

International NGOs in Africa: the politics of democracy without votes

Written by Robert Pinkney

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ROBERT PINKNEY, OCT 18 2008

The growing presence of international NGOs (INGOs) in Africa is both a manifestation of, and a major reinforcement for, a political process which is neither democratic in the traditional sense nor authoritarian. Voting takes place, but most governments use the advantages of incumbency to ensure their regular re-election. Opposition parties with little prospect of victory have limited scope for demanding changes in governmental behaviour or policy. NGOs, in contrast, are less easily ignored. They have been indispensable in plugging gaps in service provision, and in attracting donor funds, and have built up a formidable body of expertise in their chosen fields.

The fact that African NGOs enjoy growing support from INGOs is largely fortuitous. INGOs based in the West gathered a momentum of their own, strengthened by the rise of 'post-material values' and especially concern with 'global justice'. Such concern has probably grown with perceptions that free market policies, the debt burden and threats to the environment have worsened Africa's plight. African NGOs need the financial and moral support of like-minded INGOs, and INGOs need African 'partners'. These can provide chapter and verse on the impact of global forces on the ground, and can present their demands as representing the voice of Africa rather than mere foreign meddling. To take two random examples, the Wildlife Society of Tanzania has combined with the British-based RSPB to oppose the construction of a soda-ash factory by Lake Natron that might destroy the flamingo population, and in Uganda the Sustainable Agriculture Trainers' Network worked with Oxfam in opposition to the Ugandan government's proposed economic partnership agreement with the EU.

What are the dynamics of INGO involvement in Africa, and how can we characterise the political system that has emerged as a result of their involvement? While African governments are likely to welcome the provision of aid by INGOs in money or in kind, they are less likely to accept them as actors within the national political process. Indeed even indigenous NGOs can be treated with suspicion, as interlopers representing only a handful of citizens, and often dominated by a few top officials. Like INGOs, they are generally required to register their existence, and can be denied registration if they are regarded as improperly constituted, fraudulent or acting as a front for opposition parties or foreign governments. Any participation in the political process is therefore something that has to be earned rather than enjoyed as of right.

Different INGOs have different perceptions of their right to participate in African politics. If they are fronts for foreign governments or businesses they will have few inhibitions, and will follow whatever strategies are likely to be most rewarding, regardless of the sensibilities of African governments or citizens. Similarly if they are driven by moral certainty about their cause. Groups that want to advance free market fundamentalism, pre-marital chastity or the conservation of wildlife at the expense of humans, regardless of African opinion or culture, will use whatever means are most likely to achieve the desired end. This may include gaining the ear of key politicians or business people, or making implicit threats of lost resources if their wishes are not granted. But such INGOs are almost certainly outnumbered by INGOs that see 'development' as something that must reflect the wishes of the indigenous population, even if their rhetoric on 'participation' or 'empowerment' is sometimes overdone. For these groups, working through African NGOs and civil society is the preferred route to political influence, with lobbying African governments employed only as a last resort. Political practicality and moral rectitude tend to merge. Seeking a consensus with African civil society maintains the objective of being an enabler rather than a peddler of alien

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interests or dogma, and it also helps INGOs to avoid the wrath of African governments which more direct and visible pressures might bring.

All this leaves us with a political process which is probably unique in human history. History provides ample examples of democracy, authoritarianism and imperialism; political science tells us that political outcomes normally depend on such resources as constitutional power, money, coercion and popular pressure. Yet authoritarianism in African politics has generally been superseded by a form of politics in which incumbent governments are strong enough to ensure their own re-election by fair means or foul, but not strong enough to suppress civil society. Coercion, money and patronage certainly determine many political outcomes, but there is a growing area in which it is persuasion rather than power that is the key ingredient. Why should this be? On the one hand, governments now have shakier power bases as the forces of globalisation and dependency weaken their capacity to reward their friends and punish their foes. On the other, NGOs have probably evolved more effectively than political parties, traditional pressure groups and mass movements to cope with a more fragmented political order. These institutions relied on loyal followers and on such sanctions as votes, strikes, non-co-operation and even violence, none of which is so effective today. NGOs, in contrast, rely more on the value of their expertise, pragmatism and a willingness to work and compromise both with like-minded groups and with apparent enemies. Persuasion comes into play when NGOs seize the moral high ground and challenge policies which are unpopular, or are widely regarded as immoral or illegitimate. In this way, threatened forests have been reprieved, environmentally harmful projects have been shelved, and shady deals with foreign governments and businesses have been exposed. Countless administrative actions, perverted by corruption or incompetence, have been challenged, with NGOs often mobilising the wider civil society to demand redress, whether it is over the misuse of funds allocated to schools in Tanzania or the disbursement of funds saved from debt relief in Uganda.

INGOs are often an invisible presence when African NGOs confront their political masters. For reasons we have explained, they generally prefer not to get involved directly, but they provide moral, financial and logistical support for African NGOs, and African governments can hardly be ignorant of their preferences. These governments face a dilemma. The nature of African politics often requires them to satisfy the wishes of indigenous and foreign businesses and senior party officials in order to obtain the necessary resources to remain in power. It may also require them to keep the lid on opposition and dissent by tampering with human rights when necessary. But the need to keep foreign aid flowing, and to maintain respectability in the international community requires an appearance of respect for democracy and the rule of law. What has emerged has been a system in which continued neo-patrimonialism exists alongside 'democracy without votes'. The formality of voting in elections survives, but much of the influence on governments comes from NGOs and civil society. This may be regarded as 'democratic' in the sense that NGOs are representing sections of society that would otherwise have no voice, and stimulating more informed public debate.

Is 'democracy without votes' a sustainable form of politics? For INGOs there is the ever-present question of what right they have to 'interfere', which may be asked not only by African governments but by foreign businesses negotiating contracts for projects which INGOs oppose on the grounds of damage to local communities or the environment. While INGOs have achieved significant victories when their 'partner' African NGOs have been able to mobilise the relevant sections of the public, the power of persuasion is more often dwarfed by the powers of money or formal authority.

Another major problem is that the effectiveness of 'democracy without votes' depends partly on how far it is reinforced by 'democracy with votes'. If there is at least a possibility of the government losing office, or even of some of its MPs losing their seats, there is some incentive for the government to make concessions to INGO-supported demands, especially where these have widespread public support. On clearly visible issues, such as the threat to destroy a large section of Mabira Forest in Uganda, or the allegedly corrupt diversion of funds away from local communities in Tanzania, notable victories have been achieved, but success in 'high politics' is more difficult to achieve. Oxfam's collaboration with Ugandan NGOs to oppose the government's proposed economic partnership with the EU could not generate comparable public indignation, and neither could campaigns against illegal timber exports in Tanzania. In these cases the issues did not impinge so obviously on individual communities, and governments could brush criticism aside. The politics of persuasion has made substantial progress, but it works

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better with the existence, or at least the fear, of sharper weapons in the background.

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