

African NGOs seek to build their capacities

African non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are urging donors to channel more of their assistance to the continent through indigenous groups, **reports Nick Cater from Addis Ababa**. Representatives of hundreds of African NGOs, meeting in the Ethiopian capital at the end of 2004, called for at least 25 per cent of humanitarian aid to Africa to be channelled through local NGOs.

According to a researcher for Development Initiatives, a UK-based institute, between a quarter and a half of bilateral and UN aid now goes to Northern NGOs working in Africa, while only "tiny amounts" are directed through indigenous groups. At current aid levels, he estimates, adoption of the 25 per cent target would make available almost \$700 mn.

The African NGOs also recommended that at least 10 per cent of the grants they receive go to "overhead," that is, personnel and other operating costs. Some donor agencies now allow only 5 per cent. NGO leaders warn that because of this restriction, grants often barely cover the cost of operational tasks in emergencies, leaving little for future investments or to meet essential organizational needs, from training to computing.

Dr. Dawit Zawde, president of Africa Humanitarian Action, which is active in more than a dozen countries and co-sponsored the meeting with the African Union, says that donors expect a lot from African NGOs, yet do not seem to trust them with sufficient resources. "Africa has long been depicted as a hopeless zone of conflict, famine and displacement that lacks capacity to respond adequately to crisis," he notes. "This perception supports an aid paradigm that marginalizes and erodes local capacity, casting African actors as sub-contractors to their international counterparts."

The African NGOs decided to launch a think-tank and research unit, the Centre for Humanitarian Action, to help groups improve their efficiency and find additional resources, including from aid, service fees and contributions from the African diaspora.

Part of the campaign's inspiration has come from the recent capacity-building efforts of the African Union, New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and UN Economic Commission for Africa, explains Dr. Dawit. "Strong indigenous organizations are essential for an effective humanitarian response in Africa. Empowerment of African NGOs is, therefore, a critical goal, especially given the new vision of Africa's regeneration, in which Africa takes the lead in defining its problems and finding solutions."