearing of land and hence the decrease in tree cover, which other wise would help as sinks for the pollutants. Discharge of effluents into open land and water bodies have rendered water bodies and land unfit for use.

2. Objectives

1. To review literature on NGOs and their classification.
2. To identify the need for NGOs with special reference to Environmental NGOs.
3. To list international environmental NGOs and Environmental NGOs in different countries of Asia.
4. To outline the role played by NGOs in involving community participation for environmental protection and sustainable living in India.
5. To assess the strengths and weaknesses of NGOs.

3. Developmental Issues

3.1 Disasters

The following literature cites examples of the impact of 'development' in different parts of India. Added to the impacts of projects are accidents caused by negligence, like leakage, spills, seepage etc that have drastic consequences on man and the environment within a very short time. The

projects and activities though meant for obviously good purposes turn out to become sources of misery and doom to humans as well as the environment.

Bhatt (1991:17)¹ has stated that massive deforestation in the Alaknanda region in the mid Himalayas is resulting from road networks for border security, local peoples needs and commercial exploitation has resulted in the devastating flood in the Alaknanda in July 1970, which created havoc in the upper catchment.

As part of India's "Green Revolution" and industrialization policy, the Union Carbide plant was set up in Bhopal to manufacture pesticides. ...in 1979 an existing Union Carbide facility was chosen to produce and store a particularly dangerous and poorly understood chemical, methyl isocyanate(MIC). The leakage of MIC on December 23, 1984 caused 2,500 deaths (unofficial reports as high as 16,000) 4 lakh injuries/illnesses narrates Lopatin.² It is more than 29 years since the tragedy happened, yet the scars left by the tragedy remain.

Pandit (1998)³ describes in detail the geography and demography of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and its tribal population. The paper gives a vivid picture of how influx of mainlanders and developmental activities have hampered the delicate ecosystem of the islands as well as the balanced life style of the tribals with their environment. Now the tribals are left high and dry with no identity and are dwindling in numbers.

Pant et al (1998)⁴ discusses the impact of activities like construction of dams, roads, quarrying, mining and tourism on the Himalayan environment and how increase in commercial cultivation has affected the ecosystem of the area.

The effect of various activities on the environment due to 'developmental' activities have been documented by various authors. Agarwal et al (Ed)(1999)⁵ have, in the National Overview The Citizens' Fifth Report described the impact of various developmental activities on man and the environment (land, air, water..) in various parts of India.

Gilgert⁶ (2001) discusses the development of Auroville in Pondicherry from a barren ochre landscape to an area rich in biodiversity. She expresses her fears about the effect that "development" of Pondicherry, can have on Auroville.

The state of the environment is deteriorating at such a pace that Ghosh(2002)⁷ has remarked, "By 2101AD the rich may need to carry oxygen cylinder strapped on air conditioned suits".

Kothari,(2002:27)⁸ says India's model of development has focused heavily on certain material goods and services and that a number of essential aspects have been ignored.

The Narmada Valley development Project is one of the largest hydroelectric projects in the world and will displace 1.5 million people from their land in three states (Gujarat, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh). The project will devastate human lives and biodiversity by inundating thousands of acres of forests and agricultural land, describes Kapadia⁹. Writers have voiced their concern about the haphazard activities that are spearheaded in the name of development. Roy¹⁰ asks "The State"(India) wants to build these dams on the Narmada River in the name of National Development. But "How can

you measure progress if you don't know what it costs and who has paid for it?" In spite of protests from many quarters the Supreme court has allowed for the dam to be built up to its originally planned height of 138 meters (Kapadia)⁹ after many hearings.

The impact and the future consequences of the construction of the Tehri Dam are discussed in 'The Tehri Dam: Development or Mal Development?' (Anon)¹¹. The paper says that the benefits of the dam will be reaped by the city of Delhi whereas the area of Tehri and Dehra Dun will remain deprived of water. The cost of maintaining the power generation will exceed the so-called calculated benefits of the project.

The projects or activities discussed above were evolved with the aim of betterment to the people. But the negative impacts were not addressed at the time. It is after the impact is felt that there is a hue and cry. There is a need for citizens to be aware of the impacts of activities. There is a need for the citizens to be organized in standing up for themselves when it comes to taking decisions that are crucial to their survival.

3.2 Future – Impact on Sustainable Development

We cannot say NO, to development. India is growing; she needs the natural resources for the development of the country and to nourish her booming population. It is not development per se that is wrong but development without control, without concern about its impact on the environment that is wrong. The need of the hour is to take wise decisions and implement projects, which do not hamper the environment. In spite of laws and regulations, projects get formulated or implemented with an eye on immediate gains and not on the long term hazards that could possibly take place. There is a dire need to involve the common man in the decisions that affect his well-being. The involvement of the community can have a positive impact only if the citizens are aware of what is good for them in the long run. They should be able to say like eco – activists Edward Abbey has said

“At some point we must draw a line across the ground of our home and being, drive a spear into the land and say to the bulldozers, earthmovers and corporations this far and no further.” Dharmarajan, (2001:179).¹²

The citizens should know when, where and how to “draw the line” so that the outcome will be favourable to man and to the environment: It is possible to implement projects for development, yet protect the environment. According to renowned agricultural scientist, Dr. M. S. Swaminathan.(2003)¹³ “Environment and economic security are not antagonistic to each other. In fact they are the two sides of the same coin. One is dependent on the other”. Hence development should be such that we make best use of the available resources instead of squandering it, so that we do not take more than what is necessary so that we leave behind resources for progeny to “develop”.

4. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)

4.1 Definition

Rising to the occasion are many organizations, formed with the objective of helping those in misery. These organization concentrate on one or more areas like, poverty alleviation, rural development, gender equality, literacy, health services, social development, human rights, and environmental protection, etc.

Many of these organizations have interacted with heads of governments to achieve their objectives. Different means and methods are adopted to realize their goals. They have their success and failure stories. These organizations are basically not associated with the government, but are self-motivated groups and are broadly termed as Non Governmental Organizations.

In their broadest, NGOs are simply agencies or groups, which are different from government bodies. However, NGOs are distinctive in containing a voluntary component and because they do not operate for profit. Riddell, etal (1995:28).¹⁴

The World Bank defines NGOs as “private organizations that pursue activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services or undertake community development”(World Bank Operational Directive 14.70)¹⁵

According to Asian Development Bank (ADB) “In its broadest sense the term Non Governmental Organization” refers to organizations (1) not based in government and (2) not created to earn profit”.¹⁶

4.2 Trends in NGO activity

The goals which the NGOs initially focused on, that is in the 1950-1960s was increasing the poor farmers’ income. This target has undergone changes and in the 1990s the focus is on sustainable development. The trend is depicted in figure 1.

1990s Sustainable Development
1980s Gender and Environment
1970s Empowerment approach – literacy for alleviation of poverty
1950-1960s Increasing poor farmers’ income

Figure 1. Trends in NGOs activities from 1950 to 1990s

(Compiled from (Roger C. Riddell, Mark Robinson, John De Coninck, Ann Muir & Sarah White, Non Governmental Organisations and Rural Poverty Alleviation, Overseas Development Institute, London, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1995 p34-35)

4.3 Need for NGOs

Many of the projects discussed in the earlier part of the paper, have been subjected to protests by NGOs. A few of them have been successful in preventing more damage to be done to the environment. A few projects have still been implemented in spite of protests. The NGOs have been able to create an impact on the society and it has been accepted as can be inferred from the literature surveyed.

Many argue (Elliot 1987¹⁷, Fernandez 1987¹⁸, Garilao 1987¹⁹) that the voluntary sector may be better placed to articulate the needs of the poor people, to provide services and development in remote areas, to encourage the changes in attitudes and practices necessary to curtail discrimination, to identify and redress threats to the environment, and to nurture the productive capacity of the most vulnerable groups such as the disabled or the landless populations.

Korten (1990:119)²⁰ refers to the role of NGOs as “outside change agent”, which “helps the community realize its potentials” through its own interventions and guidance.

According to Jaix(1992)²¹ NGOs have a more accurate and practical knowledge of local environmental problems than would be possible for government organizations to attain. This helps them to formulate better solutions to the problems than government authorities.

Robert Buckley (1999)²² states that NGOs provide a closer link to the poor than public sector institutions

‘NGOs role have become a key factor in people centered development’ (Dharmarajan 2001:iii-iv)¹³. She further says that a healthy growth of the NGO movement is rather a national necessity.

“If we look at all of them, we can capture the spirit, the energy and the very texture of a resurgent India. We see some individuals working in them radiating calmness and a grace which borders on a spiritual message.” Kalam(2002:289)²³, President of India, about NGOs. India contains many elements of hope. Several communities, individuals, NGOs and government officials or agencies have been leading a quiet revolution in all sectors of development. Kothari(2002)⁸

Ananth(2003)²⁴ refers to NGOs “.... as ‘new social movements’ (NGOs in other words) to have managed to strike roots among a cross section of the people and also been able to shape the organizational set up across the country. Citing the example of the Narmada Bachao Andolan he says that NGO have been able to “build popular movements involving several thousands of ordinary people at a time when even the Left parties (with their strong and well knit trade union organizations) have been forced to restrict their agenda to mere symbolic actions against the establishment.” Whatever may be the area of involvement of the NGOs, there is a need for their presence and the society is in need of their services, when the people are oppressed and ignorant of how an activity is going to hamper them.

4.4 Classification of NGOs

There are different classifications of NGOs, based on the area they cover viz., regional, national and international. There is a classification based on location whether they are based in a developed country (northern) or developing country (southern). In an unpublished OECD paper van der Heijden(1986)²⁵ estimated that the number of southern NGOs ranged between 10,000 to 20,000. (Riddell .1995: 26)¹⁴ A distinction is also commonly made between NGOs, which originated in and have their home – base in industrial countries, which are referred to as Northern or ‘international’, NGOs and those which originate in and operate within developing countries which are termed ‘Southern’ NGOs.

Some typologies distinguish NGOs according to the focus of their work, some according to the approach they undertake, say operational or advocacy Maslyukivska(1999:7)²⁶

The World Bank interacts with two main categories of NGOs¹⁵ viz., 1) Operational NGOs – whose primary purpose is the design and implementation of development related projects and 2)Advocacy NGOs – whose primary purpose is to defend or promote a specific cause and who seek to influence the policies and practices of the Bank. However these two categories are not mutually exclusive.

The World Bank classifies Operational NGOs into three main groups

1. Community based organizations (CBOs) also referred to as Grass Root Organizations, which serve specific populations in a narrow geographic area.
2. National organizations which operate in individual developing countries.
3. International organizations which are typically head quartered in developed countries and carry out operations in more than one developing country.

5.0 Environmental NGOs

5.1 International environmental NGOs

NGOs focusing their activities on environmental issues are generally called environmental NGOs. Tsukasa²⁷ has reported that in a study it has been estimated that by early 1980s there were about 13,000 environmental NGOs in industrialized countries, while the number of environmental NGOs operating in developing countries was estimated at around 2,230. The number of environmental NGOs in developing countries has been and continues to increase. In the same paper it has been reported that Asian countries may have the largest number in the developing countries with Philippines topping the list in Asia. Table1 lists a few international environmental NGOs.

Table 1: A few NGOs working at international level, with their objectives and funding source.

Sl no:	Name of the Organisation	Founded in	Member ship	Objective	Funds
1	Water Environment Federation Alexandria (USA) ²⁸	1928	42,000	Preserve and enhance water quality, guide technological developments in water quality, build alliances with other organizations etc	Membership dues, grants, income from advertising, publication sales etc
2	Greenpeace International ²⁹	1971	2.5 millions	Protect biodiversity, end chemicalisation, prevent ozone layer depletion	Sale of merchandise and member contributions
3	Earthwatch Institute ³⁰ UK	1971	30,000	Promote sustainable conservation of our natural resources and cultural heritage by partnerships between scientists educators and the general public	Foundations corporations and individual donors as well as national governments, European union Volunteers, subscribers
4	Friends of Earth International ³¹	1971	1 million	Preserve earth's cultural, ecological ethnic diversity	Fees, donations and subsidies
5	European Environmental Bureau Brussels, (Belgium) ³²	1974	Full Member organizations in 25 countries	Environmentally sustainable development in the European Union, external policies of the European Union that contribute to environmentally sustainable development in other countries and globally	Grants from the European commission and national governments, member's dues etc
6	Earth Council San Jose, Costa Rica ³³	1992	17members, 14 honorary members, 80 partner organizations	Support and empower people in building a more equitable and sustainable future	Govts, foundations corporations etc

5.1 Environmental NGOs in Asia

There are NGOs working in the field of environmental protection at national and local levels. These organizations use various means to achieve their objective. The environmental NGOs in different Asian countries and the impact they have created in the respective locale is enumerated below.

Since the formal registration of the first environmental NGO in China in 1994, many environmental NGOs have arisen, but the number is far less compared to the burgeoning population. (Chenguang)³⁴

Greener Beijing Institute³⁵ is an environmental NGO in China, which originated on the Internet. Greener Beijing Institute has now distinguished itself as the fastest and most active Internet based environmental volunteer NGO in China, with more than 2000 volunteers spread all over China. The Greener Beijing website was established in 1998 giving attention to municipal waste problems and pollution from used batteries. They have used the website and held exhibitions and performances to draw attention to the endangered Tibetan antelope. They have tried to create awareness in reducing solid waste. Pop singers also have been deputed as Green Ambassador to create public interest. The group has been involved in environmental education activities such as bird watching and learning the endangered species.

Environmental Foundation Ltd (EFL) an NGO in Sri Lanka which started off in 1981 with a meager amount of money and handful of interested students have grown into the island's foremost watchdog and is feared by those who flout green rules writes Samath(1998)³⁶

Even though the government of Indonesia has not given much freedom to its citizens, the environmental NGOs have scored some important victories that have clearly led the Central Government to change some of its ways with regard to the environment. Gordan(1998)³⁷

According to Karakulova(2003)³⁸ Kazakhstani NGOs that concentrate on environmental issues have wielded growing influence over government policy.

President Nursultan Nazabayev has shown little tolerance for political opposition in Kazakhstan. Yet the Nazabayev administration is paying increasing attention to the concerns of environmental activists.

.... NGO influence has reached the point that officials seek the input of activists when formulating environmental legislation. Karakulova(2003)³⁸

Sharma et al³⁹ has discussed in detail the construction of mountain roads with the involvement of NGOs and the local community, ensuring it cost less, was labour oriented and did not contribute to environmental damage. Minimum slope cutting and preservation of vegetative cover, mass balancing bio engineering, proper water management, construction of road in a phased manner, training, labour based construction use of ordinary tools and equipment were the steps taken to implement the Green Road concept. NGOs were involved in social mobilization.

5.3 Environmental NGOs in India

Around 1500 NGOs have been listed in the latest edition of the Directory of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Environment brought out by WWF-India, with support from the ENVIS programme of the Ministry of Environment and Forests (2002)⁴⁰. A few of the environmental NGOs are described below.

Kerala Sastra Sahitya Parishad was set up in 1962 in Thrissur, Kerala to preserve the environment, to provide alternative models for development and to popularize science among the people. They have worked in the field of eco- development, creating awareness about water and energy conservation and encouraging the use of non-conventional energy sources such as smokeless chulhas etc.⁴¹

Kalpavriksh started in 1979 is a voluntary group working on environmental education, research, campaigns and direct action. Kalpavriksh believes that a country can develop meaningfully only if ecological sustainability and social equity are guaranteed. To this end its activities are directed to ensuring conservation of biological diversity, challenging the current destructive path of 'development', helping in the search for alternative forms of livelihoods and development, assisting local people in empowering themselves to manage their natural resources, and reviving a sense of oneness with nature⁴².

Centre for Science and Environment, New Delhi founded in 1980 is an independent public interest organisation that aims to increase public awareness on science, technology, environment and development. CSE has been actively involved in searching for solutions that people and communities can implement by themselves, challenging India to confront its problems, inspiring it to take action, pushing the government to create frameworks for people and communities to act on their own⁴³.

Exnora, based in Chennai is an NGO involved in various activities focusing on involving the local community for harvesting rainwater, managing municipal solid waste mainly by vermicomposting, etc. They have spread their activities to different parts of the country⁴⁴.

Tarun Bharat Sangh (TBS) NGO has been successful in rejuvenating the river Aravari as a result of the conservation efforts for over 15 years. The efforts have involved the stake holders in the local community and they have formed their 'Sansad' which makes decisions on the usage of water and cultivation of crops for judicious use of water. The success of 'for the people, by the people' has been detailed by Sebastian (2000)⁴⁵.

5.4 Advantages of NGOs

Scholars, donors, governments and the public have voiced opinions for and against NGOs. The comparative advantages are discussed here. The shared and universal strength of NGOs is their desire to 'associate and pursue common objectives through voluntary action, independently of Government and with out the expectation of profit'(Esman1991:102-3)⁴⁶.

Mars (1992)⁴⁷ says that that the above is possible because the organizational structure of the NGOs are informal and not bureaucratic or hierarchical, and they are result oriented rather than paying attention to regulations and protecting their political power Some sectors view NGOs (as a whole) as a "magic bullet" that can be fired in any direction and still find its target and deliver positive results(Vivan1994:169)⁴⁸

The World Bank 1998 Operational Directive 14.70 identifies NGOs potential strengths as their ability to reach poor communities and remote areas, promote local participation, operate at low cost, identify local needs, build on local resources and introduce new technologies. (World Bank 1998:3)⁴⁹

Many believe that it's the autonomy of the NGOs that give them an upper hand in treading the untread, experimenting with new ideas, and applying it to new situations as they are not under the government constraints.

5.5 Limitations of NGOs

Local bigwigs, bureaucrats and politicians often frustrate attempts at honest work. (Dharmarajan2001:189)¹³

The World Bank 1989 Operational Directive 14.70 refers to NGO weaknesses such as their limited replicability, self- sustainability, and managerial and technical capacity, a narrow context for programming and politicization (World Bank 1998:3)⁵²

Baxi et al (2003)⁵⁷ say that most NGOs have not been able to work in a significant way, citing a couple of reasons for the set back.; they mainly being disunity among NGOs for a greater cause; imposition of tangible targets by funding agencies. They say that India's do gooders need help in terms of professional management skills. NGOs have a long way to go in both managing and marketing themselves.

“The NGOs remain too weak, without a real mass base. The organizations that do have a mass base seem to have failed to stand up to the challenge.” Rajagopal 2003⁵⁵

Radovanova et al⁵⁶ had conducted a study on environmental NGOs in Bulgaria and concluded that lack of financial resources was not the most important factor for sustainable future development of environmental nongovernmental organisations – public support and understanding from the society and local administration and availability of relevant legislation become more and more important

According to Tsukasa²⁸, the environmental NGOs are not able to decide an environmental policy or pass an environmental legislation since they operate outside formal decision-making process.

6.0 Summary and Conclusions

Public participation is needed for their own well-being in the present day scenario. But there seems to be a need for a catalyst to motivate and educate the masses to see the problems in the true light. The oneness of the community to stand up for their right to life comes only when the community is aware that they too have the right to live a decent life. The NGOs act as the catalyst for bringing the citizens together. The cooperation of the NGOs are needed for the sustainable development of the country. Most of the programmes involving the public are better coordinated with the involvement of NGOs. However, the NGOs lack in managerial skills, self sustainability, replicability and technical capability. Hence it would be beneficial to the society if the ‘do gooders’ were helped in developing management skills, and enhance technical capability. It is worth while if the NGOs could be replicated in structure and technical capability in other developing countries. NGOs have come a long way, and yet have a longer way to go.

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