

Civil society engages African plan

Despite criticisms, more grassroots groups want to work with NEPAD

By Ernest Harsch

In the Southern African country of Malawi, most local civil society organizations were initially very critical of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Activists objected that the continental development plan was "top-down," having been drafted by a handful of presidents and then adopted by African leaders, without public consultation, in 2001. They complained that its accent on promoting foreign investment and trade ignored the constraints facing especially poor countries such as Malawi.

After some reflection, however, more than 70 such groups formed a coalition known as the Malawi Economic Justice Network (MEJN), which welcomed NEPAD "as a landmark in the process of shared aspirations for African unity." According to one of its leading spokesmen, Mr. Dalitso Kingsley Kubalasa, the network still has reservations about the plan, but also "remains hopeful that a genuine NEPAD" can help Africans reduce poverty, achieve gender equity and attain global economic viability. Rather than "giving up on NEPAD because the process hasn't been ideal," he says, Malawian civil society organizations have decided instead to put forward their own suggestions for advancing NEPAD, "to make it really work."

The situation in Malawi is not unique. In South Africa, Nigeria and Senegal — whose presidents have been among NEPAD's foremost advocates — hardly a month goes by without some major public gathering designed to mobilize local support for it. In Ethiopia a consortium of civil society groups has been formed to monitor the plan's implementation and progress. In Algeria, a coalition of 19 groups has initiated a programme to popularize NEPAD at literacy centres and among students and grassroots organizations.

"Overall," notes a study released in June by the UN's Office of the Special Adviser on Africa (OSAA), "there is evidence of growing efforts to involve or consult with civil society organizations and the private sector in implementing NEPAD." It adds, however, that "the nature and scope of this involvement vary greatly."

Scepticism and faultfinding

Although NEPAD is already more than three years old, it is still not well known or understood in many parts of Africa. Some leaders go to continental or regional meetings on NEPAD, but then fail to speak

about it to their own citizens once they return home. Few African parliaments have discussed the plan in any detail.

One study commissioned by OSAA on women's organizations and NEPAD found that in Cameroon "dialogue barely

existed" between civil society groups and the government. A survey in South Africa found that 17 per cent of all respondents had never heard of NEPAD and that another 15 per cent believed it would not change their lives, even if it were implemented. Ms. Grace Akumu, executive director of the non-

governmental Climate Network Africa, notes that while NEPAD is sometimes discussed in Kenya's capital, "not very many NEPAD activities have taken place outside Nairobi, in the rural areas."

The limited public knowledge of NEPAD, combined with the initial lack of official consultation with civil society and private sector groups, contributed to the plan's critical reception by grassroots activists. Many continue to find fault with what they consider its shortcomings.

Mr. Oduor Ong'wen of the Kenyan group EcoNews Africa notes that NEPAD embraces the poverty-reduction and other targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), while at the same time urging Africa's greater integration into the world economy through expanded trade and foreign investment. He believes that NEPAD's promoters are too optimistic about the benefits of globalization and worries that policies of economic liberalization will further hamper achievement of the MDGs.

In an article published in February 2004, Mr. Tajudeen Abdul Raheem of the Uganda-based Pan African Movement and Mr. Alex de Waal of the London-based Justice Africa argued: "NEPAD needs popular debate. Some of the core ideas are sound, though having fallen into the hands of the bureaucrats they have had any

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Civil society groups want a voice in NEPAD's implementation, insisting that it not be left to governments alone.



originality systematically bleached out." In particular, they fear, some of the governments promoting the plan are beginning to focus too much on securing donor aid for projects. "NEPAD is not an implementing agency. If it were to become so, it would be a competitor to existing ministries and departments and would rightly be shunned." The New Partnership, they insist, should instead focus primarily on "the big policy issues" such as trade, debt relief, HIV/AIDS and the quality of aid.

Some seem to reject NEPAD's basic orientation. According to Mr. Khabele Matlosa of the SAPES Trust, a Zimbabwe-based educational and research organization, the policies reflected in the New Partnership are essentially "neo-liberal and dependent."

'We need to be realistic'

Increasingly, however, other groups and activists are starting to see NEPAD not so much as a flawed plan of a few presidents, but as an opportunity that could be seized to advance Africa's development priorities. After all, most civil society groups agree with the plan's stated commitments to advance democracy, entrench human rights, improve education and health services, strengthen productive capacities and achieve regional integration.

African civil society, argues Ms. Akumu of Kenya's Climate Network Africa, should identify the positive aspects of NEPAD, "because if all we see is negatives . . . then what is the point of getting engaged in it?" The positive elements, she believes, include the political will of leading African statesmen "to do something for the development of Africa," as well as their commitment to good governance, peace, democracy and respect for human rights. She adds that working through NEPAD does not prevent grassroots organizations from criticizing its shortcomings. In fact, "we mention them so that we can strategize to better overcome them."

South African Member of Parliament Ben Turok, who urges greater cooperation between civil society and parliamentarians on NEPAD, notes that most African governments remain very weak. Grass-roots activists therefore should not expect rapid implementation. "These are early

Traditional chiefs in Ghana: There and in several other countries, chiefs are offering to mobilize rural support for NEPAD.



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days and the path we intend to follow is difficult. Thus we need to be realistic about these matters."

At a national civil society forum on NEPAD in Nairobi, Kenya, in October 2003, the several dozen participating groups drew a number of general conclusions. The first was: "NEPAD is an important idea whose time has come and we must keep up with it." The groups also pledged to undertake their own NEPAD activities and to "make enough noise" that the government will hear them.

Democracy and the state

From the outset, a number of groups saw NEPAD's insistence on democracy, respect for human rights, peace and good governance as one of its most innovative features. Previous African development plans, they noted, virtually ignored the political underpinnings for economic and social progress.

In May 2003, the Electoral Institute of South Africa (EISA) convened a conference on "strengthening democracy through NEPAD," with a focus on how civil society in particular can help that process. Speakers highlighted the importance of strengthening Africa's electoral systems, which remain weak in much of the continent.

Participants also drew attention to the unique role of the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), a NEPAD initiative in which participating countries agree

voluntarily to submit their governance performance to review by other Africans. Mr. Chris Landsberg, director of South Africa's Centre for Policy Studies, warned against "false expectations" of what the APRM will be able to achieve, since it does not have any punitive authority over countries with poor governance standards. Its value, he said, is as a "socializing tool" to popularize and encourage the spread of good governance practices.

Above all, agreed the academics and activists at the EISA conference, civil society organizations have a vital role in strengthening democracy and human rights in Africa and in holding the continent's leadership accountable, not only for its political practices but also for its management of Africa's financial resources. By making governments more transparent and responsive to their citizens, some participants pointed out, civil society groups do not aim to weaken the state, but to strengthen its capacity to carry out essential public functions.

Mr. Kubalasa of the MEJN coalition in Malawi makes a similar point. NEPAD's economic policy framework, he says, "should be facilitated by a strong and inclusive developmental state, which engages various levels of society."

In some countries, traditional chiefs are coming forward to offer their assistance in helping to promote developmental efforts in Africa's countryside, where the central state is often especially weak. "If NEPAD