

Staff Paper

NGO'S AND THE AFRICAN FARMER: A SKEPTICAL PERSPECTIVE

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No Abstract

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I. THE PROBLEM

One inescapable conclusion flows from the growing body of literature about non-governmental organizations (NGOs)--they have become a major player in the economic development of developing countries.¹ Most donors now enlist the services of NGOs at some stage in their foreign assistance programs, whether in project design, implementation or management.² With their expanded base of support, NGOs have moved far beyond their traditional role as purveyors of disaster relief and have taken on a wide array of projects in health, business, education and agriculture. More recently NGOs have entered the policy advisory arena, advising donors and undertaking lobbying campaigns aimed at shaping public opinion and influencing policy outcomes.³ With their rise to prominence, there can be little dispute that NGOs have won a seat at the bargaining table in international development circles.

The growth in donor support for NGOs has occurred during a period of increasing disillusion about the role of government in promoting development.⁴ Nowhere has this disillusion been greater than among aid officials working with sub-Saharan Africa (hereafter Africa). After decades of failed state-led development strategies, multilateral and bilateral foreign assistance programs have embraced NGOs as purportedly flexible

¹The Inter-American Foundation estimates over 20,000 NGOs operating in Latin America (Anson, 1995). In Africa, 181 foreign NGOs are officially accredited with the government of Burkina Faso; more than 200 NGOs are active in Tanzania (van de Walle and Johnston, 1996). Researchers have estimated that over 22,000 NGOs are active in the Philippines (Balisacan, 1997).

² OECD support for NGOs grew from \$2.8 billion in 1980 to \$6.3 billion in 1994 (OECD, 1994, 1995). The share of Swedish International Development Authority foreign assistance which was channeled through NGOs increased from nine percent in 1990-91 to thirty percent in 1994 (Edwards and Hulme, 1996b), supporting over 2,000 NGO projects in over 100 countries (ODI, 1996). England increased its official funding to NGOs by almost 400% between 1984 and 1994 (ODI, 1995). In 1994, USAID reported channeling 34% of its foreign assistance through NGOs and stated plans to continue raising that share in the future (ODI, 1995). The proportion of World Bank-financed projects involving NGOs increased from 6% in 1988 to over 50% in 1994 (ODI, 1995).

³ See Judge (1995), Krut (1997), Ruttan (1996), Sandburg (1994) and Willetts (1996).

⁴ Many authors have explained this development as a shift in foreign assistance paradigm or a "New Policy Agenda" (Bennett, 1995; Borton, 1995; Coclough and Manor, 1991; Edwards and Hulme, 1996a; Farrington and Bebbington, 1993; Gary, 1996; Ruttan, 1996). Lester Salamon (1994) writes that "we are in the midst of an associational revolution that may prove to be as significant to the latter twentieth century as the rise of the nation-state was to the latter nineteenth" (p.109). According to Salamon, the "long-simmering crisis of confidence in the capability of the state" is one major factor driving this revolution (1993:110).

and low-cost alternatives for advancing multiple development objectives.⁵ Central to this increasing engagement with NGOs has been expanding their role in Africa's agricultural sector.

This paper is designed to stimulate debate and an exchange of information on the performance of foreign-financed NGOs in promoting agricultural development in Africa. We report that the expansion of NGO activities in Africa's agricultural development has not been based on solid and impartial evidence of their performance.⁶ Despite Tendler's observation in 1982 that "...claims about [NGOs] have not been put to the test in evaluation and research" (p. iv) researchers have produced little hard evidence to justify expanding the role of NGOs in promoting agricultural and rural development in Africa. This review of the literature on NGOs engaged in agricultural development in Africa fails to answer two basic questions about the effectiveness of foreign-financed NGOs:⁷

- * What has been the impact of NGOs in promoting agricultural growth and rural economic development in Africa?
- * How does NGO performance in different agricultural activities compare with that of public- and private-sector entities in Africa?

The lack of answers to such questions suggests that NGOs are being overzealously promoted in Africa. Many veteran development specialists in donor agencies are quietly asking: are NGOs being oversold?

Our review of the literature on NGOs reveals several reasons why researchers have been unable to answer the questions surrounding NGO performance. One major problem is that until recently, there has been little donor support for external or internal evaluations of NGO performance. The Overseas Development Institute's (1996) review of donor-sponsored evaluations of NGO projects found that when NGO evaluations have been conducted, they have tended to focus on "problem" projects and the impact of discrete projects according to donor objectives. A similar survey commissioned by the OECD found that donor-sponsored evaluations tend to also rely on qualitative data, make rapid judgements and report outputs rather than assess

⁵For example, forty-four World Bank assisted projects implemented by NGOs accounted for 55 percent of all loans to Africa in FY1991 (Marcussen, 1996a). In 1992, USAID allocated one-fifth of its budget for Africa to NGOs (Jenkins, 1994).

⁶For review of NGOs in Latin America see Bebbington and Farrington (1993); Bebbington and Thiele (1993); and Carroll (1992). See Farrington and Lewis (1993) for Asian examples.

⁷ We focus on foreign-financed NGOs engaged in agricultural and rural development in Africa with emphasis on private, non-profit, non-membership organizations.

impacts (Riddell et al., 1997). Other commentators have pointed to a prohibitive research environment that stifles "independent" research. The alleged cozy relationships between NGO managers and their evaluators and a tendency for donors to accept "soft" performance evaluations have undermined independent evaluations.⁸ Najam (1996) suggests that the large numbers of favorable reports of NGO performance in the literature reflects the fact that "most NGO scholars also happen to be NGO believers" (p. 339). Researchers' biases in favor of NGOs may also explain why comparative analyses of NGOs and government agencies "tend to attribute to government a set of shortcomings that mirror in negative terms the strengths of NGOs" (Tendler, 1997:158).

The lack of empirical information about the effectiveness of NGOs is also symptomatic of theoretical and methodological shortcomings which underlie the measurement of NGO performance. In particular, there are three major methodological problems in evaluating NGO performance.

- (1) The absence of a standard typology of NGOs has made it difficult to carry out rigorous comparative studies and facilitate a common dialogue among researchers and policy-makers.
- (2) The proliferation of vague performance criteria has hindered efforts to measure the direct and indirect impact of NGOs.
- (3) With neither a common typology nor well-defined performance criteria, much of the literature has resorted to qualitative, anecdotal evidence and uncritical praise for NGO performance.

The failure of the literature to document NGO performance incurs formidable costs for foreign assistance programs to Africa. With little indication of the cost or quality of NGO services, there is limited possibility for determining whether NGO services might be delivered more efficiently via alternative organizations. It is also unclear whether continued donor support to the NGO sector outweighs the opportunity costs of diverting funds from other investments such as improving rural roads, strengthening agricultural research capacities and expanding human resource development. Absent sufficient evidence of their effectiveness, NGOs might follow the pathway of Training and Visit (T&V) extension model. The T&V model has been oversold for many years and it is now being replaced by more pluralistic and demand driven extension

⁸Riddell and Robinson (1995) suggest that the growing involvement of official donors in funding NGOs has undermined donor objectivity and steered their evaluations toward confirming the most optimistic claims of their grant recipients. They cite major evaluations undertaken by the Canadian International Development Agency (1986), OECD (1988) and Overseas Development Authority (Cameron and Cocking, 1991) which avoid a critical look at NGO performance and instead appear to simply confirm NGO claims of effectiveness. See also Edwards and Hulme (1992); Eicher (1988); Ruttan (1996); and Stiefel and Wolfe (1994).

models (Chowdhury and Gilbert, 1996; Antholt, 1998). Will NGOs fade away just as quickly as the community development programs of the 1950s and integrated rural development programs of the 1970s?⁹ A rigorous evaluation of NGOs and their effectiveness in promoting agricultural development is a critical first-step in coming to a balanced and empirically-based assessment of the future of NGOs in agricultural and rural development in Africa. A hard look at the impacts of NGOs will assist in identifying not only those activities best carried out by NGOs, but also those which should be abandoned, reformed or expanded.¹⁰ Solid studies of NGO performance can help prevent a potentially premature abandonment of NGO models and help define future roles for NGOs in promoting agricultural development in Africa.

This paper proceeds in part two with a discussion of definitional issues surrounding NGOs and the need for agreement on a working NGO typology. Part three deals with the challenges in evaluating NGO performance. In part four, we draw from a wide array of reports and publications to synthesize what is known about the contribution of NGOs in promoting agricultural development in Africa. Part five discusses the replication of NGO projects and part six presents conclusions.

II. DEFINING NGOs: THE NEED FOR A WORKING TYPOLOGY

A major weakness in the evaluation literature is the prevalence of ambiguous definitions of NGOs. This definitional failure largely arises from the absence in the wider NGO literature of a common typology for describing and categorizing different types of NGOs. Without a common typology, most NGO studies develop broad classification systems which are based on ambiguous or subjective descriptors.

In the 1980s researchers attempted to define NGOs and develop organizational typologies of NGOs. In one of the first surveys of NGOs, Esman and Uphoff (1984) classified NGOs according to size, vertical and horizontal linkages and operational functions. Uphoff (1986) later refined the framework by outlining a "middle" or "membership" sector between the public- and private-sectors. This "membership" sector was composed of non-profit, non-governmental organizations which are supported by voluntary labor and/or voluntary contributions from their clients. The organizations in this sector were classified according to their organizational objectives, role in the host community's development and clientele relations. Uphoff recently added that "NGOs are best considered as a sub-sector of the private-sector" (1996; 18). Despite the absence of an easily recognizable profit-motive, he noted that service NGOs resemble private-sector firms in that they

⁹See Ruttan (1975); Holdcroft (1984); and Binswanger, (1998).

¹⁰Tendler (1982) first noted the need for this information. See also Tendler and Friedheim (1994).

are governed or "owned" by a board of directors and provide services to clients who freely choose to accept them.¹¹ Vakil (1997) proposed a classification system comprised of "essential" and "contingent" descriptors (p. 2062). Essential descriptors indicate an organization's orientation and level of operation while contingent descriptors indicate sectoral focus and other evaluative factors which are specified by performance criteria. This effort provides a sufficiently comprehensive classification system for encompassing the heterogeneity of existing NGO types and an ideal foundation for developing a working NGO typology.

Despite these efforts, few researchers refer to these classification systems to describe the NGOs being evaluated. Most researchers devote little effort to explaining how the organizations in their studies qualify as NGOs. NGO classifications in the literature are either highly ambiguous or so broad that they are of little use for comparing findings. For example, in a study of NGOs in Zimbabwe, Vivian and Maseko (1994) identify their sample as a group of "operational rural development NGOs." These are "NGOs which identify their function primarily as undertaking work with their own personnel meant to foster rural development" (1994:1). The failure of the authors to define terms such as "operational," "NGO" and "rural development" leaves considerable uncertainty concerning the types of organizations in the study. Similarly, Fowler et al. (1992) fail to elaborate the differences between "service" and "intermediary" organizations which are either "community-" or "membership-based." Brown and Korten (1989) and Korten (1990) categorize NGOs into voluntary organizations, people's organizations, public service contractors and hybrid governmental/non-governmental organizations. While they further classify NGOs according to whether they are "value-" or "market-driven," the failure to define these terms adds to the confusion.

Carroll (1992) defines such terms as "scope and level of operation, clientele, functions and inspiration/affiliation" (p.13) which he uses in subgroups of "grassroots support" and "membership support" organizations. More subjective criteria such as an organization's "relationship to the poor" (p. 82) are used in Farrington and Bebbington's study (1993). Likewise, Bratton (1989) writes: "whereas the state is driven by the organizational imperatives of administrative command and control, NGOs generally seek to inculcate autonomous and participatory action" (p. 573). In the pursuit of inclusiveness, Clark (1991) develops a broad

¹¹A growing body of research analyzes NGOs (or the "Third-Sector") as a hybrid of both private- and public-sectors. See Gidron et al. (1992:xi) Levy (1996), Salamon (1995:244) and Wuthnow (1991:5). The Johns Hopkins University Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project was established to "document the scope, structure, revenue base and background of the nonprofit sector and to do so in a way that not only yield[s] solid and objective information about individual countries, but ma[kes] it possible to undertake cross-national comparisons in a systematic way" (Salamon and Anheier, 1996:xi). The project is analyzing the scope, structure, financing, and role of the private, nonprofit sector in 12 countries (Salamon and Anheier, 1997).

NGO typology comprised of six different classes: (1) relief and welfare agencies; (2) technical innovation organizations; (3) public services contractors; (4) popular development agencies; (5) grassroots development organizations; and (6) advocacy groups and networks. But such broad classes ignore the complex nature of multi-service NGOs. Without specific criteria to define the characteristics of each of these classes, it is difficult to apply this typology to other organizations in different contexts.

The proliferation of classification systems and frequent reliance on ambiguous terminology cripple the capacity of researchers to build a knowledge base of NGO performance. While the above studies cover a wide variety of organizations, the lack of detail in their classifications makes it difficult to compare their results or apply their lessons to other organizations. NGOs as diverse as farmer cooperatives, faith-based organizations, international private development organizations, community associations and foundations could fall into many of the different classes of NGOs outlined in the above classifications. It is also difficult to verify the conclusions from these studies in different contexts. These problems pose challenges for NGO researchers seeking to establish a record of NGO performance and underscore the need for a working typology.

III. CHALLENGES IN EVALUATING THE PERFORMANCE OF NGOs

The failure to develop working NGO typologies has confounded attempts to evaluate NGO performance. In the absence of a detailed NGO typology or a common classification system, researchers have extended the use of ambiguous definitions of NGOs to the formulation of performance criteria.¹² The result has been a wide range of differing evaluation methodologies and continuing disagreement among NGOs, donors and researchers over how to define and assess NGO impacts in agricultural development.

The American management specialist, Peter Drucker, observes that the executive who leads effectively must first answer the question, "How is performance for this institution to be defined" (1990)? Developing a NGO typology is a critical starting point for defining this performance and identifying relevant performance criteria. A typology distinguishes the characteristics of different organizations and identifies and classifies their different activities. Varying funding mechanisms, governing bodies, accountability measures and staff composition in addition to different clientele and services determine how organizations operate and the types of activities that they undertake. Combined with their guiding mandates, these different factors determine the function of a NGO within a community. Accurately describing this function is critical to developing

¹²Carroll (1992) illustrates the usefulness of detailed definitions in identifying effective NGO performance criteria.

expectations for performance that in turn provide the basis for establishing the performance criteria that may be used in evaluations.¹³

Understanding this function is particularly important for identifying relevant performance criteria given the wide range of existing NGO types. In addition to providing services with easily measurable outputs such as marketing, credit and seed-delivery, most NGOs also pursue intangible objectives. As Drucker observes, NGOs pursue a different "bottom-line" than private firms (1990:107).¹⁴ NGOs may aim to "empower" local residents (Stiefel and Wolfe, 1994:101), "strengthen" community associations and/or "educate" local residents (Bebbington et al., 1993:206).¹⁵ There is no clear methodology for measuring such objectives. Furthermore, applying any single set of performance criteria to evaluate performance in achieving such objectives risks assessing factors which are irrelevant to a given NGO's activities.

In the absence of an operative typology to guide the development of performance criteria, researchers frequently resort to short-cuts which insufficiently describe organizational activities. Researchers often resort to reviewing organizational mandates or by-laws to describe NGO activities and develop performance criteria. However, these documents often describe activities in general and use ambiguous terms to allow NGOs flexibility in service-delivery. Activities may be described as promoting "empowerment," "consciousness-raising" or education (Carroll, 1992; Clark, 1991) and "development" in a particular region (Drabek, 1987).¹⁶ Yet such broad terms provide little basis for accurately describing a given NGO's activities and forming appropriate criteria to judge their performance.

Alternatively, some researchers interview NGO employees and their beneficiaries to solicit descriptions of organizational activities and objectives. Researchers in one study posed "open-ended questions" to NGO managers and their beneficiaries and grouped their responses in categories entitled "mobilization,"

¹³See the following debates over methodology for describing NGO functions and identifying performance criteria: Brett (1993); Drucker 1990); Edwards and Hulme (1996a); Esman and Uphoff (1984); Kanter (1979); Uphoff (1986); and Weisbrod (1989).

¹⁴See also: Edwards and Hulme (1996a); Fowler (1996); and Uphoff (1996).

¹⁵Like many NGOs under South Africa's apartheid government, NGOs in repressive or unstable political environments may also pursue activities which aim to promote political liberalization.

¹⁶The ambiguous nature of this term was best illustrated during a 1987 conference on NGOs. The biggest point of contention among the 120 NGO representatives was defining "development." The debate ultimately preempted any agreement on a common set of NGO performance criteria (Drabek, 1987).

"empowerment" and "promotion of self-reliance" (Vivian and Maseko, 1994). Yet there is little reason to believe that the interviewers and respondents shared a common understanding of such terms.

Other researchers sidestep the complications associated with linking performance criteria to organizational activities. These researchers subjectively determine performance criteria according to donor objectives or their own conceptions of effectiveness. Such criteria commonly include the following:

- * degree of participation;
- * responsiveness to clients;
- * progress in expanding impact;
- * influence in public-policy making;
- * progress in coordinating activities; and
- * impact on the rural poor.¹⁷

Cassen (1986), Biggs and Neame (1996) and Fowler (1996) propose that human capital, local control over decision-making and institutional development should also form the basis for performance criteria. They argue that these criteria more effectively address the complex and contingent process driving community development than quantitative criteria. Guba and Lincoln (1989) argue that performance criteria for a given NGO should originate from the *evaluator's* judgement of its operating environment. In this case, evaluators determine performance criteria according to their judgement of the extent to which the political environment, level of infrastructure or local markets hinder delivering services.¹⁸ These criteria commonly depend on evaluators' assessments of a range of qualitative factors which impact NGO operations. However, criteria such as "responsiveness to clients," "progress in expanding impact" and control over decision-making are not easily quantifiable. The interpretative requirements associated with these criteria further raise the likelihood that evaluator bias will influence evaluation outcomes, jeopardizing the effectiveness of these criteria in both measuring NGO performance over time and comparing results between organizations.

By contrast, Uphoff (1996) has attempted to develop quantifiable indicators of performance. Contending that program "sustainability" is the central tenet underlying all NGO functions, Uphoff's evaluation methodology measures financial benefit-cost ratios and the rate of increase in the pool of "stakeholders" in the organization. He writes that "positive-sum dynamics and relationships appear to be the essence or crux of

¹⁷Cernea (1988); Farrington and Bebbington (1993); Lane (1995); and Nelson and Wright (1995).

¹⁸See also Bratton (1990) and Drucker (1990).

sustainability" (p. 32). While it is not evident how this definition of sustainability considers the positive and negative externalities arising from NGO activities promoting education, local participation in projects and conflict resolution, this approach is promising. In addition to the difficulties in identifying performance criteria, many NGO evaluations are further impaired by more rudimentary methodological shortcomings. The common reliance of NGO studies on case-studies or small samples for evaluation limits their conclusions.¹⁹ We were also unable to locate a single NGO longitudinal study or a NGO study which includes control groups. All of these attempts in identifying performance criteria represent efforts to define the "bottom-line" of the non-profit NGO sector. Each of the cited writers has attempted to articulate the functions of the organization with which they are concerned, identify indicators of progress and develop criteria for measuring these indicators. However, the prevalence of ambiguous and immeasurable indicators confuses the subjects of these evaluations and subjectively biases their findings.

IV. NGOS AND THE AFRICAN FARMER: CLAIMS AND EVIDENCE

The proliferation of poorly developed performance criteria and research methodologies has resulted in extensive qualitative and anecdotal evidence about the performance of NGOs in promoting agricultural development in Africa. With little empirical evidence to either support or refute their claims, researchers have generated a literature largely composed of unqualified generalizations and consistent praise for NGO effectiveness. The claims surrounding NGO performance revolve around four major assertions:

- (1) NGOs promote community development projects because they are able to mobilize local populations for local development. NGOs "...can respond to needs quickly... are independent and can be flexible in their choice of work..." (Cromwell, 1993:33). They play "...an important role in partnership with the community and the local government to put in place the elements required for successful community intervention and direct participation in public policies which involve and benefit the poor" (Pyle, 1997:18).
- (2) NGOs can transfer technology to farmers. NGOs are capable of "...respond[ing] to the challenge of adapting technical support to particular circumstances more effectively than can the centralized structures of NARS" (Cromwell, 1993:37).
- (3) NGOs can deliver agricultural support services more efficiently than government agencies. NGOs' "...commitment to use low-cost technologies, streamlined services and low staff costs,

¹⁹For example: Bennett (1995); Farrington and Bebbington (1993); Riddell and Robinson (1995); and Wellard and Copestake (1993).

enable them to operate efficiently on low budgets" (Cernea, 1988:18). Their efficiency "...emanates mainly from their small scale, their flexibility and their project orientation" (Norguiera, 1990:99).

- (4) NGOs are effective vehicles for alleviating rural poverty.²⁰ Clad and Stone contend that "...funds sent straight to the field, often in relatively small amounts via NGOs, are far more likely to be better spent than those flowing into the treasuries of countries" (1993:199).

A close examination of the literature on NGOs engaged in agricultural development in Africa reveals little conclusive evidence to support these four claims. We shall examine the state of the art of the literature on the role of NGOs in promoting community development, transferring technology, delivering agricultural services and alleviating rural poverty. While there are isolated cases of NGO experiences to support the claims in each of these four themes, the state of the literature does not allow their generalization or provide the evidence to make a convincing case for expanding NGO activities in agricultural and rural development in Africa.

Promoting Community Development

Among the most common claims concerning NGO performance is that they are more effective in promoting community development than governments. This claim arises from the assumption that NGOs are flexible organizations that are more responsive to the concerns of the poor than government agencies.²¹ As Michael Cernea states, "in the interaction between [the people and the state], NGOs insert themselves not as a third and different/independent actor, but as an emanation and representation of the community" (1988:10).²² NGOs "...can adapt more readily to local contexts [than government] and meet the demands of people-centered development" (Fowler, 1997:28). Other views that NGOs effectively promote the participation of intended beneficiaries in development projects also support these claims.²³ For instance, a World Bank report states that:

²⁰For example: Bennett (1995); Berg (1987); Bratton (1990); Clark (1991); and Wellard and Copestake (1993).

²¹Carroll et al. (1993); Farrington and Bebbington (1993); and Frantz, (1987).

²²See also Bratton (1989); Charlton and May (1995), Fowler (1991); Gordon (1996) and Moore (1993).

²³See Bebbington and Farrington (1993); Carroll (1992); and Fowler (1992).

Developmental NGOs have played a particularly important role in pioneering participatory practices. Often, these NGOs have the strongest grassroots links, the most capable and dedicated community workers, and the greatest experience in reaching disadvantaged groups through innovative participatory methods (Carroll et al., 1996:1).

Led by Robert Chambers, who coined the "farmer first" approach of developing appropriate technology (Chambers, 1983), the groundswell of support over the past 15 years for the view that the participation of intended beneficiaries improves project performance has further bolstered these arguments.²⁴

Much of the discussion of NGOs in community development revivifies the underlying premises of the community development (CD) movement of the 1950s and 1960s. There is a common view in the literature on NGOs that locally-based, small-scale projects which incorporate local participation constitute successful community development. NGOs promote community development by "...adopt[ing] an integrated approach to programs, which includes attention to the institutional and economic context as well as the technical factors" (Cromwell, 1993:33). The CD movement originated from similar notions of economic growth. The British Colonial Service first launched pilot community development programs in the 1940s to promote self-sufficiency as they prepared to withdraw from their colonies. These programs were based on the view that local participation in development projects that address local problems cultivates community self-reliance and economic development (Holdcroft, 1984). Later expanded by the Ford Foundation and U.S. foreign assistance programs, CD programs spanned 60 developing countries by 1960. Yet, despite their quick rise to prominence, CD projects failed to reach concrete economic goals such as raising incomes and increasing food production. CD projects also proved resource-intensive, growing up around "'top-down' bureaucratic empires" (Holdcroft, 1984:53). Their poor performance during a time when famine threatened much of south Asia eventually caused the abandonment of CD projects and the downfall of the CD movement.

NGOs currently operating in Africa face many of the same challenges that confronted the CD movement. However, few of the proponents of NGOs have spelled out how NGOs might be better able to overcome the problems which undermined the CD movement. Furthermore, the political economy surrounding NGO operations appears to limit the flexibility that many NGOs hold central to their ability to promote beneficiary participation and successful community development. This environment is distinctly different from the market-place in which private firms operate. While private-firms respond to consumer demands, NGOs respond to the interests of a wide range of different stakeholders, each with a vested interest in the outcomes

²⁴For example, Cernea (1991); Montgomery (1983); Paul (1987); and Uphoff (1992).

of their activities. In addition to their clients, NGOs are accountable to donors, governing boards, government officials, partner agencies and employees (Avina, 1993). Managing the conflicting interests among these constituents often requires a delicate balancing act that can erode NGO responsiveness to their intended program beneficiaries.

For example, the political and economic interests of host governments may not necessarily conform to NGO development agendas. Governments may favor particular regions for development, specific contractors or agricultural price policies which conflict with NGO objectives. Political concerns may also cause government officials to object to the grassroots activities associated with increasing beneficiary participation in community development projects (Bergdall, 1993). Despite these potentially conflicting interests, NGOs cannot afford to ignore government agendas. Government ministries and local officials determine and enforce the regulations which govern NGO activities. Their authority over NGO activities grants government officials the ability to leverage their interests and advance government or individual agendas.²⁵ The weak rule of law in many developing countries further heightens the leveraging capacity of government officials, increasing the threats to NGO flexibility and their development agendas.²⁶

The interests of local elites also may conflict with NGO objectives to increase the involvement of the poor in local development projects. NGO operations rely on the cooperation of local elites for access to resources and individuals within the communities in which they function. However, organizing local populations and granting them a stake in local development introduces new players into local politics and may conflict with the interests of local elites.²⁷ Threatened by a potential challenge to the status quo, local elites may pressure NGOs to incorporate their interests in local programming. Thus NGOs risk subordinating the

²⁵For instance, complicated and time-consuming registering requirements in Kenya and Zimbabwe. Registering requirements often require annual renewal and frequently change, requiring NGOs to continually alter their services to conform to current regulations (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993; Uphoff, 1984).

²⁶For example, see Gary (1996); Gow and Vansant (1982); Fowler (1991); and Stewart (1997).

²⁷ See Edwards and Hulme (1996a); Gow and Vansant (1983); Pigozzi (1982); and Tandler (1982). However, just as they may pursue conflicting interests, local elites and farmers may also share common priorities in rural development. In Brazil "what made the stories of successful dissemination work for small farmers was not just the prominence of civic-minded local elites, rather the interests of the local elites and small farmers in these cases partly overlapped due to the nature of the problem" (Tandler and Friedheim, 1994:166).

interests of the poor to those of local elites and compromising their own development agendas.²⁸ Resisting these influences proved to be a major challenge for the CD movement. CD projects worked closely with local elites and "...accept[ed] the existing local power structure as a given" (Holdcroft, 1984:51). Their close ties to local elites alienated local residents and over time, diminished local participation and support for development projects (Holdcroft, 1984).

NGO employees may also encounter conflicts of interest in advancing the participation of their clientele in project management and implementation. In a case study of an education project in Burkina Faso, Michener (1998) observed field staff who were more concerned with the practical constraints to implementing projects than promoting participation. These employees appeared skeptical of the feasibility of promoting participation. They were also fearful that increasing beneficiary participation raised the likelihood that their clientele would take over their jobs. Michener notes that "empowering communities so that NGOs can eventually withdraw is a serious contradiction in the participation philosophy" (1998:2116).

Donor interests may also clash with the interests of NGO staff, partner agencies and project beneficiaries. Many donors succumb to the demands for immediate results by their domestic supporters (Chambers, 1996). This pressure for short-term results often conflicts with the goals of host governments and coordinating agencies who may favor investments with longer-term, less tangible payoffs such as strengthening institutions, human resources or research capacities. However, as the primary financiers of NGO activities, donor interests loom large in NGO agendas. NGOs which have complained about these pressures lament over the "high price in terms of loss of autonomy, compromise of priorities and lack of their own institutional identity in the way they have had to approach donors for funds" (Drabek, 1987:xi).

How do NGOs prioritize their responses to these different constituents? Unlike consumers in the market-place, NGO clients cannot take their business elsewhere. NGO beneficiaries rarely refuse costless services. Nor are they necessarily likely to demand high standards for the quality of NGO services (Sen, 1987; Tandler, 1982). In this context, the uptake of client response to NGO services is internally driven; NGOs themselves must develop institutional mechanisms that ensure their accountability to their clients (Tandler,

²⁸NGOs have been increasingly subjected to accusations of being beholden to elite interests and government agendas and face growing questions concerning their legitimacy as actors in civil society. For example, Bebbington (1997) reported that Bolivian NGOs encountered a barrage of media criticism in 1996 alleging that they earn excessive wages, are unaccountable to society and engage in subversive activities.

1993).²⁹ While project governing boards which include local representatives improve accountability to NGO clientele, they are often temporary and/or weak in the face of competing interests. Governing boards are also often charged with presiding over time-consuming administrative minutiae. Alternatively, there are few supporters of external evaluations of NGO responsiveness to client needs (ODI, 1996; United Nations Secretary General, 1998). Their weakness reduces the ability of these institutions to ensure NGO accountability to their clientele and diffuse the friction which often arises between the competing interests facing NGOs. At risk is the possibility that NGOs not only shift their development agendas away from the needs of their clientele but further undertake projects which may be inappropriate to local needs, or worse, deleterious to the communities they aim to serve.³⁰

The implications for project development have been significant in some cases. In Zimbabwe, Vivian and Maseko (1994) found that two-thirds of 34 national NGOs were executing specified donor contracts rather than seeking funding for locally-designed initiatives. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents in this study described their activities as responding to predesigned donor initiatives. Similarly, Bingen (1992) found that NGOs in Mali frequently presented villagers with predetermined development programs. Marcussen (1996a) observed similar trends in the assessments of Danish and Norwegian foreign assistance programs to NGOs in Mali. He concluded that,

despite the formulated desire within [the Norwegian] program of finding new solutions to old problems (food security), many projects within it were found to support and continue to implement, almost unquestioningly, techniques and measures which have been applied for a long period and in many cases found to be of limited effectiveness (p. 411).³¹

There are other fundamental obstacles to NGO efforts in promoting beneficiary participation. Many NGO beneficiaries often do not want to participate in development projects. A major weakness in the claims surrounding NGOs and participation is the assumption that local beneficiaries of NGO services will express

²⁹In a survey of the 15-year experience of nine large rural development projects in northeastern Brazil, Tandler (1993) found that the projects achieved higher performance following reforms which opened their service delivery to the influences of "demand" pulls and pushes from their clients. More recently, Tandler (1997) documents successful reforms among select government agencies in Latin America which cultivated dynamic relationships with their beneficiaries and improved their services.

³⁰Anang (1994); Bebbington and Riddell (1997); and Hulme and Edwards (1997).

³¹Marcussen cites Danida (1993) and the Royal Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1992). See also Marcussen (1996b).

a growing interest in preserving these services. The realization of an increasing value of NGO services will presumably motivate local beneficiaries to participate in NGO operations without remuneration. While the recipients of social services may encounter tangible benefits, there is little reason to believe that these gains outweigh the costs of their participation. Nor is there any apparent reason to believe that NGO project beneficiaries will volunteer their time and energy in exchange for social services for which they have already paid in the form of taxes. As White (1991) found in a survey in Bangladesh, the majority of farmers preferred to passively receive services than expend time and energy in participating in their delivery.³²

The management structures of NGOs may also limit their capacity for promoting local participation in development. Some researchers have noted that NGOs are just as likely as private firms to arrange their management structures in "top-down" hierarchies that complicate efforts to include beneficiary participation in decision-making.³³ Diminishing funding opportunities and increasing competition from private-sector agencies pressure NGOs to streamline their decision-making and increase the scale of their services.³⁴ Jain's review (1994) of eleven successful non- and semi-governmental organizations in five Asian countries found that organizations standardized their administrations and reduced their flexibility as they increased in size. These types of administrative changes limit the organizational flexibility that is necessary for promoting participation and reduce the opportunities for local participation in NGO project-planning (Stewart, 1997).

Finally, there is no conclusive evidence that increased beneficiary participation in development projects improves performance. As Isham, Narayan and Pritchett (1995) point out, "the existence of consensus (or advocacy), however, does not imply the existence of clear evidence that participation improves performance" (p. 175). While their recent global study of 121 diverse water projects found strong statistical support for the link between increased beneficiary participation and the performance of the water projects, they also pointed out that there are two hard questions which remain unanswered:

³²Maclure (1995) discusses the implications for client-patron relations arising from the common misconception that community self-reliance is a goal of development assistance. White suggests, "...the push towards 'member control' comes from national and international development theorizing, not from the clients themselves" (White, 1991:26).

³³See Anang (1994), Tandler (1982) and Vivian and Maseko (1994).

³⁴Shrinking international funding for NGO service providers in South Africa has increased the pressure on NGOs to loosen the administrative structures that ensure community participation. This pressure confronts South African NGOs with the difficult trade-off between sustaining consultative, participatory development and securing funding support (Pieterse, 1997:161).

- (1) Does participation directly cause better project performance across all sectors (e.g., agriculture, health etc.)?
- (2) What are the full costs and benefits of increased participation (p. 196)?

At present, there is a lack of solid evidence on the record of NGOs in promoting community development. This is largely due to the lack of clear methods for evaluating the performance of NGOs in promoting community development. Part of this difficulty lies in reaching an agreed upon definition of "community development" and the criteria for assessing performance. Widely divergent conceptions of community development in the literature complicate comparing the experiences of different NGOs. The lack of studies of large samples of NGOs engaged in community development further prohibits any judgement of their performance in this area. Riddell et al.'s (1997) review of 60 separate donor-commissioned evaluations of 240 projects in 26 countries contributes to filling this gap in the literature. They report that aggregating the evaluation results indicates that 90% or more of the NGO projects achieved their immediate objectives. However, they acknowledge that this sample of NGO projects represents only a small and unrepresentative fraction of all NGO projects. They also note that the lack of firm and reliable evidence and the wide array of evaluation methodologies further qualifies their findings.

Similar problems limit the research on NGO performance in promoting beneficiary participation in development projects (Cohen and Uphoff, 1980). The results of research on the role of NGOs in promoting participation are inconclusive. A global survey of 51 development projects found that 22% excluded local populations, 60% incorporated low or moderate levels of participation and only 18% included high participation of local populations (Brodhead, 1988). Additional reports that NGOs often incorporate local participation by seeking temporary voluntary labor for labor-intensive projects raise further questions about the depth of local participation in NGO operations.³⁵ The emerging literature suggests caution in considering the potential for NGOs in promoting participation and community development.

Transferring Technology

Many analysts contend that NGOs possess a unique capacity for developing, adapting and disseminating new technologies for agricultural development because of their small-scale, flexibility and closeness to local populations (Chambers, 1983, 1992; Farrington and Bebbington, 1993). Other analysts

³⁵See Hashemi (1996); Lane (1995); and Spitz (1992). Michener's (1998) case-study in Burkina Faso found that contrary to objectives to promote people-centered participation, the project's documents suggested "...that the policy level [was] most concerned with participation as an efficiency device" (p. 2115).

argue that NGOs approach problems "holistically," organizing their efforts by larger socio-economic issues rather than a particular commodity or discipline (Kaimowitz, 1993:1145). NGOs are thus presumed to possess superior capacity for analyzing problems as well as adapting technology to local conditions (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993: Kaimowitz, 1993).

The available evidence shows a mixed record of performance among NGOs engaged in technology development and dissemination in Africa. Cromwell (1995, 1996) reports how NGOs which sought to fill the gaps in national seed disbursement programs in East Africa failed to distribute seeds in a timely manner to all targeted regions. These NGOs also failed to display any unique capacity to design innovative systems, instead simply imitating government models for seed distribution. They also failed to take advantage of existing informal seed distribution networks, resulting in a poorly functioning systems which operated parallel to informal networks (Cromwell, 1995, 1996). Vivian and Maseko (1994) reported similar findings in Zimbabwe. Only 14 percent of the NGOs in their study described their activities as offering alternatives to government services. Most of the sampled NGOs instead appeared to replicate government services in isolated regions of the country (Vivian and Maseko, 1994). These attempts to replicate government models are unsustainable without the research inputs, human resource networks and assistance from related government departments that support government seed distribution programs. As Cromwell (1995, 1996) notes, spiraling program costs arising from attempts to compensate for these inputs exhausted NGO budgets in East Africa. Commenting on similar NGO efforts in technology transfer outside of Africa, Kaimowitz (1993) notes that in Latin America, "...after ten or fifteen years of effort, there are still only a few documented NGO success stories with agricultural technology" (p. 1146).

As an increasing number of researchers have shown, NGOs' inherent small size constrain their capacity for technology development and transfer (Eicher, 1989). While we are aware that there are a number of NGOs that are increasing the technical competencies of their staff, the small budgets associated with many NGOs often limit their ability to hire experienced technical specialists. NGO employees are instead often expected to simultaneously play the roles of researcher, technician, administrator, fund-raiser, manager and evaluator.³⁶ Limited budgets also provide few opportunities for employees to gain advanced training in a specialized field. Without continuous investment in staff training, NGOs are limited in their ability to develop innovative

³⁶Employees are also often expected to be "value-driven, committed and self-motivated," a major attribute of NGOs that is described by Fowler (1997:27) as contributing to their comparative advantage.

programming, let alone develop and disseminate new technologies.³⁷ These obstacles to staff specialization contribute to the poor technical, financial and managerial skills that researchers often observe among NGO staff.³⁸

The small-scale and remote location of many NGO rural development projects also isolate NGOs from national research networks. This may explain why some NGOs are unaware of the current research in their fields and of other NGOs' experiences and often conduct redundant research or only belatedly adopt new technologies (Bratton, 1989; Marcussen, 1996a; Vivian and Maseko, 1994).

The capacity of NGOs to develop and transfer new technology is also constrained by their dependence on donor support. Donors are often reluctant to support the necessary long-term investments in technology development (Eicher, 1999). Donor pressures to generate short-term, concrete outputs and the competitive environment for fundraising also discourage NGOs from making their own investments in long-term projects with less tangible benefits.³⁹ These pressures and frequently changing donor priorities pose difficulties for generating continuous financial support for adaptive research over periods of five to ten years (Kaimowitz, 1993). Assembling multiple donor financed projects into coherent long-term development programs poses further problems for many NGOs. The mixed record of evidence and extensive structural constraints illustrated in the literature underscore the challenges facing NGO efforts in transferring technology.

Delivering Farmer Support Services

Another widespread assumption about NGO performance is that they are capable of providing services such as seed, extension and credit to farmers at a lower cost than government agencies or private firms.⁴⁰ This belief is supported by the widely-held notion that NGOs are innovators in delivery services (e.g. Bebbington and Farrington, 1993; Clark, 1991). It is also supported by the common view that NGOs employ technologies with modest input requirements.⁴¹ For instance, a paper by the World Bank's Environment Department states that NGOs "...can assist the Bank in reaching poorer and more vulnerable social groups with appropriate

³⁷Farrington and Bebbington (1993); Tripp (1993); Vivian and Maseko (1994).

³⁸See Cernea (1988); Farrington and Bebbington (1993); and Korten (1987) and (1990).

³⁹Antrobus (1987); Desai and Howes (1996); Edwards and Hulme (1996a); and Smillie (1996).

⁴⁰See Berg (1987); Cernea (1988); Esman and Uphoff (1984); Farrington and Bebbington (1993); Fowler (1988); Karim (1996); and Sandberg (1994).

⁴¹See Berg, (1987); Carroll et al. (1996); Farrington and Bebbington (1993); Stiefel and Wolfe (1994).

technologies and in a cost-effective manner" (Carroll et al., 1996:9). Another common perception is that because NGOs are working with local communities, they have a capacity to develop lower cost delivery systems than the government or private-sector (Esman and Uphoff, 1984). Cernea notes that unique features such as "the largely voluntary nature of NGO activities, their commitment to use low-cost technologies and streamlined services, and low staff costs enable them to operate efficiently on low budgets" (1988:18). Fowler adds that "...in not seeking profits, NGOs can be less costly than business, while staff self-motivation enables them to function at less than market rates because part of the employee's reward comes from self-fulfillment" (1997:28). Their freedom from the constraints of the complex hierarchies and unnavigable bureaucracies of government further gives NGOs greater flexibility in responding to the changing needs of farmers, adding to the returns on their investments in service delivery (Steifel and Wolfe, 1994).

Despite the preponderance of such claims, there is a lack of conclusive evidence that NGOs are more efficient than government or private agencies in delivering farmer support services. While some proponents of the NGO efficiency thesis make reference to studies of NGO financial performance to support their arguments, their evidence comes from case studies which have considerable methodological shortcomings that qualify their conclusions. Several researchers have buttressed their claims by referring to the evaluations of the Orangi Pilot Project in Pakistan (World Bank; 1987), the Aga Khan Rural Support Program in Pakistan (World Bank, 1990) and the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (Lovell, 1992).⁴² Each of these studies concludes that the NGO under investigation displays comparable efficiency in service delivery relative to government delivery systems. Yet there are major problems which qualify the results of these studies. None of these studies provided evidence that the types of services provided by the NGO and government agency were similar enough to merit a meaningful comparison. These studies failed to take account of the cost implications for both NGOs and the government of providing substantially different types of services in different regions to different clientele. Two of these studies also failed to account for the full extent of grants and indirect subsidies to NGOs, potentially leading to an underestimation of NGO program costs. Furthermore, the small number and case-specific nature of these studies hardly warrant conclusive generalizations concerning NGO efficiency.

Contrary to these claims, the evidence emerging from the larger body of literature dealing with NGOs in Africa, Asia and Latin America is showing that NGOs often operate at a higher cost of service delivery vis-

⁴²Each organization provides a wide range of credit, technical advisory, water development and educational services in rural areas.

à-vis government services. Wiggins and Cromwell (1995) assessed 19 NGOs in Africa engaged in seed distribution and found that their cost per unit of distributed seed was higher than the level incurred by government seed agencies.⁴³ In an evaluation of sixteen multi-service NGOs across Latin America, Asia and Africa, Riddell and Robinson (1995) found that NGO projects

...are costly to implement and the benefits take time to mature. In five of the projects, the benefits clearly exceeded the costs of achieving them. In five others the objectives were achieved, but at a high cost in terms of staffing and resources. In two projects ...the costs far exceeded the benefits. For the remaining four projects, it was difficult to make precise judgements (Riddell and Robinson, 1995:60).

Schmidt and Zeitinger (1996) compared 15 micro-credit NGOs in Latin America and concluded that excessive borrowing costs and administrative overhead costs diminished the likelihood that these organizations could achieve financial viability. Even before accounting for indirect government subsidies in their programming, the average annual losses among these NGOs amounted to 25 percent of their loan portfolios (Schmidt and Zeitinger, 1996). In a global review of thirteen microfinance organizations, Hulme and Mosley (1996) found that the four NGOs in their sample were highly dependent on concessional lending and grant support and operated at significant losses.⁴⁴

There are many factors limiting the financial performance and sustainability of NGOs that may explain these early findings. First, the limited capacity of NGOs to invest in their human resource capacity often results in a shortage of the skills necessary for managing a dynamic and efficient organization. Poor

⁴³ Wiggins and Cromwell (1995) attributed the high cost to the small scale of seed production among the NGOs and high overhead and transportation costs. In many cases, NGO sold seeds at a loss to compete with locally prevailing grain prices (Wiggins and Cromwell, 1995).

⁴⁴ These organizations demonstrated Subsidy Dependency Indexes (SDIs) ranging from 135 to 408 percent. This index measures the extent to which an organization's current lending interest rate would have to rise to cover total operating costs in the event that all subsidies to the organization are removed (Yaron, 1992). A 100 percent SDI estimate indicates that interest rates would have to double for the given organization to cover all the real resource costs which are incurred in their operations. While the SDIs of these NGOs demonstrated both higher and lower rates relative to the SDIs of private- and public-sector microcredit organizations, the dissimilarity between the lending programs and associated support services of the sampled organizations prevents any meaningful comparison.

bookkeeping and accounting skills in NGO administrations is a common weakness discussed in the literature.⁴⁵ NGO management styles have also proven as susceptible to bureaucratization as have the government administrations to which they are frequently compared.⁴⁶ The lack of capacity for conducting self-evaluations and implementing cost-cutting reforms among many NGO staff aggravates these deficiencies (Tripp, 1993). Second, many analysts report that NGO structures are often incompatible with cost-effective administration. Their accountability to local government, multiple donors and local populations often requires that NGOs complete several different reports of their project accomplishments and expenses. While host governments may demand general reports, donors may require separate reports for each of the projects which they support and the use of specific indicators of impact. Host governments and donors may also demand different accounting procedures. Meanwhile, local populations may demand reports in local languages and public briefings to discuss project impacts.

Third, the project approach to managing development programs among many NGOs often inflates administrative costs. Many NGOs organize their activities and accounts according to separate donor-financed projects. This project-orientation discourages sharing administrative resources between projects. As a result, as NGOs expand their services they often encounter constant or increasing rates of administrative costs instead of the declining rate of costs typically associated with increasing the scale of operations. The small size of most NGOs also prevents taking advantage of economies of scale in service-delivery. For example, NGOs seeking to invest in agricultural research face high overhead costs in developing laboratories and information exchange systems that do not accrue significant benefits in the short-run. Similarly, microcredit NGOs face the high administrative costs and risk exposure during the initial period of a new lending program. Most microcredit NGOs have been unable to lower these costs without dramatically scaling-up the size of their loan portfolios and moving up-market to middle-income borrowers.

Fourth, the frequent reliance on donor-support necessitates significant and continual expenditures on fund-raising activities. Fundraising requirements impose high start-up costs for most NGO projects. As most

⁴⁵See Abugre (1994), Cernea (1988), Farrington and Bebbington (1993), Gumbo and Dhemba (1992), Korten (1987) and Tendler (1982).

⁴⁶Vivian and Maseko (1994) observed that Zimbabwean NGOs appeared susceptible to the same management trends and orthodoxies prevailing in government agencies. They also did not observe any consistent differences between the organizational styles of NGOs and government agencies. Furthermore, they found that Zimbabwean NGOs were often the last organizations to respond to management innovations. See also Edwards and Hulme (1996a) and Tandon (1996).

donors earmark their funds for specific projects, raising the funds to support the fund-raising activities for new project initiatives poses a time-consuming challenge. Sustaining support for projects also often requires extensive communication with donors. Many donors require extensive project reports, arrangements for field visits and repeated applications to renew funding. Their changing priorities and the short-term nature of most grant funding also offers no guarantee that donors will offer long-term support for a given project. As a result, frequent changes in a NGO's donor base often require repeated administrative outlays as each new donor brings new requirements for grant applications and program reporting (Antrobus, 1987; Bennett, 1995). Changes in a NGO's donor-base also preempts the long-term planning that is critical for achieving efficient service-delivery (van de Walle and Johnston; 1996).

Combined with the constraints on NGO flexibility discussed above, these obstacles to low-cost administration challenge the potential for NGOs to innovate service-delivery systems in rural areas and may explain the conclusions in ODI's (1996) review of donor evaluations of NGO projects. This review found that:

Few of the projects stood out as being particularly innovative or flexible; where innovation was found, it was often merely new to a particular area of country, and thus a replication of other NGO efforts. Where striking examples of innovation were found, these were frequently the result of years of costly research and experimentation (p. 2).

There have been few studies to indicate the impact of these factors on the financial performance of NGO service delivery. Nor have there been comparative studies of the performance of NGOs, private firms and the government in delivering similar services to farmers.⁴⁷ However, the structural constraints to NGO service-delivery suggest that many NGOs will struggle in providing those services which have traditionally been in the purview of government (Eicher and Kupfuma, 1998). The World Bank's Operation Policy Department's points to this lack of reliable empirical evidence of NGO comparative financial performance and further raises the possibility that NGO service-delivery may in fact be more costly than government provided services in the short-run.

Overall, however, the record is mixed and there is no reliable empirical evidence to show that NGOs implement projects at a lower cost than other agencies. In fact, by investing resources in participatory

⁴⁷While some authors have identified this gap in the literature, its persistence highlights the growing need for an empirical analysis of operational efficiency among NGOs in international development. See Anang (1994); Edwards and Hulme (1996, 1996b); Fisher (1997), Hashemi (1996); Riddell and Robinson (1995); and Tendler (1982).

approaches, emphasizing the development of long-term sustainable systems and extending reach to marginal areas, projects with NGO involvement may prove more expensive in the short-term (World Bank, 1995:47).

The lack of empirical evidence of NGO financial performance leaves a substantial gap in the literature on the effectiveness of NGO services. This gap poses a pressing need for benefit-cost comparisons of NGOs and public- and private-sector organizations engaged in the same type of farmer support services. Such analyses are critical for clarifying the full costs and benefits associated with different mechanisms for delivering farmer support services and promise to advance the policy-dialogue over the role for NGOs in Africa's agricultural development.

Alleviating Poverty

Many commentators argue that NGO efforts in promoting community development, transferring technology and delivering services constitute the most effective approach for alleviating poverty.⁴⁸ These commentators argue that the development of local capacities for project implementation promotes self-reliance and ensures a self-sustaining process that reduces poverty over the long-run (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993). NGOs "help build community and cooperative institutional capacity for self-management, equitable benefit flows and 'voice'," effectively alleviating poverty (Carroll et al., 1996:9).

Most evaluations of NGO effectiveness report that NGOs succeed in extending their services to the poor. While it is uncertain whether NGOs are able to reach or sustain services to their poorest clientele, there is little doubt that most NGOs work with the poor. However, assessing NGO performance in alleviating poverty is more complicated. Debates over methodology and inadequate attention to monitoring the progress of NGO beneficiaries have prevented establishing a record of performance. Recent surveys of donor-commissioned NGO evaluations concur that few NGOs monitor project beneficiaries or measure the changes in their household economic conditions (e.g. ODI (1996) and Riddell et al. (1997)). The neglect among NGOs for conducting poverty assessments prior to implementing projects and a lack of longitudinal poverty data further complicate attempts to establish the record.

While these shortcomings leave many questions unanswered, the emerging evidence on NGO beneficiary demographics provides a partial view of NGO performance in poverty alleviation. In a pioneering assessment of NGO performance, Judith Tandler (1982) reviewed the evaluations of seventy-five African, Asian and Latin American NGOs and concluded that NGOs often did not reach the bottom 40 percent of the

⁴⁸Bennett (1995); Berg (1987); Bratton (1990); Clark (1991); Cromwell (1993), (1995); Fowler (1988); and Wellard and Copestake (1993).

income distribution in the communities where they operated. Carroll's (1992) evaluation of thirty Latin American NGOs found that the beneficiaries of these organizations were "...the middle poor, those at the third and fourth quintile of the income-distribution spectrum" (p. 67). He further noted that "even the highest rated among the thirty grassroots support organizations and membership support organizations have relatively few direct beneficiaries among the poorest rural households" (1992:67).⁴⁹ More recently, in their global study of sixteen NGOs, Riddell and Robinson (1995) commented that "many of the projects failed to reach the very poorest, and even in cases where poverty alleviation occurred, improvement in economic status was modest" (p.60). While ODI's (1996) review of NGO evaluations found that "a number of NGO projects appear capable of reaching further 'down' to the poor than comparable government or official donor programmes" (p. 2), it also pointed out that a high proportion of the NGO projects stopped short of extending their services to the poorest. The picture emerging from these studies is a group of NGOs struggling to reach their poorest constituents. However, the inconclusiveness of the research to date underscores the poor state of our understanding of NGO effectiveness in alleviating poverty in Africa. It is clear that without better tools for tracing the impacts of NGOs over the long-run and generalizing about their performance it will be difficult to advise NGOs on how to play a more effective role in poverty alleviation.⁵⁰

V. REPLICATING NGO PROJECTS

Will the NGO movement fizzle out like the community development thrust of the 1950s and the integrated rural development movement of the 1970s? The future role for NGOs in Africa's agricultural development will be partly determined by the ability of NGOs to widen their impacts across regions. To secure their role in Africa's agricultural development, NGOs must be able to demonstrate their ability to increase the scale of successful operations and replicate their projects in varying environments. However, many researchers

⁴⁹But Carroll's observations may overestimate the average reach of Latin American NGOs among the poor. Funded by the Inter-American Foundation, the NGOs in his sample were more likely representative of the most innovative and effective NGOs in reaching the poor among Latin American NGOs (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993).

⁵⁰The Social Poverty Map is a simple approach for displaying the demographic and economic characteristics of NGO beneficiaries (de Janvry and Sadoulet, 1990: 443). Carter and May's (1999) livelihood mapping approach provides another methodology for measuring rural poverty that could be used to record changes in the poverty rates of NGO beneficiaries over time.

have noted a poor record of performance.⁵¹ This record likely arises from three major structural aspects of NGO programming which complicate NGO efforts to scale-up and replicate their projects.

First, the highly specialized nature of many NGO projects often complicates efforts to replicate project outcomes. Many NGOs continually adapt their services as they learn about the unique and changing nature of their clientele's needs. The resulting organizational structures and project approaches are often not easily replicated elsewhere nor appropriate to the needs of other communities. It is also difficult to identify which project aspects to replicate without the resources to conduct controlled experiments that test for the key variables accounting for project performance (Farrington and Bebbington, 1993).

Second, NGO programming often requires intensive human-capital inputs. Many NGO projects largely rely on the efforts of multi-talented managers who are motivated by ideological commitments. The uniqueness of these managers and their skills complicates simple project replication (ODI, 1996). The additional shortage of such individuals in many developing countries and the inability to offer competitive wages to attract talented workers from the private-sector also make it difficult to recruit technical staff for replicating projects (Cernea, 1988). Such unexpected human capital intensity in scaling-up projects played a key role in the eventual decline of IRD projects in the 1970s (Ruttan, 1975).

Third, NGO projects are difficult to scale-up because of problems in coordinating services among NGOs and between NGOs and government. Some writers praise NGOs because they “contribute to strengthening coordination among individual producers, and subsequently, among communities” (Bebbington and Farrington, 1993). However, the need to better coordinate NGO services remains a central theme in much of the NGO literature. The project orientation of many NGOs and their accountability to multiple donors challenge NGO capacities to coordinate their own services.⁵² NGOs that rely on a common pool of donors also often encounter competitive pressure for support that discourages exchanging information and inter-agency coordination.⁵³ These coordination problems have often resulted in parallel and competitive service provision

⁵¹See Bratton (1989); Jiggins et al. (1996); and Tendler (1982). See also Otero (1995) for a discussion of the constraints on scaling-up among non-governmental intermediary financial institutions and microenterprise support organizations in Latin America.

⁵²See Edwards (1993); Fowler (1992); and Tripp (1993).

⁵³See Bennett (1995); Bingen (1992); Cernea (1988); Gary (1996); and Smith (1987).

with significant costs.⁵⁴ For instance, competition between NGOs and local government agencies in Mozambique resulted in a duplication of services that not only wasted scarce resources but also undermined the national government's efforts to develop local government capacities for service delivery (Egan, 1991).⁵⁵

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown that the literature on foreign-financed NGOs engaged in agricultural and rural development in Africa has failed to provide definitive answers to two basic questions. First, what is the performance of NGOs in promoting agricultural and rural development in Africa? Second, are NGOs more effective than public- and private-sector organizations in promoting agricultural development? Considering the available evidence, it is apparent that the increased flow of foreign assistance channeled through NGOs in Africa has been based on unsubstantiated claims about their comparative advantage in promoting development. Although these claims arise from many isolated case studies of successful NGO performance, there is a lack of rigorous empirical research to draw definitive generalizations about NGO performance.

Three complex issues underlie the failure to marshal solid evidence of NGO performance. First, the environment surrounding research on NGOs has often discouraged conducting independent, critical performance evaluations and releasing them for public scrutiny. Second, researchers have failed to develop an adequate framework for describing NGOs and analyzing their performance. As Vakil (1997) points out, the very label "non-governmental" begins the discussion about these organizations in terms of what they are not. Third, poorly developed performance criteria have contributed to "soft NGO evaluations" which offer few lessons for the larger academic and professional communities. Together, these three issues help explain the proliferation of unsubstantiated, complimentary claims of NGO performance in the literature and the perpetuation of the unwarranted belief that NGOs have a comparative advantage in promoting agricultural development.

⁵⁴Abugre (1994) notes that the failure of many micro-credit NGOs in Africa to integrate their services with traditional financial systems has "...undermined traditional financial systems" (p.158). Similarly, Robinson (1993) and Edwards and Hulme (1996a) suggest that persisting coordination problems between NGOs and government pose a threat to the political balances characterizing politically unstable environments. Besley (1997) shows how NGO interventions in a developing country might crowd out and eventually substitute for government services to the poor by provoking increased services to or reduced tax burdens for the nonpoor.

⁵⁵There have been similar experiences in Guinea (Peart, 1995) and Sudan (Tvedt, 1992). See also Bennett (1995); Farrington and Lewis, (1993); and Wiggins and Cromwell (1995).

Our review of the literature also reveals an emerging stream of critical thinkers questioning NGO performance. A growing number of commentators have pointed out a wide range of constraints on NGO performance and have raised the possibility that NGOs may in fact be *less* equipped to handle some of the complex tasks of agricultural development than national governments, the private-sector or public/private partnerships. These concerns have provoked increased attention to program monitoring among NGOs, giving rise to a growing number of workshops and detailed instructional guides for assessing and improving effectiveness (e.g. Gosling and Edwards (1996) and Fowler (1997)). However, as long as there remains a lack of empirical evidence to document NGO impacts, the growing undercurrent of criticism of NGOs and their impacts will remain confined to anecdotes and the polemicists of broad theoretical disputes.

The failure to generate empirical evidence of NGO performance imposes four major costs. First, the lack of comparative studies limits the ongoing debate over the optimal roles for government, the private-sector and the NGO-sector in agricultural development. Without quantitative evidence, the ideological agendas that permeate this debate gain new currency, earning NGO-enthusiasts an audience at the highest levels of policy-making. Second, there is a glaring lack of information regarding the full direct and indirect costs and benefits of NGOs engaged in agricultural development. We are not aware of any published studies which rigorously evaluate the cost-effectiveness of NGO services in agricultural development in Africa. Nor are we aware of any published studies comparing the performance of NGOs, private-sector firms and/or public-sector entities in providing farmer support services in Africa. Without this information, there can be little indication of the full costs of NGO interventions in promoting agricultural development in Africa. Third, the aggregate effects of NGO activities on local markets and regional growth in a given country remains unclear. Fourth, there is little indication of the opportunity costs to investments in the NGO sector. For example, would donor funds invested in public rural roads or research have a higher return to society than investing in NGO extension projects? In the zero-sum environment of foreign-assistance, increasing allocations to the NGO-sector implies reduced allocations to rural roads, irrigation, faculties of agriculture and national agricultural research systems. The extent of these four costs will remain unknown as long as the literature fails to provide a convincing specification of NGO contributions to agricultural development. Identifying optimal roles for foreign-financed NGOs in Africa demands a detailed look at the short- and long-run benefits and costs of NGO activities and the changing roles of the public, private and NGO sectors over time. Many of the benefits of NGO activities have been well-documented in the case-studies referenced above. However, a systematic approach to research on NGOs is necessary to document the full extent of NGO impacts on agricultural development. This process

should begin by developing a typology of NGOs. Besides categorizing different NGOs, an organizational typology might also reveal the uniqueness of NGOs relative to private firms and government agencies. Defining the characteristics of NGO activities might identify a unique set of institutions which exist among NGOs. Most researchers contend that NGO institutions distinguish these organizations from public- and private-sector entities, comprising a third-sector. However, recent writers have illustrated how NGOs perform like private firms or public agencies in different contexts (e.g. Howard and Strasberg (1997), Meyer (1995) and Tendler and Amorim (1996)). Identifying NGO institutions might indicate the constraints and opportunity-sets facing NGOs and determining their technical capacities and intervention in rural markets. Identifying these constraints and opportunity-sets might in turn point to appropriate performance criteria which better evaluate the impacts of NGOs in agricultural development.

What are the costs and benefits of NGOs and other types of organizations in promoting agricultural development in Africa? The literature has not satisfactorily answered this crucial question because of the dearth of rigorous comparative studies. Yet most donors and government policy makers need to know the answer to this question before choosing among an array of public, private and non-governmental organizations. Understanding the performance of NGOs and their competitors could help identify the comparative advantage of NGOs in promoting agricultural development in Africa. This is a tall order and economists have a special role to play in asking questions, carrying out research and communicating their results to policy makers. Balisacan notes that:

Economists are accustomed to thinking about market failures and government failures in the context of policy design. Soon we may be adding a third type of failure to our vocabulary: NGO failures. But the fourth type--economists' failures--may not be far behind if we fail to inform public policy about what works and what does not in poverty alleviation (1997:137).

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