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## **Actual and Potential Roles of Local NGOs in Agricultural Development in Sub-Saharan Africa**

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyses the roles that local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) can play in agricultural development in Sub-Saharan Africa. Two fundamental roles are commonly discerned: service delivery and advocacy as civil society organisation. Based on empirical research in Benin, the paper analyses and compares the requirements of different roles and typical activities in agricultural development on the one hand with motivations and characteristics of local NGOs on the other hand. This includes the analysis of the social and political environment as the decisive factor for NGO emergence and activity selection. Findings suggest that due to internal factors such as motivation, skills and capacity, and to external conditions such as donors' special interests and funding, local NGOs have problems in delivering on both of their roles. It is concluded that the potential of local NGOs can be best put into practice in pluralistic institutional arrangements. Here, they are best suited to carry out activities at the interface between the rural population and other actors in rural development, while more professional services are feasible if specialisation is supported. This support must include appropriate framework conditions, a long-term and adapted commitment by donors, and adequate preparation of staff.

**Keywords:** local NGOs, agricultural development, Africa, political economy, donor policies

**JEL:** D23, L31, N57, O17, P48

### **1 Roles Attributed to Local NGOs in Rural Development**

Since the 1980s local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have played an important role in the development debate and in development cooperation. Two main fundamental roles are attributed to them: As civil society organisations they are expected to advocate general public goods such as human rights and democracy; as service providers for the poor they are said to work more effectively and efficiently than the state (FOWLER, 1988; BROWN and KORTEN, 1991; SALAMON, 1994; LENZEN,

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not reflect in any way those of the institution she is affiliated.

2001). However, the appraisal of their role and work is ambivalent. On the one hand their engagement for sustainable development is appreciated, on the other they are criticised as overrated actors (EDWARDS and HULME, 1996; HOLMEN, 2009).

With regard to their contribution to agricultural research and development (R&D), literature too is not unanimous. Some authors (FARRINGTON and BEBBINGTON, 1994; JONES and SANYANG, 2007) underline that local NGOs are widely recognised by governments, international institutions and development agencies as being highly motivated in their work by solidarity, to have direct contact to the local population and thus enjoying a better knowledge of local people's circumstances and their needs; this enables them to better reach the poor and act more effectively on their behalf (FARRINGTON and AMANOR, 1991). This assessment supported local NGOs as new actors in agricultural R&D after the disappointing results of public actors and the withdrawal of public services from rural areas (often as a result of structural adjustment programmes, see Heidhues in this volume). On the other hand, some authors found that the activities of local NGOs in agricultural R&D are very limited, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) (e.g. WHITESIDE, 1998, for Southern Africa). In Benin / West Africa where research programmes looked for NGO partners to carry out adaptive agricultural research, it had to be stated that though many rural NGOs claimed to be competent in this area, astonishingly few activities were found in practice (BRÜNTRUP-SEIDEMANN et al., 1999). This finding motivated to further investigate the roles of NGOs in rural development and the underlying reasons for why they do what they (do not) do.

Below, I will present an analysis which explains what motivates and handicaps local NGOs in SSA to engage in agricultural R&D. It is founded on empirical research in Benin from 1998 to 2000 which more generally examined roles and activities of NGOs as well as their determinants (BRÜNTRUP-SEIDEMANN, 2010). Benin can stand as a typical case for many SSA countries that have gone through a series of economic and political transformations in the last 50 years since independence (compare Rauch and Heidhues in this volume). The 2-year in-depth research provided a thorough understanding of the motivations and characteristics of local NGOs, their dependence of the wider social and political environment, their interrelations with the rural communities, with the state and particularly with donors – their main partners (chapter 2). This understanding is matched with the requirements of agricultural R&D and compared to other typical activities that local NGOs carry out – particularly microfinance (chapter 3). This comparison of drivers of local NGOs on the one hand and requirements of agricultural R&D on the other hand shows what are potential roles for local NGOs in agriculture in the typical SSA framework and what is needed to promote local NGOs and make their work more effective. I conclude that NGOs do not have a simple comparative advantage over the state in providing agricultural services, and propose

more appropriate roles in the development of the sector, as well as some more general lessons learned on NGOs in rural SSA (chapter 4).

## **2 Emergence and Roles of Local NGOs in Rural Development in Sub-Saharan Africa**

### **The Historical Circumstances of NGO Emergence**

NGOs in the sense of non-profit, voluntary, state-independent organisations working for the common welfare are a relatively recent phenomenon in SSA. Their concept did not fit well into the traditional societal structure which was marked by strong family and clan solidarity and dependencies in conditions of great material scarcity which left no space for altruistic engagement (LAUTH and MERKEL, 1997; MERCER, 2002; KOCKA, 2003). The colonial state, too, was not favourable to the emergence of independent organisations with a potential to create social unrest, and a class of well-situated, common welfare-minded citizens who typically are the basis for NGO development was extremely slow to emerge. After independence, most SSA countries quickly became non-democratic and suppressed (the emergence of) non-state actors, not only in the economic (compare Hoeffler in this issue) but also in the civil realm. Of course, there were certain exceptions; particularly some branches of northern international charities were established. But it is only after the end of the cold war and the wave of democratisation in SSA that local NGOs could appear to a larger extent (ANHEIER and SALAMON, 2004)

Benin is a typical example of this general trend. Local NGOs did hardly exist until the beginning of the 1990s, when the Marxist-Leninist dictatorship ended and the foundation of NGOs was permitted. With the beginning of the democratic era, various factors promoted a real boom of NGOs in Benin: the virtual bankruptcy of the Beninese state at the end of the 1980s and the employment restrictions under structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) had resulted in the end of the secure absorption of university graduates into the civil service; many civil servants actually lost their job. Often, it was the more dynamic employees who took the terminal bonuses and left the public sector. As the private sector had not sufficiently developed to offer employment, there was a large number of well educated intellectuals looking for work.

At the same time international donors were looking for an alternative to state organisations to assist them to reach their target groups (WORLD BANK, 1995). Mainly in rural areas, where the SAPs had resulted in an extensive withdrawal of public services, local NGOs were the alternative of choice to fill the gap. Moreover, donors wanted to strengthen the democratisation process in Benin. One prominent idea was to promote local NGOs as organisations within civil society. A wide range of very diverse donors,

such as the World Bank or UN-organisations, bilateral donors, such as DANIDA or GTZ, or Northern NGOs, all of them supporting activities in rural areas, looked for local NGOs as cooperation partners.

As a result of these push and pull factors, many former civil servants, academics and school graduates founded NGOs. A survey analyzing the motivations of founders of local NGOs (BRÜNTRUP-SEIDEMANN, 2010) confirmed that the local NGOs were primarily created to provide employment and income for their founders. They chose the route of founding an NGO, because that was where the money was, in particular it was what international donors were looking for and supporting.

The Beninese state that still was the most important partner to the larger donors supported the cooperation between local NGOs and foreign donors. The state benefited from the expansion of local NGOs as they were supposed to channel additional donor money into Benin. They also provided employment for a growing number of well educated people without jobs, a potentially important source of political unrest. Many NGOs were founded by active civil servants and run by family members. Thus, a close relationship to state authorities existed and still exists. The state promoted NGOs by facilitating their public admission and granting them tax privileges. Moreover, the state contracted NGOs to implement development projects. The local NGOs and their activities were often integrated into the public development strategies. Some donors even actively involved the state in their cooperation with NGOs by establishing parastatal agencies that worked with NGOs as subcontractors, or under similar institutional arrangements with NGOs as service providers.

### **NGO Roles and Activities in Rural SSA as a Result of External Conditions**

Using the example of Benin, the previous chapter showed that the conditions in SSA since the 1990s were highly favourable for the creation of local NGOs. However, since in Benin as in many other African countries the concept of NGOs has no tradition (see above), local NGOs are financed neither by donations nor by membership fees, as is common in Europe or the United States, as well as in many developing countries in Asia and Latin America. This social and historical observation is confirmed by the fact that ordinary members of NGOs or voluntary supporters could not be found during field research, a finding supported in other studies (e.g. SINGER, 2006, for Northern Benin). Without a local financial basis, the existence of a local NGO depends entirely on the ability of its manager to convince donors or the state that it can execute development projects financed by them and/or that it should be promoted and supported as civil society organisation. If there is no assignment, the activities of the NGO are discontinued and the entire organisation may collapse.

Although the donors and the Beninese state were generally aware of the local NGOs' origin, motivation and financial dependency, most of them did not take these issues into account when establishing the rules for cooperation. They mostly provided funds only for the execution of projects, without considering the overheads for running an NGO or the remuneration of its "owner". In the majority of cases, they offered short-term one year contracts only, with the possibility of an extension in order to have better control over them, or to handle the annual budgeting processes. Delays in the transfer of funds from headquarters frequently led to delayed payments to the NGOs.

These dependencies, uncertainties and often limited and erratic funding have decisive effects on the organisational development of local NGOs, their scope of action and their relationship with the rural population. These three dimensions are closely related to each other.

The general organisational structure of local NGOs reflects donors' expectations and exigencies in important ways. Local NGOs try to adapt their concepts and highlight qualities that are in line with the international community. This starts with the legal form under which the founders – as explained above rather economic entrepreneurs than social benefactors – offer their services: the status "NGO" corresponds to the inclination of donors to follow the dual approach of supporting civil society actors as service providers. At the same time, since NGOs are exempted from certain taxes, they can provide their services much cheaper than private providers, a fact that certainly does not decrease donors' preference for NGOs. The request for bureaucratic procedures absorbs energy and flexibility. As another consequence, NGOs cultivate the development discourse of donors in order to demonstrate that they are professional development organisations, and thereby legitimise themselves.

The scope of action of local NGOs is similarly determined by the demand of donors. Development activities planned by the donors, or according to their policies, tend to be formulated from outside, often with little real knowledge of the realities of the rural population at a specific site. NGOs concentrate on development activities with a rather short-term horizon which show results within the relatively short cycles of typical development projects. In addition, being not anchored in local, slowly changing realities, donor preferences change more frequently than the preferences of local populations. Under these circumstances, the demand for development activities tends to be more variegated and volatile than a demand driven by local needs. To acquire projects in such a market, NGOs have to pretend to be competent in a wide area of development activities in order to fit into any profile a donor might be looking for. Thus, it is more difficult for NGOs to act in a long-term perspective and to specialise. In addition, NGOs cannot offer long-term perspectives to their personnel which results in high fluctuation among the NGO staff. This again prevents NGO specialisation and hampers service quality improvement.

Of course, the donor-driven structure and activities of local NGOs influence their relation to the local population. The mission of donors and their selection of certain activities shape what type of specific target groups are addressed by a NGO (see also chapter 3). This creates tensions within the local community and negatively affects the relation towards the local NGOs. The variability of activities hampers long-term and reliable relations. Since NGOs cannot react to short-term, urgent needs of the beneficiaries as they have no contingency funds at their disposal, their utility and credibility in the eyes of the population suffers. Bureaucratic procedures add to the perception that they are rather objects than partners of NGOs.

Given this strong influence of external actors on local NGOs, it is no wonder that in the perception of the rural population the mode of operation of local NGOs does not substantially differ from that of the public sector. This is known from other studies in SSA (e.g. VIVIAN, 1994; DUJARDIN, 2008) and was also confirmed by a large survey in southern and central Benin with rural men and women (BRÜNTRUP-SEIDEMANN, 2010). Local NGOs, just as the public sector, were perceived to come to rural areas with pre-established programmes and cooperated with beneficiaries organised in small groups, often even the same groups that public extension officers had worked with in the pre-SAP period. The rural population also did not perceive noteworthy differences in the mode of operation of the public services and the NGOs. The fact that many former civil servants had become managers or “owners” of a local NGO, and that some public extension officers were at the same time working for both local NGOs and a public institution, reinforced this perception. A main difference between public development organisation and NGOs was, in the opinion of the beneficiaries, that the public service organisations mostly worked with men whereas the NGOs worked predominantly with women, particularly in the area of micro-credit for income generating activities (see chapter 3).

However, contrary to expectations, the relationship of the rural population to the (remaining) agents of public institutions was often better than the relation to the staff of local NGOs. The explanation is that local NGOs were new actors in the arena of rural development; they came from outside and had no organisational tradition in the area. Initial high expectations towards them as newcomers did not materialise as time went by and disappointing experiences with local NGOs became increasingly known. Rather, the public development organisations with all their weaknesses were well-known actors and the rural population knew how to handle their officers (LÜHE, 1996). Moreover, public extension officers often had better skills in rural and agricultural development and were – based on their long experience - more knowledgeable about the problems of rural people. It was the deep cut in their budget - not so much a lack of competence and experience – that no longer allowed them to provide extension services to “their” former farmers’ groups.

### 3 Why Has Agricultural R&D Been Neglected by Local NGOs?

In the following, the role of NGOs in agricultural R&D will be analysed, or rather – since hardly any NGO was active in this field – it will be explained why agricultural R&D has been neglected for a long time by rural NGOs. The arguments for and against agricultural R&D will be compared with the arguments for activities typically carried out by rural NGOs, in particular with micro-credit.

Micro-credit was by far the most common activity of NGOs in Benin (BRÜNTRUP-SEIDEMANN, 2010). Even if they supported alphabetisation, health care and nutrition, and rural organisations, these activities were often tied to providing credits to motivate villagers. This reflects the trend in many other SSA countries. How can the emphasis on micro-credit be explained? The analysis of the credit sector and the motivations of the stakeholders involved (NGOs, donors and the rural population) shows the attractiveness of this domain:

- For many donors, promoting microfinance is a promising strategy to reduce poverty rapidly.<sup>2</sup>
- For the NGOs, granting credit is an opportunity for generating own income by accruing interests and fees and thus creating independent capital.
- For the beneficiaries, NGO-credits are a way to acquire funds quickly and without complicated bureaucratic procedures and the need for major deposits, which is the case with cooperative credit systems which, thus, rather serves better-off people.

The prevalence of the microfinance sector influenced the selection of the target groups: mostly reliable clients with stable income generating activities were considered for a microfinance approach. In Benin, these were basically female small traders and women processing agricultural products. Women as beneficiaries fit in with the general development guidelines of donors that target the promotion of women.

In comparison to microfinance, only very few NGOs were found to be directly active in supporting agriculture. This was surprising because on paper official activity lists of NGOs mentioned agriculture as one of their two top priorities (MPREPE, 1999), and also in interviews with NGO leaders this impression was maintained. However, the field research showed that this often meant supporting farmers' organisations in their formal management or processing of agricultural products, not agricultural production *per se*. The only local NGOs that were active in agriculture were those engaged for that by one international NGO (PROTOS). These local NGOs were systematically trained and promoted, but it was far from certain that their engagement would continue after the support of the donor ceased (PROTOS and CIRAPIP, 1999). In addition, one

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<sup>2</sup> See Microcredit Summit 1996.



international NGO which directly intervened in the field and one private enterprise offered some agricultural extension activities.

This lack of engagement in agriculture, which is the most prominent economic activity in rural Benin, cannot be explained by the lack of demand by the rural population. Particularly men, who are the main agricultural actors in central Benin, asked for more support in this area in many interviews. Two main rationales can explain the phenomenon:

- i) Agriculture was no priority for donors, and thus local NGOs did not engage in it. This lack of engagement is reflected by the fact that official development assistance to agricultural development declined sharply between 1975 and 2004 from about 18% to less than 4% (WORLD BANK, 2007).
- ii) Agricultural R&D does not easily fit in with the competence and working conditions of local NGOs. This statement requires some further explanation:

Agriculture in SSA is characterized by high heterogeneity of production systems with a multitude of different crops and generally low productivity, a high variety of agro-ecological conditions and few irrigated areas. This is even true in relatively small areas, such as smaller parts of southern Benin. Thus, technologies imported from other environments often do not perform well. Inappropriate new technologies in combination with the lack of education, information, access to credit and efficient markets, are major constraints in agricultural development (WORLD BANK, 2007; ZHOU, 2008).

Therefore, site specific development of new and adaptation of exogenous innovations is necessary to take into account the major constraints for their adoption, such as the complex family economy, the risks involved in innovations and access to inputs and markets. Neglecting these aspects was one of the reasons why the Asian Green Revolution based on irrigation and access to modern seeds and fertilizers was not successful in rain fed agriculture in SSA. A promising strategy to overcome these failures is participatory agricultural R&D that aims at adapting new technologies to farmers' conditions, to develop technologies together with farmers and include farmers' concepts of livelihood. Participatory R&D can exploit the potential of local knowledge, such as detailed site specific knowledge on soils, vegetation, resistance and climate adaptation potentials of different species, etc. This bottom-up approach that aims at integrating farmers in all stages of research has proved useful since the 1990s, and local NGOs are often named as the appropriate actors to promote participatory R&D (CHAMBERS et al., 1989; HIEMSTRA et al., 1992; RHOADES, 1994).

Important conditions for participatory agricultural R&D:

- Participatory agricultural R&D requires a high degree of flexibility and skills of the organisation.

- Achievements require time to attain and are visible only in the long term. Skilled staff is needed that is willing to sign up for longer periods.
- Trusting long-term relationships have to be established with the rural population that withstand failures and support mutual learning.

The analysis of the conditions of local NGOs as described above and the comparison of the work of local NGOs and public institutions (see above) show that these requirements for participatory agricultural R&D are too often not fulfilled by local NGOs.

The discussion of NGO activities in agricultural R&D up to here reflects the understanding of NGOs as service providers, a perception that for a long time was standard. At the time of field research in Benin, local NGOs in rural areas were solely active as service deliverers, none was found to act as an advocacy organisation. Since then, an increasing number of NGOs in Africa has diversified from service provision into advocacy organisations (FIAN, 2010). As they also depend on foreign funding, they face similar problems as service providing NGOs, such as insecure financing and short time frames of donor funding that result in staff fluctuation and hamper reflection and learning within the organisation (KANJI, 2002). Similarly, it may influence the selection of priorities and orientation of lobby issues towards the interest of their donors.

## 4 Conclusion:

### **Appropriate Activities of Local NGOs in Agricultural Development**

The article argues that rural NGOs in SSA have not been very active in agricultural R&D in the past, mainly as donors did not engage them to do so, but also because certain organisational characteristics of NGOs do not match the special requirements in this area, such as long-term orientation and special knowledge and experience. It can, in addition, be argued that as agricultural R&D is an extremely wide field (see Rauch or Brüntrup in this issue) neither local NGOs nor any other individual type of actor in rural development has the capacity to fill it out on their own.

Based on the analysis of limited NGO capacities in the complex field of agricultural R&D, but also taking their strengths as well as the limitations of other actors into account, it is concluded that local NGOs alone cannot fulfil all needed roles and activities. Rather, they must be regarded as part of pluralistic institutional arrangements which include NGOs, the public sector and the private sector, as well as farmers' organisations and donor agencies (WORLD BANK, 2007; GONSALVEZ et al., 2005; ZHOU, 2008). Such pluralistic institutional arrangements are in line with the so-called multiple sources of innovation model which states that agricultural innovation is more likely to derive from several sources than from a single one (ANANDAJAYASEKERAM et al., 2008).

Taking this idea of pluralistic institutional arrangements for agricultural R&D as a point of departure, donors should pursue strategies to support a variety of actors (state, private sector, NGOs and other civil society organisations) according to their area of competence. A 'mix' of organisations in different institutional arrangements is clearly most suited to strive for diverse agricultural goals, to serve different target populations with diverse sources of funding and a diversity of delivery mechanisms for agricultural R&D (ANANDAJAYASEKERAM et al., 2008). The place for local NGOs should not be one that substitutes any of the specialised actors (private sector, divers state organisations), but at the interface between the rural population and the other actors.

In the following, I conclude which activities local NGOs can and should fulfil in such pluralistic institutional arrangements. These propositions consider the two fundamental roles that NGOs can play: service delivery and advocacy. For both roles activities can be found which are consistent with the typical potentials and constraints of local NGOs which were found to be: knowledge of the changing development discourse and access to donors, dynamism particularly of the NGO founders, lack of resources, donor dependence, lack of specific technical knowledge, limited specialisation and limited integration into the rural population. Taking these characteristics into account and looking for typical interfaces that can be addressed, appropriate activities are:

- Access to information relevant for agricultural development – ranging from land rights to research results – is often difficult for the local population. Local NGOs can play an important role in providing better access to information for the rural population, for instance through the internet, translating services, organising excursions, linking services etc.
- Smallholder farmers are seldom organised in functioning farmers' organisations and have no political voice. Local NGOs can support farmers' organisations by providing knowledge and training in organisational development such as awareness raising, accountancy, legal advice, internal regulation, functional alphabetisation etc. They can also support the linkages between individual farmer organisations, the creation of federations and their functioning.
- Public agricultural research and extension services often do not have the capacity to conduct adaptive research and to reach out to all farmers. The private sector is often not willing to invest in extension for smallholder farmers. Local NGOs can organise such services in cooperation with research institutes, public extension organisations and the private sector.
- General knowledge on credit, markets and availability of insurance and safety nets is an important factor that influences agricultural development. Local NGOs in their role as development brokers can establish linkages between the rural population and public and private institutions that provide such services to support agricultural development.

- Finally, NGOs can advocate for small farmers' interests in agricultural R&D, communicate their problems and create awareness on how agriculture, particularly smallholder agriculture, can promote rural development. They can establish institutional linkages and affiliate with international networks to improve their access to different media and better information. Thus, local NGOs can form a (constructive) counterforce to the state and hold the national governments accountable for their strategies and activities.

It must be emphasised that the specific choice of roles, activities and responsibilities they might assume will be site specific, depending on the institutional environment they are working in, on their capacities and the local ecological and economic potential. All these activities have in common that they provide public goods for which a private market cannot be expected under the prevailing conditions and in the short term. But they are transitory in the sense that once successfully accomplished, there is no further need.

It must also be recognised that some NGOs have already engaged in becoming specialised actors providing services of the public and private sector. For instance they provide technical and consultancy expertise, manage microfinance institutions or commercialise agricultural products. Often, they are inscribing themselves as NGO only because of tax privileges and donor preferences to work with NGOs. It should be encouraged to convert this kind of NGOs gradually into formal private business development providers. This will further develop a spirit of professionalization, enhance economic sustainability, and create taxable income for the state. Donors which accompany this professionalization should organise support accordingly and should be aware and willing to finally pay more (for better services). Governments can foster this development by setting the conditions for NGOs' official acknowledgment more reasonably.

The donor community (including northern NGOs), key on the demand side for NGO development, should reassess its paradigm regarding NGOs as panacea for development and develop a clearer distinction between sustainable business services and transitory NGO services and cooperate with the different organisations in a differentiated way. Donors can support the formation and proper functioning of local NGOs in establishing favourable conditions for cooperation with them, such as

- lasting commitment that allows NGOs to engage in long-term cooperation and to offer long-term perspectives to their staff;
- funding NGOs' core staff and administration to decrease staff fluctuation and facilitate reflection and learning;

- offering basic and advanced training in agricultural R&D, including follow-up of vocational and on-the-job training;
- promoting institutional networking between the various stakeholders in agricultural development, such as public and private research and extension organisations, rural financial institutions, agribusiness, and others.

One should be aware that this clearer distinction of roles will require donors/contracting entities to finally pay more, but for better services and for a more performing and sustainable enabling institutional environment for agricultural development. Local African NGOs generally are not established by the local rural population. As they are financed by external donors, it cannot be taken for granted that their interests coincide automatically with those of the target group; they are likely to have an own agenda. Since they are often the interface between donors and local population, this is a dilemma when supporting the advocacy role of local NGOs. Consequently mechanisms must be established that allow the rural population to pronounce themselves directly, to represent themselves in dialogue on development policy and to make local NGOs more attentive to their demand. In the short and medium term, it is a primary responsibility of donors as the main financiers to guide the entire pluralistic institutional arrangement in this direction.

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