

## **EDITORIAL**

### **Understanding the Voluntary Sector**

Democracies, defined as governments of the people, by the people and for the people, have a mandate to reach out to all their constituents. However it is not possible for any government to know all its citizens or to understand their hopes, ambitions and problems.

A good democracy not only has a public and private sector but a flourishing third – the voluntary sector. The public sector is that portion of society controlled by national, state and local governments; the private one includes those who work to produce goods and provide services in order to make a profit and for whom making money is the motivation; the voluntary sector covers the area of social activity and aims to serve; it does not work for profit but instead tries to transform society in order to improve people's lives. Its motivation is the desire to cause changes for the better. In a successful democracy, the voluntary sector plays a vital role.

The public and private sectors are well-known and fairly visible but the voluntary sector is less so. It covers heterogeneous organisations of many kinds, such as non-profit, non-governmental, civil society, grass-roots, social movements and self-help.

Among them, the best known are probably non-governmental organisations or NGOs working for both international and local development, as well as disaster and humanitarian aid agencies. Many rely on overseas aid and voluntary donations but some generate funding in other ways such as selling handicrafts or charging for services.

Professor Peter Willets of City University, London, defines an NGO as "an independent voluntary association of people acting together on a continuous basis for some common purpose other than achieving government office, making money or illegal activities." NGOs may deliver services, organise campaigns, take up human rights or do some or all of these.

Not long after the creation of the UN in 1942, the acronym NGO came into common use. Approved NGOs were awarded observer status at UN assemblies and some meetings. Nowadays, the World Bank and other UN

bodies work with Civil Society Organisations worldwide, including NGOs such as trade unions, faith-based organisations, indigenous people's movements, foundations and many more.

The NGO branch at the UN Department of Economic Affairs awards consultative status to those NGOs that fulfil their eligibility requirements. This gives NGOs from all over the world the opportunity to take part in formal UN deliberations.

Voluntary organisations or VOs are similar to NGOs but only work for the benefit of non-members. VOs traditionally deliver services to the most deprived and underprivileged sections of society. They often hold governments to account but also co-operate with them to implement programmes aimed at helping the poor and needy. Their philosophy is people-centred and pro-poor.

Unlike governments, which tend to impose schemes on their people, VOs actively encourage people's participation; they are close to the community and much more aware of local needs, priorities and problems. They can help governments to identify the right beneficiaries for the effective implementation of plans. They are not bound by the red tape and bureaucracy of governments but are often innovative, flexible and dynamic. Their administrative costs are minimal and their workers are usually well trained and dedicated. They play an important role in checking unbalanced growth and fighting against injustices and the abuse of authority. They are better equipped to disseminate information and to evaluate and monitor programmes. They are an essential link between the people and their government and as such, they strengthen democracy.

VOs are usually initiated by individuals or groups of individuals and are self-governing. They decide their own constitution and system of governance without any external control. Membership is purely voluntary. They plan and implement their own policies and programmes using a combination of paid and voluntary workers. They may be non-political or politically oriented but never involved in party politics. They may sometimes make a profit but it is always invested in furthering their objectives and never distributed among the members. Their style of functioning is less

formal. They have a managing committee, elected by members and often mobilise some of their resources from local sources. They acquire legal status when they register under the appropriate Act.

India has the largest number of VOs in the world. Many of them are registered under the Societies Registration Act of 1860 which was imposed by the British government at the time of the Raj in order to keep a close watch on voluntary activities. In 1984, the Congress government, under Indira Gandhi, amended the act to make it more stringent and introduced the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act which controls all foreign funds received by voluntary organisations.

On the other hand, the Seventh Five-Year Plan (1985-90) actively involved VOs in the implementation of the government's developmental programmes and recognised that VOs could be the ears and eyes of the people at village level and reach a larger population group with greater community participation.

In 2011, the Congress-led government brought in yet more restrictions on VOs while at the same time making it easier for foreign investors to make money in India. Foreign investors are not required to renew their registration either under the Foreign Exchange Management Act or under the Company Act while VOs must regularly renew their registration under both the Societies Registration Act and the Foreign Contributions Regulation Act.

In the last ten years, the government's attitude to VOs has changed as a result of working side by side with them in implementing development programmes. VOs are more efficient and cost-effective and their staff tend to be dedicated, honest and people-friendly. This is in stark contrast to government staff who are often autocratic, unsympathetic, corrupt and completely alienated from the people they are supposed to serve. Thus VOs unwittingly highlight the inadequacies of government programmes and staff.

In well-run, successful democracies, the work of voluntary organisations is highly appreciated and encouraged and governments support them as much as possible. In India, however, the reverse seems to be happening. When voluntary organisations make a complaint or

allegation against a government department or officer, it is usually ignored. No investigation is carried out despite ample evidence to back up the complaint. There seems to be a general unwillingness to face up to the weaknesses, corruption and inadequacies of some of the government's departments, policies and programmes.

For example, nearly all India's rivers are polluted. There is a large government agency – the Central and State Pollution Control Board – which is manned by qualified, well paid staff whose job it is to monitor and restrict water pollution. However, there is no visible effect of any work they may have done and in fact, the rivers are becoming more and more polluted. Many VOs, working to clean the rivers and reduce water pollution, have complained that this board is not doing its job but there have been no reports of any action taken against its staff.

Matters are no better in the field of primary education. There have been numerous, well documented reports that show the dire state of government primary schools, particularly in rural areas. Teachers are often absent, always late, do very little teaching, wander in and out at will, don't hold assemblies and falsify the number of students on the register. VOs have lodged many complaints about this state of affairs but nothing has been done and not a single government teacher has been sacked.

Another area that VOs are investigating is the use of black money during national, state and local elections. They have published research and produced evidence but so far no decisive action has been taken.

This can only weaken India's democracy. Serious issues like pollution, primary education and corruption cannot be swept under the carpet. The government must become responsive and transparent otherwise the largest democracy in the world will slowly deteriorate.

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