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INTEGRATED AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SACCAR/WINROCK
WORKSHOP, HELD IN LILONGWE, MALAWI,
26 NOVEMBER – 1 DECEMBER 1989

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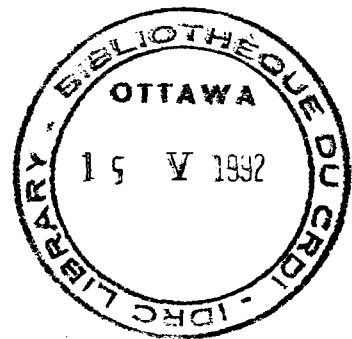
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La présente série est réservée aux documents issus de colloques, aux rapports internes et aux documents techniques susceptibles d'être publiés plus tard dans une série de publications plus soignées. D'un tirage restreint, le rapport manuscrit est destiné à un public très spécialisé.

Esta serie incluye ponencias de reuniones, informes internos y documentos técnicos que pueden posteriormente conformar la base de una publicación formal. El informe recibe distribución limitada entre una audiencia altamente especializada.

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Integrated agricultural research



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**Proceedings of the SACCAR/WINROCK Workshop
held in Lilongwe, Malawi,
26 November - 1 December 1989**

Editors

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THE ROLE OF THE NGO IN RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY TRANSFER

Davison J. Gumbo

Introduction

The sudden increase in number and types of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the third world in the last decade has been phenomenal. Depending on the policy environment of the country concerned, NGOs have mushroomed all over and all purport to work at the grassroot level. The values and role of NGOs needs not to be over-emphasized but, it is important for people to understand the driving force behind NGOs and their successes and failures.

Historical Perspectives

NGOs grew mainly as welfare organizations whose main objective was to provide goods and services to the needy. This role, carried out in times of severe stress like famine, drought, floods, and so on, is obviously beneficial. Most NGOs in this category have, however, not accepted an added role of providing room for some improvement: the need to provide not goods and services but rather the means to get the goods and services. This does not apply to disasters but certainly applies to annual drought relief cycles where NGOs concerned can put up an irrigation scheme. May be the longterm benefits will actually offset the initial piecemeal effort.

Another category is that of NGOs that view themselves as pressure groups. Such NGOs believe in the provision of support to national governments in the form of criticism. Criticism needs boundaries and requires data for substantiation. In most cases lack of data weakens such NGOs' arguments and there is usually a general lack of proposed solutions. In some cases solutions may be there but may be too outrageous for the government concerned to even consider. Changes to alter a standing land tenure system can be one such innovation that may come from an NGO. Such NGOs operating in the south tend to take their cues from the north but always fail to adapt those cues to realities of their environments and do at most end up as pressure groups whose accusations and interventions are taken lightly.

The third type of NGO is that which has direct northern NGO support both in operational principles and funding. The tendency in this category is to be at loggerheads with national governments as they fail to find a niche in the development spectrum of their host government. It is not surprising that at times the mistrust between the two is so great that the NGOs are often under some kind of surveillance. The failure of such NGOs to recognize the political climate often creates this unfortunate scenario.

The fourth type are NGOs that have attempted wherever they are to supplement government development efforts. They operate in niches where government extension service may not. Such NGOs usually have a clear development policy to improve the general welfare of the people.

NGOs and their Advantages

NGOs have one big advantage over most development institutions - their size. NGOs that have tended to remain small have also tended to be efficient and have been able to realize their targets. Their size has enabled them to remain informed and flexible. Where this flexibility has been used as a means of answering community needs, this has been beneficial. However, sometimes the flexibility attracts funding for which there is no manpower in the NGO.

NGOs tend to have highly motivated people who, by and large are prepared to work at the grassroot level. This is important when it comes to realizing targets. Within this operational framework, of course, is the ability of NGOs to try any new innovations whose approval may take a little longer in Government bureaucratic systems.

NGO Constraints

It is not all easy in the NGO world. Much as their advantages are recognized, the NGOs could do a much better job if the following constraints are noted by individual NGO and are addressed. Since most NGOs tend to be small they also tend to create personality and end up being centralized around an individual rather than NGO performance. When such a person leaves, s/he may leave with both approaches and the donors. Also, NGOs tend to fail to attract well qualified staff, which weakens the institution. This internal weakness means that such NGOs cannot foster linkages with research institutions or governments. Such a failure to foster these links means that the NGO is not only isolated but is also starved of vital information and support.

One of the positive attributes of NGOs is flexibility but if this flexibility is directed externally while internally the NGO cannot function, the flexibility may also turn out to be a big disadvantage, especially in situation where donors keep changing their funding agendas.

NGO networks

As indicated, the NGO world does respond to donor influences; just as there has been a proliferation of networks in research, so has there been an increase in the number of NGO networks. The SADCC region's energy NGOs are trying to put up a network and it is hoped that the necessary support will be provided.

NGOs must as a matter of urgency attempt to address their internal rigidities. Support to do this must come from all national research institutions. NGOs have a role to play but in order for them to play this role they must not be isolated but must be integrated in the general planning strategies. NGOs themselves especially local, must start to develop clear cut policies which they must abide by if they are to prove their mettle. Donors on the other hand should assist in institution build up to NGOs so that these can play a more meaningful role in developing the third world.