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ROLE OF NGOS IN EDUCATION FOR ALL

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One of the critical issues in implementing any national or global strategy of education for all would be the kind of role that NGOs are called upon to play and end up playing. In the last decade non-governmental organisations have emerged as an important actor in the development arena in most countries of the South. In order to understand the potential of NGOs in playing certain types of roles, we need to also understand the kinds of NGOs that we are talking about in the Asian context, and more particularly South Asian context.

#### NGO ROLES

We can look at NGOs in different ways. One of the ways to examine this is to see the type of activities that they carry out. In looking at this one could define broadly three types of NGOs. One type are those who are engaging in active grass-roots development work at the base. This grass-roots development work can be of two broad types. Firstly, of provision of services educational services, health services, services in relation to agriculture, drinking water, etc. And the other is the type which primarily works on the lines of organising and empowering the people, making them aware, conscious of their situation and their capabilities, such that the people themselves

then take initiatives in their own development. Even though both these types of NGOs work at the grass-roots level, the nature of their impact and the character of their functioning is very different. While the first one tends to promote provision of services to meet certain gaps and needs, particularly in remote and difficult areas where, for example, educational provisions do not reach. The latter tend to contribute towards collective organisation of the poor who in turn make demands from the state service providers to meet their various needs, including educational needs.

A second type of NGO activity could be broadly classified as a support activity which provides training, education, research, documentation, evaluation support to grass-roots NGOs. Support function varies considerably from provision of support on a substantive theme like education, health, etc. to generalised strengthening of the work of grass-roots organisations, like training on management and accounts-keeping, organisational development and change, staff development, creation of systems and procedures, programme planning, monitoring and evaluation etc. The nature of impact that such a support institution has also varies but has been seen to be quite substantial in promoting effectiveness and longevity of the work of NGOs beyond a specific project.

The third NGO type in broad terms could be called a network or a federation or association or a forum. This could be at international level, regional level, or national level. This could be a formal association or federation; it could be an informal forum or a network. These seem to serve an important function of bringing the micro experiences together on a common platform which can then become the basis for advocacy -- influencing the policies of decision-makers in the government; and internationally, for wider exchange of experiences and ideas and stimulating creativity and new attempts in micro setting, and generally providing strength and solidarity to the work of those working at the grass-roots. In recent years, both issue based networks with a limited focus and duration, and ongoing associations, forums, platforms and federations have grown in considerable size, intensity and impact in many countries of Asia.

There is one other dimension on which NGO activities should be examined and that is the level at which they operate. Most NGOs operate at the local level, comprising of handful of villages or slum communities. This is where the grass-roots types have major visibility. Some grass-roots NGOs also operate on a much larger canvas, either a state or combination of states, though they rarely cover the entire population of that region. The third level is the national at which we see most of the support institutions operating,

though some of them operate at the regional or state level as well. The federations or networks also have some times a regional character but most often a national one. In recent years, the emergence and contribution of inter-country regional and interantional networks, forums and platforms has been substantial, particularly as new issues and concerns begin to emerge in one region and get shared in another. This has been an important role in the question of environment, pesticide, drugs etc.

Before examining the role of NGOs in Education for All, I would like to propose that we look at the implications of these different type of NGO work in general in their societies. The experience suggests that service provision, filling the gaps, meeting the needs where others (primarily State service delivery mechanisms) do not operate, has been traditionally and historically a very important NGO activity, certainly in the area of health and education. Such NGO activity does receive recognition and support from the State many a times financially as well. However, the second type of grass-roots NGO work, which works towards empowering and organising the people, tends to invariably come in conflict with the vested interests at the local and regional levels. In many occasions and many countries of South Asia, the State, its representatives and agencies are part of that vested interests. As a result, the State, its agents and representatives tend to find themselves in an

adversarial position, based on conflict of interest with such NGOs at the local level. When this adversarial role of NGOs becomes visible, the State and its agencies have tried to either intimidate and harass local NGOs or co-opt them by bringing them into committees, providing funding etc. In most situations, the State lacks the capacity to tolerate dissent, a different point-of-view, and to relate to such "noise making" grass-roots NGOs on the basis of respect for autonomy and pluralism.

In relation to support institutions, the State has only recently begun to recognise their existence. These support institutions have particularly been effective in the field of education as they have provided training, research, material preparation and a wide range of other supportive interventions to strengthen the work at the grass-roots to improve the service delivery. The national or regional level networks or platforms on the question of education have been largely non-existent in many of the Asian countries, though some institutions like national level adult education associations or regional level associations like ASPBAE, and international forums like International Council for Adult Education have in recent years begun to play a substantive role in influencing the policy on adult education, in bringing experiences from diverse setting together and in providing a common platform for NGOs working on the question of adult education and literacy.

Similar networking seems to be missing in areas of primary education or women's education etc. On the other hand, the network of formal educational institutions like colleges, universities, research institutes is quite strong, both at the national and regional levels.

### POSSIBLE ROLES OF NGOS IN EFA

Based on the experiences of NGOs, their activities and roles in various aspects of the educational sector in our countries, certain key roles can be identified which can strengthen our approach towards Education For All. These roles need not be seen in mutually exclusive terms, and in reality many NGOs tend to perform multiple roles simultaneously. However, they have been presented here in order to highlight their uniqueness and complementarity.

### SERVICE PROVISION

Historically most common, most practiced, most accepted and recognised role of NGOs has been provision of educational services. This has been done both by missionary organisations, religious institutions as well as secular NGOs in our countries of South Asia. Much of the educational provision has focused on primary education

and/or literacy. In fact, it has been the innovative work of NGOs derived from their service provision role that has brought the question of non-formal education, the question of womens' education, the question of literacy in the policies and programmes of the governments of these countries. Much of this service provision on education has been carried out in remote inaccessible and poverty stricken areas. In India, for example, this has been so in tribal areas, with scheduled caste population and in geographically and physically inaccessible areas.

While continuing to recognise the importance of provision of educational services by NGOs, there are certain concerns that need to be kept in mind. Firstly, over-enthusiasm for using NGOs to provide educational services can in many occasions support the trend towards privatisation of education which has become rampant in recent years. It also tends to absolve the State and its agencies from their moral and constitutional responsibility of providing equitable and high quality education for all sections of the society. Thus NGOs end up providing non-formal educational services in remote, difficult areas to poor populations while the State continues to subsidise and support education of the middle and rich classes, particularly in big cities and surrounding areas. This is not acceptable.

Second implication in recent years has been to look at NGOs as more efficient and cost-effective substitutes to the government service delivery mechanism. Many international donor agencies and high levels of political and bureaucratic decision-making in our countries has begun to openly compare NGOs with local official delivery mechanisms in terms of their cost-effectiveness, reduced corruption and more sensitive service provision at the local level. This trend can have the dangerous implication of using NGOs as cheap substitutes for inefficient, irrelevant, corrupt, expensive official governmental educational services delivery system. This is a blatant "exploitation" of the competencies and effectiveness of local NGOs in reaching the poor and in performing their role efficiently and effectively. It also tends to side-track the government's attention and responsibility from trying to improve and revitalise the existing corrupt and inefficient official delivery mechanism. The use of NGOs for provision of educational services in remote and difficult areas should not be seen as a pretext to avoid intervening in the official educational service delivery system to improve its capacities and service provision.

## INNOVATION AND EXPERIMENTATION

A major role that grass-roots and support institutions have played over the years in the field of education has been to innovate and experiment with new ideas and approaches to learning. This has been most remarkably done in the pedagogy of adults, in structuring educational services through non-formal and community-base systems, in preparation of locally relevant, culturally sensitive learning materials for children and adults, in developing approaches to training instructors and supervisors and teachers, like Participatory Training methodology, in developing new models of monitoring and evaluation which are community-based, participatory and provide authentic and immediate feedback to the instructors, teachers and supervisors, etc. This contribution of NGOs is perhaps the most visible contribution if one examines the changes in governmental policies and programmes in education, because many of these innovations and experiments have been incorporated in nation-wide or state level programmes.

In order to engage in this innovation and experimentation, the NGOs require certain freedom and autonomy, certain resources, certain local opportunities for practicing. This has been possible in some of the countries in Asia and not so possible in other countries. It has been possible in those countries where there has been possible political

space for such experimentation to take place, where there has been support to finance such innovative and experimental strategies and where there has been a mechanism to share and learn from such innovations and experiments both across NGOs and with the government.

The important thing here is to ensure that innovation and experimentation does not get co-opted by the government into a laboratory approach where NGOs continue to brood into their innovation experimentation without either being linked to the rest of the context or looking at their innovation in a long term perspective. In some of the experiments related to science education or production of learning materials of children, this has indeed been the case in India.

The second concern here is that once such innovations and experiments bring results a strategy of utilising those results on a broader level needs to be carefully worked out. The notion of replicability on a wider scale is important but some times confused in the form, and not in the substance. Our experience suggests that what is replicable in most situations of such experiments and innovations is the process and the methodology, and not necessarily the content and the structure. However, it is the latter which the government finds easy to adopt and implement on a national level, which inevitably results in

failure and thereby becomes a "beating ground" for the lack of efficacy of those experiments and innovations.

### COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

A major role of grass-roots NGOs has been mobilising the community to begin to examine the value of education for themselves and their children, and to make members of the community active in influencing the educational provisions and services in their area. Formation of parents committees, village education committees, bringing in community leaders to oversee schools, developing mechanisms for making teachers and instructors socially accountable to the community have been some of the major contribution of grass-roots NGOs working in the field of education. This has been so because NGOs believe in the philosophy of community-centred, community controlled, community-based educational activities and that is a part of the broad philosophy of their work in alternative development of our societies.

However, in recent years this role has come into major critique as this is the role which tends to bring the community in an organised form, questioning the local vested interests, questioning the very forces which keep the community impoverished decide and fragmented and

resisting any further attempts to control and regulate the communities from far away places. Effective community participation, mobilization and accountability has spread to areas beyond education and thereby become integral part in the life of the community. So community assertion has been seen as threat to local landlords, money-lenders and government officials who have become part of the nexus of vested interests in many situations. It is here that the processes of community participation and mobilization are questioned as a legitimate role of such NGOs as it is seen as threatening. Governments response invariably has been one of intimidation, harassment or public delegitimation of the work of such NGOs. A more antiseptic version of community participation seems to be invented where tokenism in the manner of fulfilling the form of participation, village education committees etc. have been set-up in many situations with token participation without the awareness and mobilization of the community as a whole. Under the Education For All, this is going to be a key role for NGOs because they can then help the community to also take leadership in defining its basic learning needs. It will be a travesty of Education For All if basic learning needs in the community get defined from national capitals and international agencies. Involvement of parents, teachers, communities, cooperatives, unions, etc. in building new alliances, in creating partnerships at different levels from the villages and slums are some things that can be

done with the help and support of NGOs and is being done. But it has implications for the government's response and its capacity to deal with new alliances, partnerships and involvements. These alliances, partnerships and involvements can not be done unilaterally at the prescribed terms and conditions by the State, it would also require a mutuality, and space for diverse perspectives, expressions and opinions to be articulated.

#### INTERVENING IN CURRENT DELIVERY SYSTEMS

One of the major roles that NGOs have begun to play, primarily the support institutions, is intervention in existing delivery mechanisms of the government in trying to revitalise them and improve their capacities. Such interventions have taken the form of training of functionaries, of designing curricula and learning materials, of building the capacities of the educational delivery mechanisms to play its role more sensitively, effectively and competently. The example for such interventions in existing delivery mechanisms are fewer but are beginning to emerge.

A major concern here has been that the intervening support institution does not get absorbed into the state apparatus and begins to behave like a member of the government as

opposed to maintaining its freshness, distinctive competence and approach.

The second concern in this has been that the existing delivery mechanism of the government and its key decision-makers tend to undervalue the importance of intervention from outside on a large scale level and believe primarily that interventions can be made only from inside. As a result, new institutions have been set up by the government itself and this duplicated capacities have also lead to deterioration because the State has limited capacities to promote creativity in its own structures. However, this seems like an important role in Education For All, and a role that may be supported more actively than has been done so far.

### ADVOCACY

NGOs have a very important role in advocacy on questions of education. NGOs have begun to engage in and critiquing government's policies on education, begun to question the quality and type of education, mechanisms of provisions of education and issues of equity and quality of education. This role of the NGOs is very recent one and has been more active in sectors other than education (like environment, health, women etc.).

This is perhaps a crucial role for NGOs in a way to influence the policies and programmes of the government, to influence the thinking of the decision-makers and to act as a monitoring mechanism to see whether the espoused policies are being translated into programmes on the field. Education For All is essentially a political decision and, therefore, ensuring equitable and high quality education for the poor and the oppressed, for the women and children of our countries is some thing that requires concerted monitoring and lobbying on the part of autonomous citizen groups, and NGOs can play this role very effectively. However, advocacy tends to question government's policies and demonstrates the gaps between state policies and concrete programmes. Thus NGOs involved in advocacy, particularly those from support institutions, federations and networks, seems to be considered as "noise-makers", "mischief-creators" and somehow "disturbing" the harmony. This tends to make the response of the State, its representatives and agencies hostile on occasions and undermining the importance of autonomous monitoring and critique of educational policies and programmes. In some countries, the state has responded more cleverly by bringing such institutions and individuals engaged in advocacy within its own fora and defining its own arena for such debates and critiques such that it can control the terms of those debates and its outcomes. If democratic

thrust in the new vision of education, if the question of equity and quality of basic education has to be given primacy in Education For All, then advocacy function of NGOs has to be recognised and strengthened.

### Implications

What then are the implications of these various possible NGOs roles in Education For All ? I would like to mention a few more critical roles ones.

1. Education For All rightly describes the importance of building national capacities in these areas of implementing educational strategies. I would like to propose that this capacity-building is not merely seen as capacity building for government agencies but also focuses on NGOs. Two types of things that need to be done in capacity-building of NGOs if they have to play their important role in EFA.

The first relates to the capacity-building at the level of individual NGOs, be there at the grass-roots level or support institution level. While some existing programmes and ideas exist for capacity-building of grass-roots NGOs, very little such thinking exists for capacity building of support institutions.

The second aspect of the capacity-building of NGOs is to build the capacities of their networks, and federations and forums. It is these mechanisms which can bring the micro experiences together, analyse and systematize them for feeding into national debates, advocacy and influencing.

## 2. Autonomous Funding

Alongwith capacity building and related issues is the issue of funding of NGOs. It is very important that funding of NGOs is not routed through the State departments or agencies but is seen as autonomous. The control over funding should be maintained by NGOs and their representatives, and not by government officials and clerks. It is important to recognise that funding has been a very important tool of controlling, regulating, monitoring, coopting and understanding NGOs and this has been done effectively by many governments, international funding agencies, etc. etc. One of the ingredients in strengthening the capacities of NGOs to play their diverse roles in Education For All has to create mechanisms for their ongoing, sustained and autonomous funding.

### 3. Access to Information

The NGOs need timely and accurate information if they have to play any kinds of roles. In many of our societies, we have Official Secrets Acts and the entire system of governments is secretive, closed and inbrooding. In the absence of openness in governments, information about programmes, policies and outcomes is hidden and secretly guarded. In the absence of right to information in our countries, NGOs and citizen groups find it very difficult to exactly know what is going on or to offer any critique or alternative to what is happening in the field of education. Thus the right to know is to be seen as an important ingredient in building the NGOs ability to play these roles, and mechanisms for easy and continuous flow of information to NGOs need to be established in this regard.

### 4. Policy Support

And finally, policy support is needed in our countries for autonomous and independent functioning of NGOs. It is important that restrictive laws, procedures and practices be curtailed and modified and formal policy statements in support of NGOs' work are made; the government officials and key decision-makers from top to

down are continuously oriented and reoriented to the role of NGOs, their character and their relationships and a generally favourable and open climate is created in the country and in the regions to promote NGOs' involvement in this. It is important to remember that current NGO government relationships are marred with suspicion and mistrust, largely because political leadership and bureaucratic pronouncements have on several occasions tried to undermine or devalue the work of NGOs (like calling them in such diverse names as "anti-national", "agents of external forces", "immature", etc etc.). Unless such wider policy support and supportive climate is created any sustained and intensive involvement of NGOs in Education For All can be like chasing a mirage.