

NGOs and future of civil society

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By R Balasubramaniam

The growth of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) over the last four decades in many parts of the world is phenomenal. India is known to be home to nearly three million NGOs working in different sectors like health, education, rural and tribal development, environment issues, social development amongst others. They vary in size and sectoral focus and many small charities have now become large and some of them rival government departments and private sector in their scope and ambition.

Many acknowledge that NGOs are today one of India's largest employers and have gone into areas where many would dread to enter. A lot many of them have done extraordinary work amongst the marginalised and have created platforms for the voiceless across the country.

While the sector has its share of black sheep, one cannot be dismissive about the enormous contribution that a significant number of NGOs have done to the cause of social development. While the government is well within its rights to demand accountability and transparency from this sector, one should resist the temptation to try and paint all NGOs with the same brush.

The debate around NGOs is usually one sided depending on which side of the story one likes to hear. The government response has been based on anecdotal incidents involving a few high profile NGOs and the changes that it is foisting on the entire sector is likely to have unprecedented consequences. The debate should be objective and must address the myths and realities that are prevailing and likely to ensue because of the complexity of the eco-system that is getting fashioned by the government.

The changing taxation laws, the Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) and the constantly changing rules, the Lokpal Act and the inclusion of all key NGO functionaries and board members as public servants are but a few in this list. On the one hand, the government talks about sustainable development and community participation but is insensitive to attempts by NGOs to become sustainable organisations by themselves. Limits on the percentage of revenues to determine the 'charitable status' makes the NGOs dependent on external sources of funds – whether it is from donors or corporates or government funding.

This reduces many well intentioned NGOs to become contractors delivering welfare services wherever the public systems have failed or have never reached. While the government wants to promote service agencies, it is now becoming wary of any NGO advocating change or empowering citizens in de-

manding change. It does seem ironical that the government is streamlining laws and making it easy for FDI and global business leaders to set up operations in India, but goes overboard in creating barriers for the NGOs from receiving foreign funds or working with global partners. The government should understand that the ease of doing business should also apply to the development sector and it must not intentionally create barriers that inhibit social action/change.

Being 'voice-poor'

How poverty is viewed and how it can be tackled is one of the key areas of disagreement. While the state views poverty in terms of levels of income, assets, calorie intake, per capita gross national product or a combination of these, many NGOs see poverty additionally as the lack of opportunities, lack of access to government services, geographical isolation, vulnerability, powerlessness and being 'voice-poor'. The state response is usually driven by government programmes and it finds physical weakness, isolation and income poverty more acceptable and less threatening aspects of deprivation to tackle.

The government tends to neglect discussions around vulnerability and powerlessness which NGOs focus. This naturally creates tension in the relationship and reactionary consequences. While NGOs may want to see themselves as supplementing government efforts, the state may see them as threat trying to supplant government itself. The NGOs also need to appreciate that they do not truly represent 'civil society' but only 'civil interests'.

The changes in the external eco-system will necessarily drive even the best run NGOs to reconfigure themselves in order to survive. The NGOs will have to now learn new coping mechanisms while at the same time, retain the flavour of voluntary action. They will have to learn to survive in hostile environments where politics and tradition compete for pride of place with bureaucracy and international donor agendas. They will have to fashion new strategies to deal with the risks in the environment, their own ambitions, and learn to operate with humility and transparency. They need to hold themselves accountable not merely to their boards and donor agencies but also to the government and the communities that they work with.

The need of the hour is to begin the process of dialogue not just around managing the relationship between the government and NGOs, but also around the understanding of poverty and how to manage it collectively. Unless one appreciates the complexity and enormity of the problem on hand and the need for collective action, this growing tension may result in the disappearance of civil society organisations as we know it.

(The writer is Founder & President, Swami Vivekananda Youth Movement, and Founder & Chairman, Grassroots Research & Advocacy Movement)