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The Role of NGOs and the Consumer

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The Role of NGOs and the Consumer

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At the outset let me clarify the basic difference between NGO's (Non-Governmental Organisations) and CBOs (Community Based Organisation otherwise called Voluntary Agencies). This is necessary before identifying the role of the CBOs/Voluntary Agencies and-whom we call-the Consumer.

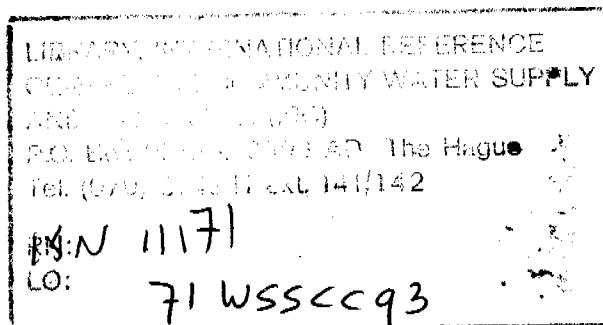
Not all NGOs are Voluntary Agencies/CBOs. In South Asia where there is a proliferation of NGO's some of them acting as a front only to receive generous foreign funds and do cosmetic work on the ground have become a bureaucracy in itself and have lost touch with the communities they claim to serve. In these very countries Cooperatives Trade Unions, Farmer's Societies are NGO's but for obvious reasons they cannot be called Voluntary. They receive massive party-political patronage, work for profit, only look after the welfare of their own members and lead lavish lifestyles that cannot remotely be compared to voluntary and community based groups who take a living wage instead of a market wage.

Voluntary groups work on a no profit no loss basis, work for the welfare and development of all, are apolitical and are identifiable by the simple lifestyle they lead because they live and work with and among the community they serve-the real consumers.

Indeed what makes these voluntary groups different and unique are many -

- they live very simply with consumer
- they respect and value the knowledge and skills the community has-to solve their own problems without excessive interference from outside.
- they are innovative and look for sustainable solutions that are low cost and easily replicable.
- they are small flexible and low cost.
- they have the courage to resist pressure from vested interests and conduct campaigns against injustice and exploitation.
- they look for simple solutions and respect the wisdom of the masses.

Such groups are to be found in thousands all over the world all working closely with the rural consumers.



Before we even enter into a dialogue defining roles it is important to focus on the sort of consumer we are dealing with. It would be extremely foolhardy to under-estimate and under-rate the capacity of the rural consumer to identify their own problems and find their own solutions.

After all hundreds of years ago when there were no qualified engineers to speak of how did they solve their problems of drinking water? Not by depending on paper knowledge but practical commonsense.

Today there is vast evidence of rain water harvesting structures in the arid and semi arid regions still being used and still in existence that provides a living example of the knowledge and wisdom they had. There are living still workable examples several hundred years old of how rain and river water was diverted, collected, and filtered to provide drinking water to consumers. How wisely they never tapped ground water unless it was absolutely necessary, how there was a community system of maintenance where it was every one's responsibility. In those days the supply of drinking water was not considered a technical problem when social solutions were available.

The role of voluntary groups is to educate the professional community of engineers to see the common sense and wisdom of these traditional methods and protect the consumers from being too dependent on technical, human and financial resources from outside.

The role of Voluntary Agencies is to develop and sustain the self respect and dignity of the rural consumers and give them confidence and support to see they do not look down on their own culture and ways just because others have labelled it primitive, backward and unscientific.

Community based groups all over the world while interacting with consumers have agreed the roles should be as follows:

- (i) to be the eyes and ears of the people at the grass root level.
- (ii) to supplement government effort so as to offer the rural poor choices and alternatives.
- (iii) to set an example. It should be possible for the voluntary agency along with the consumer to adopt simple, innovative, flexible and inexpensive means with its limited resources to reach a larger number with less overheads and with greater community participation.
- (iv) to activate the delivery system and to make it effective at the village level to respond to the felt needs of the poorest of the poor.

- (v) to dissemination information.
- (vi) to make communities as self-reliant as possible.
- (vii) to show how village and indigenous resources could be used, how human resources, rural skills and local knowledge, grossly underutilised at present, could be used for their own development.
- (viii) to demystify technology and bring it in a simpler form to the rural poor.
- (ix) to train a cadre of grassroot workers who believe in professionalising volunteerism.
- (x) to mobilise financial resources from within the community with a view to making communities stand on their own feet.
- (xi) to mobilise and organise the poor and generate awareness to demand quality services and impose a community system of accountability on the performance of village level government functionaries.

More than ever the problems of safe drinking water being faced by the consumers today are blurring these roles and confusing the issues. Increasingly with the pressure of population and demand for more the supply of drinking water has been seen to be only a technical problem. The search and survey of ground water, the training of personnel the local of heavy, costly, sophisticated rigs has made the supply of drinking water prohibitively expensive. The pressure from towns and cities has increased the pressure on villages to supply water through an elaborate, pipe water system sometimes stretching for hundred of miles at the expense of rural consumers where the actual source is located.

There is also the problem of ownership. Who owns the assets being created-the handpumps, the piped water supply systems-the Government or the actual consumers? Added to this unresolved issue was the right of consumers to repair and maintain their own water supply system. Did they have the right or did they need permission from government and or just keep waiting like docile sheep till the engineer appeared on the scene?

In many parts of the world the involvement of women was seen as a problem and not a solution. Where many active women's groups fed up of waiting for the elusive engineer to turn up and repair the handpumps have got together and with local community groups started repairing the pumps themselves, problems of acceptability by the male community have arisen but this has not stopped the women from interfering in what has always been considered a man's prerogative.

The issue of paying for the services and for the water being provided has always been inconclusive. Governments have guaranteed a minimum of 40 litres/day/person for their basic needs but in spite of heavy investment poor management and maintenance has prevented many Governments to honour this pledge and as a result the consumers have rightfully refused to pay-when such payments have been demanded for drinking water in the rural areas.

However where the consumers have a control over their water resources and supply has been facilitated through the formation of their own village monitoring committees there has been no problem. There is a growing sense of unease among the consumers that the technical problem of supply drinking water has been vastly exaggerated and in this process of mystifying the problem the consumer has suffered.

In the ultimate analysis voluntary agencies feel one of the major obstacles is the attitude of the engineers. Almost all of them have a very poor opinion of the capacity and capability of the consumers to solve what they basically see as a technical problem. In many parts of the world where the rural poor consumers live the problem is one of quantity not quality but in this misplaced priority of making water potable first, thus increasing the cost, quantity has suffered. As a result the consumers have been forced to look for and depend on their own ingenious sources and solutions.

Many voluntary groups along with the rural consumers feel there is an urgency missing in tackling this problem which is nothing short of criminal. While excellence should be valued, while potability is a laudable goal and while minimum hygiene standards should indeed be observed, when in many parts of the world the very availability of water is in question-forget the quality for the time being-the same casual approach as if it can wait and procedures have to be observed adds insult to injury and cannot be pardoned.

How costly is the availability of drinking water to the poor rural consumer in human terms is a ethical question that has to be asked. When surface and ground water is in short supply should water be surveyed, drilled, pumped through pipes at tremendous cost to the urban areas for them of waste on lawns, poorly designed toilets and washing machines when this very water coming from rural areas is not available to the villages where the source has been located? When there is not enough water for everyone to share is it ethical that ground water should be tapped from tremendous depths by sophisticated rigs quizzling thousands of litres of diesel for drinking water to urban areas and as a result many rural consumers who are also farmers see their shallow open wells for irrigating their fields run dry? The simple answer in this case is not legislation to prevent such injustices from taking place. Its social conscience that's lacking and that is perhaps equally or more important than only providing drinking water. We often feel it is the job of an urban "expert" to make a simple solution look complicated. The American definition of an "expert"-an ordinary man from another town-are what all rural consumers are today.

CASE STUDY

In Rajasthan, more than 30,000 India Mark II handpumps are being maintained by 1,000 Hand Pump Mechanics (HPMs), who have replaced the caretaker, the block mechanic, and the mobile maintenance unit.

The decision to scrap the top-heavy, prohibitively expensive, UNICEF-designed three tier system in favour of a more community based and community-accountable repair and maintenance system was taken ten years ago by the State Government.

The idea of barefoot mechanics, given adequate training, repairing and maintaining their own handpumps had appealed to the Indian government so much that it was only system recommended by the late Prime Minister's Technology Mission.

The initiative for the HPM scheme came from the villagers themselves. They asked - what was so special about handpumps that they required a whole government department, a battery of personnel and equipment to repair? If the community could maintain their own bullock carts, diesel and electric pumps, farming implements, bicycles and tractors without mechanical degrees of any kind, why could it not repair its handpump?

The answer is that it does not need engineers going into villages to maintain handpumps, if villagers-men and women- committed to living in the village are trained. And a government programme called Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM) has proved it in practice.

The HPMs chosen for the TRYSEM programme are mostly young, semi-literate and landless. The majority are agricultural labourers from the poorest families in the village. What they do have is a practical skill picked up from working and improvising in the village.

Unlike the eningeer who does not really suffer if the handpump is out of order, the HPM has a stake in the scheme working. He/she is answerable to the community and earns respect by providing a vital service. He/she is not a government servant, but has his/her roots in the village and no choice but to stay.

In the three-tier system, only the caretaker comes from the village-and he/she gets the worst deal. He provides a free service, and depends on the block mechanic who in turn depends on the mobile maintenance unit. The fact that the caretaker is given only a limited function while others draw large salaries shows ignorance of the skills available in rural areas.

The experts have glorified the role of caretaker as an example of community participation, when the community has not been taken into the executing agency's confidence. The HPM, in contrast, cannot work without community support and sanction.

From this socio-economic point of view commonsense must concede the advantages of the single-tier Barefoot Mechanic system over the Three Tier. From a technical standpoint the engineers feel they must be involved, but this is not true either. The handpump may be a marvel of technology, but there are very few components which cannot be changed by a properly trained HPM.

It does help when we go into the background of most of the HPMs. What is so extraordinary about them is that they are so ordinary. The profile of 71 HPMs placed in Ajmar District of Rajasthan India for instance should give some idea how easy it is to find such people all over the world where the poor consumers live (Table 1).

PROBLEMS IDENTIFIED

Demystifying technology is a difficult process, and this has been identified as one of the (Table II) problems for the HPM scheme. The *..biggest problem is the attitude of* the Literate Man. He thinks himself indispensable because he has a paper qualification and he alone has the intelligence to solve all the problems.

The Literate Man fails to see the vast difference between Literacy and Education, and is convinced that the rural poor consumer are largely primitive and uneducated. This arrogance is apparent the moment there is a move to give greater responsibility to the community.

All the field problems of the HPM scheme can be traced to this prejudice. Government officials and engineers obstruct the programme in a variety of ways.

Officials frequently refuse the community's choice of mechanic to oblige local politicians. Engineers, worried that the HPMs will do a better job for a quarter the cost, refuse, with the connivance of international agencies, to cooperate. Banks will not finance the ventures.

Eventually, in spite of these efforts to stifle ideas from the grass roots, the rural people have found their own workable solutions to maintenance, with or without the experts.

To summarise briefly what has been stressed repeatedly in the paper regarding the relationship between the voluntary/community groups and the Rural Consumer -

- i) Governments and international agencies alone do not have the answer to the serious problems of providing drinking water. The sooner and the earlier voluntary groups and the consumers are involved in the planning and implementation process the more sustainable the project is going to be.
- ii) It would be unwise to look down on traditional solutions that the consumers have implemented on the problems of drinking water. If outsiders play a facilitating role it will lead to better understanding and mutual respect-an input conspicuously missing in the planning and design process today.
- iii) The provision of safe drinking water is no longer only a technical problem as engineers see it today. It has become more of a social problem because of related issues
 - such as distribution
 - sharing of resources
 - collecting revenue for services rendered
 - identification and training of rural consumers to repair and maintain their own water supply systems
 - solving disputes at the village and community level
 - making communities aware of the need to conserve, preserve and protect water sources.
- iv) With the involvement of women becoming more visible in the drinking water and sanitation field an attitudinal change will be necessary.
- (v) Voluntary Groups along with the consumer are linking the whole issue of drinking water with ethics and the stand that governments, international agencies and the private sector needs to take when it comes to treating the consumer as an equal partner in the consultation process.

TABLE I

PROFILES

1.	Occupation Status -	Blacksmith (2 HPMs) Agricultural labourer (51), Cycle repair shop (2), Electrician (1), Pan shop (1), Barber (2), Grocery shop (1), Vegetable shop (1), Sweet shop (1), Mason (1), Famine Work (8), General labourer (10).		
2.	Age Group	18-25 years	59 HPMs	
		26-30	14	
		31-35	6	
		Over 35	2	
3.	Income from occupation other than repair and maintenance	RS50-100	30 HPMs	
		101-150	41	
		151-200	10	
		Over 200	Nil	
4.	Education Qualification		<u>Scheduled Caste</u>	<u>Scheduled Tribes</u>
	Up to 5th Std		15	14
	6th-8th		16	19
	8th-10th		2	4
	10th plus		1	-
5.	Land Holding		<u>Scheduled Caste</u>	<u>Others</u>
	Landless		9	10
	Marginal (0-5)		16	18
	Small (5-12.6)		8	8
	Over 12.6 bigahs		1	1

1.	Cost/pump/year to maintain	RS 500-600/pump/year (\$40-\$50)	RS50 pump/year and for spare parts/pump/year
2.	Tools and equipment	Trucks, jeeps, trailers, heavy repair equipment and special tools	Cycle Special tools
3.	Education qualifications	Mechanical Degree holder Diplomas, etc.	4th-10th standard class pass, primary school level adequate
4.	Personnel	Additional Chief Engineer Superintending Engineer Executive Engineer, Asst. Engineer, Block Mechanics Caretakers	Hand Pump Ministry at the village level
5.	Training	No long term training programme at any level. Only short term training course for lower level engineers and caretakers	3 months practical training under TRYSEM including field survey of pumps they will look after.
6.	Community participation	Marginal, at the caretaker level, the caretaker is selected by the government not the community.	HPM identified by the community, priority given to youth from lower castes and income groups.
7.	Community accountability	None. Answerable only to Government.	The users have the right to recall the HPM and send someone else for training if his work is poor.
8.	Community resources	None used	The use of village know- ledge resources and skills are total in the HPM system
9..	Institutional finance	No provision. Tools are given free to caretakers	HPMs take a loan from the nearest bank of RS2,500 (\$200) for tools. Subsidy of 50% if the HPM is from a lower caste.