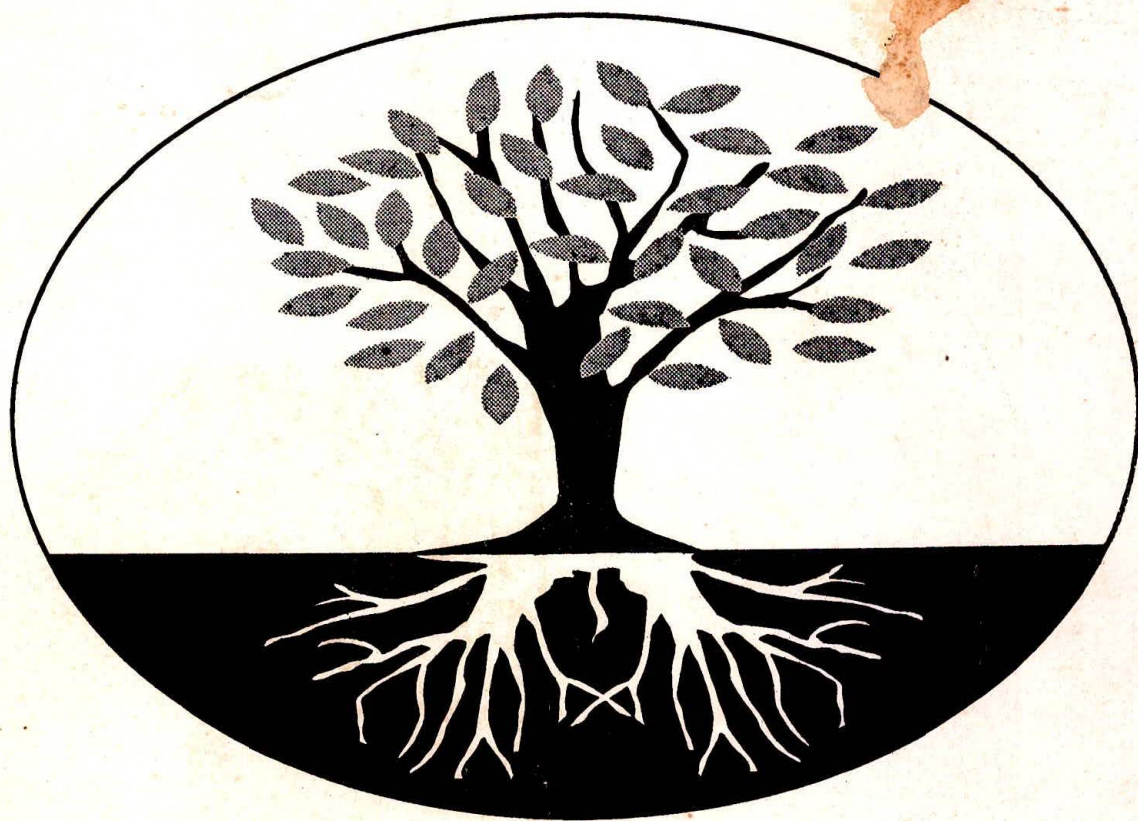


STRENGTHENING THE GRASS-ROOTS



NATURE AND ROLE
OF
SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS

STRENGTHENING
THE GRASS-ROOTS

PREFACE

In relating with several other NGOs in different Asian countries, we began to see certain patterns and issues common to the work of Support Organisations. Yet, we found that very little is known about Support Organisations and challenges and dilemmas they face.

It was with this in mind that the three sponsoring organisations came together to convene a consultation on the nature and roles of Support Organisations in Asia. The Asian NGO Coalition (ANGOC) is an Asia-wide network of NGOs working on rural and sustainable development. The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) has been promoting the philosophy and practice of participatory research by providing educational support to grass-roots NGOs.

The Institute for Development Research (IDR) is a U.S. based non-profit research and training NGO working towards strengthening the capacities of support organisations in countries of the south. In collaboration, PRIA-IDR-ANGOC have initiated a programme to strengthen the capacities of Support Organisations active in Asian countries. This seminar was the first Asian regional consultation of this programme.

We are grateful to Ford Foundation, CIDA and PACT for their support to this seminar.

This report has been prepared by L. Dave Brown and Rajesh Tandon. It is an attempt to summarise key issues, trends and patterns. It is being published and distributed with a view to generate further debate and reflection on the nature and role of Support Organisations in different regions of the world. We hope that it will also serve the broader purpose of strengthening the grass-roots.

October 1990

CONTEXT

The last two decades have seen a dramatic increase in the visibility as well as the contribution of non-governmental voluntary development organisations in many countries of the world. This growth in the visibility, size and contribution of organisations generally characterised as voluntary development organisations (or NGOs) has been possible because of a variety of demands arising from the development process in our countries. As models of development proposed by capitalist and socialist theories began to crumble, as theories of macro-economics and positivism led to continued perpetuation of the statusquo, and as the plight of the poor and the marginalised in many of our countries of the South and the North continued to worsen, non-governmental organisations in different parts of the world began to play an increasingly important role in experimenting with development models, approaches and principles. Many of these experiments led to changes in government policies at the national level, changes in the policies of multi-lateral and bilateral institutions at the international level.

Most non-governmental organisations engaged in the promotion of development initiatives work at the grass-roots level. They work directly with the poor, marginalised sections of the population — the women, the children, the tribals, the landless, the slum-dwellers. Their work entails a range of services — education, health, drinking water, irrigation, appropriate technology. It also includes education, organisation and conscientisation of the poor such that they could play a more active role in defining and working towards their own development. As

the arena of development in many of our countries began to get more complex in the late 70s and 80s, new types of voluntary organisations also began to emerge. These have come to be known as **Support Organisations**.

These are the organisations which do not necessarily work at the grass-roots level alone, directly with the poor and marginalised. These organisations support other grass-roots NGOs in a variety of ways through research, training, documentation, advocacy, networking, and so on.

While the growth of such organisations has been a relatively new phenomenon in many Asian countries, there have been some organisations of this kind for quite some time. Yet, in recent years, the nature and role of such organisations continued to be confused and undefined and somewhat enigmatic. It is to review this that a consultation of leaders from support organisations from several countries of Asia was convened in Delhi during March 1990. The consultation brought together a wide range of experiences and views with respect to the nature and roles of support organisations, the problems and challenges they face, and the kinds of directions they need to be pursuing in the coming period. It also provided an opportunity to explore the meaning of support and support organisations, their relevance and contribution and their potential in strengthening the growth of voluntary initiatives in our countries in the future.

This report is an attempt to summarise the various ideas shared, debated and analysed during this consultation and to present the

wide range of meanings, strategies, challenges, possibilities that were mentioned, articulated and debated. The reflection during the consultation was rich and multifaceted and this report presents only some of the opinions voiced. It is not an attempt to present details of case-studies

and illustrations from different countries but to highlight the characteristics and the strategies, of Support Organisations which could provoke further discussion, reflection and understanding on this complex and emerging phenomenon in the future.

MEANING OF SUPPORT ORGANISATION

One of the more interesting issues debated during the consultations was what do we mean by support organisation? What kind of support do such organisations provide and to whom is that support provided? Clearly, support organisations in the voluntary development sector of our countries provide a wide variety of support activities — research, training, technical assistance, information sharing, advocacy, networking, etc. And this support is rendered to other grass-roots development NGOs, peoples' organisations or other groups and individuals engaged in promoting voluntary development initiatives within our countries. In this sense, support organisations provide a specialised function for those engaged in voluntary development initiatives in our countries.

Debate in the consultation focused on the distinction being made between a support organisation and a service organisation. While activities like research, training, technical assistance etc. could well be construed as services offered by an organisation, those services could well be rendered in a commercial consultant mode. The provider of such services treats recipients as its clients and the relationship is negotiated around scope, outcomes and finances. There was a general consensus that the kind of support organisations we have in mind are different in significant ways from mere service providers, service organisations or specialised technical resource organisation. Support organisations are part of the broader movement of voluntary development NGOs in a given context, country or region; they have a world-view of their own; they have a vision of a new society and they share some of the philosophical and ideological underpinnings

which guide the voluntary development NGO movement in many of our countries and the region. They are inspired by a vision of social change and it is within this vision that they see a role for support functions. Therefore, the manner in which they carry out the support function, the relationships they build with the recipients of that support is consistent with this broader framework and vision of social change and its philosophical underpinnings. Thus support organisations are not mere service-providers; they are partners in the broader movement of social change. They have philosophical principles and futuristic aspirations similar to those to whom they provide this support.

This does not mean that support organisations do not offer competent services. They are meant to provide certain types of support services on a professional and competent basis. This professionalisation of the support function need not necessarily imply commercialisation of their perspective and approach. This distinction is critical in understanding the nature of support organisations that are being discussed in this report.

TYPES OF SUPPORT

Support organisations seem to be offering several critical types of support activities which were shared and analysed during the seminar. The emphasis, the priority and the history of these support activities may vary in different countries of the region, and it may vary over a period of time on the whole. The following eight types of support functions seem to be the dominant ones provided by support organisations - information-sharing and dissemination; documentation, research and evaluation; technical assistance; training

and human resource development; organisational capacity building; networking among NGOs; linkages to donors and government agencies; and policy advocacy and influence.

One of the most common types of support functions and perhaps the most wide-spread is **information sharing and dissemination**. Support organisations undertaking an information sharing and dissemination role regularly collect and distribute information about successes and failures, opportunities and threats, programmes and schemes, legislations and policies that have a bearing on the work of other NGOs and development initiatives within a country or a region. Some of these functions are carried out within a limited geographical or linguistic region, some are carried out all over the country, in Asia and even Internationally. The importance of this function is related to the fact that many grass-roots development initiatives lack a regular in-flow of information regarding the issues on which they are working, similar experiences of others and the macro context in which their work could be understood (Box 1).

Access to authentic, relevant and useful information in a form and manner useable by such grass-roots NGOs is extremely restricted partly because of the manner in which information is used as a source of power and

control and regularly withheld or disseminated in distorted forms. It is also partly so because formal and dominant media are controlled by the ruling elite, are terribly expensive and logistically inaccessible to those working in remote, diverse and poor communities. Newspapers, television and radio are forms of communication which either do not tell the whole story or the relevant story or are just inaccessible. Bringing out newsletters on other written and audio-visual means for disseminating information, experiences and ideas thus becomes a critical function of support organisations. Such support organisations also develop capacities to acquire, store, analyse, document, publish and disseminate information in a form that is understandable and usable by grass-roots activists. Such capacities rely increasingly on access to new technology, though many support organisations still find it difficult to use it fully.

Sharing experiences across nations and regions among like-minded NGO communities has become a crucial requirement in order to advance our collective efforts towards social transformation as the world has become increasingly internationalised and inter linked.

The second major function of support organisations is in the area of **research and evaluation**. Much of the research being conducted presently serves the interests of perpetuating the status-quo. Both the

Information Sharing and Dissemination in the Asia Region

The Asian NGO Coalition for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ANGOC) is a network of national NGOs and NGO networks throughout the Asian Region. In its information sharing role, ANGOC publishes newsletters and a journal for the NGO community. It also regularly publishes proceedings from conferences on critical issues. In 1988, for example, ANGOC coordinated a conference on Strategic Management of NGOs, and published the resulting cases and analyses so that other NGOs could build on experiences discussed there. In 1989, ANGOC coordinated conferences on people's participation in sustainable development. It is actively engaged in disseminating information about emerging experiences with sustainable development activities. ANGOC is also documenting cases of NGO efforts to influence national and international policies relevant to sustainable development.

Box 1

knowledge and experience of people at the base of the poor and the have-nots, and their own capacities to create, articulate and use their knowledge have been extremely restricted. It is within this context that field workers and leaders of grass-roots NGOs need to acquire the confidence and competence to utilise their own research, reflection and analytical capacities to work on their issues and concerns directly related to them. Use of such capacities in dealing with the problems of poverty and marginalization from the perspective of the poor themselves with active involvement of the poor and those working with them is the dominant contribution of support organisations. Some support organisations also engage in alternative research initiatives to bring out the basic dynamics of marginalisation and exploitation in our societies — issues which otherwise do not get the visibility that dominant knowledge production and academic enterprise also. (Box 2).

Similarly evaluation of grass-roots experiences and the work of people's initiatives and voluntary organisations is a regular contribution of support organisations with such functions. The perspective towards evaluation is one of strengthening the

capacities of reflection and analysis on an ongoing basis within such grass-roots initiatives, instead of a one-time intervention from the outside. Participatory Research and evaluation are contributions evolved through the work of support organisations in this framework and perspective.

A **third** role for Support Organisations is to provide **technical assistance** of various kinds. In some cases, such as with the centre for Development Cooperation (CFDC) in Sri Lanka, technical assistance may include basic administrative services and equipment that supports NGOs which do not have secretarial, photocopying, and other document preparation capacities. Others may provide much more specialized forms of technical assistance (see Box 3). Technical support is increasingly necessary as NGOs seek to solve such poverty problems as deforestation, income generation, watershed management etc. While individual NGOs seldom have the resources to hire the kinds of professional expertise needed for such problem - solving, centers that serve a wide range of NGOs can provide technical expertise and innovations vital to those dealing with complex problems or those articulating technical alternatives which are

Research and Evaluation in Thailand, Pakistan and India.

The Rural Reconstruction Alumni and Friends Associate (RRAFA) works closely with grass-roots NGOs in Thailand to develop systematic research on problems of poor villagers. They have developed participatory strategies for getting previously unavailable data on issues like rural indebtedness. They are also developing ways to present their research to policy makers so that national decisions can be based on good information about the realities at the grass-roots.

ASR (Association for Social Research) in Pakistan is a centre for research and documentation on issues of progressive social transformation. It works with womens' groups, other voluntary agencies, trade unions etc. to promote research and documentation.

PRIA (Society for Participatory Research in Asia), New Delhi promotes grass-roots research by activists and NGOs on issues related to poor peoples' access to and control over Natural Resources. It also engages in Participatory Evaluation exercises with other grass-roots NGOs and development initiatives.

Box 2

Technical Assistance in India and Pakistan

Action for Food Production (AFPRO) is a technical assistance organization in India with specialization in livestock, agriculture, water and alternative energy. It was initially focused primarily on food projects, but it has expanded to a wide range of appropriate technologies. Recently, for example, it has played a key role in the development and dissemination of small biogas plants that can serve families and village groups in rural settings.

The Orangi Pilot Project (OPP) in Karachi, Pakistan is a successful experiment in urban rehabilitation that now offers technical assistance in areas like low-cost sanitation systems and low-cost housing construction. They are developing several programmes that will constitute an integrated model for upgrading the physical, social and economic conditions of low income settlements.

Box 3

more appropriate to the concerns of poor people. Areas on which technical assistance is sought include health, income-generation, reforestation, alternative energy, appropriate rural technology etc.

The **fourth**, another widespread role of support organisations is **training**. In recent years, training has become almost a fashion. Training has undoubtedly become more important as the work of voluntary development organisations becomes more widespread and complex. Staff and field workers need to be trained in a wide variety of new skills, competencies and perspectives. Orientation to development and the vision of a new society are also areas for reflection and learning for the people working in voluntary organisations. A new area of work that has gained importance in recent years is self-development or human resource development. Personal growth of leaders and

workers in voluntary organisations has become critical as many of them experience the phenomena of stress, burn-out and individual dejection and cynicism (Box 4).

Similarly, many voluntary development NGOs are engaged in a wide variety of training interventions with the poor and deprived sections of the population with whom they work. Yet, their own staff have very little training in how to design, prepare and conduct training interventions. Thus training as a learning and educational intervention is not fully conceptualised or developed in the work of many voluntary development organisations. It is in this context that some interventions of the Training of Trainers variety have also been carried out in different countries of Asia by support organisations. This has helped to conceptualise the broader and central meaning of training as an educational

Training and Human Resource Development in Bangladesh

Technical Assistance for Rural Development (TARD) provides training and advisory support to a variety of national and international NGOs working on rural development projects in Bangladesh. It has developed a training approach that focuses on the experiences and perceived problems of trainees rather than curriculums designed by trainers, and focusses on developing the capacity of NGO staffs to solve the problems they identify.

Box 4

Organisational Capacity-Building in India

The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) developed a number of successful training programmes, but increasingly found that their NGO partners wanted support in developing the capacity of the organisation as well as its staff members. Over the last several years PRIA has developed programmes in Organisational Mission, Strategy and Structure that help NGO teams plan for the future. PRIA follow-up consultations help these NGOs develop and implement new strategies and organisational arrangements to fit changing conditions and organisational capacities.

Box 5

learning process for the poor and the marginalised.

Support Organisations that begin with human resource development sometimes move on to provide support for **organisational capacity building**. For NGOs involved in rapid growth or operations in a rapidly changing political and economic environment, thinking through missions, strategies, organisational alternatives, and leadership development challenges may require support beyond that available in training programmes. Increasingly Support Organisations are experimenting with leadership development workshops, organisations and strategy consultations, and other approaches to building the capacities of organisations as well as of their people (see Box 5). This role requires increased competence on matters of strategy and organisation as well as skills in participatory evaluation and consultation. Such support is increasingly necessary as NGOs and NGO sectors become larger, more complex, and undergo rapid change. The future sustainability and longevity of NGOs and the

NGO sector as a whole now requires such interventions as well.

As more development NGOs emerge to take on development activities in a country, the importance of the function of networking among NGOs becomes clearer. The existence of NGO **networks** facilitates many other support functions, such as the sharing of information or the identification of needed human resource development activities. More importantly, network organisations (and the discussions they enable) can help NGOs develop a shared understanding of national development problems and coordinated strategies for attacking those problems (see Box 6). NGO networks offer a way to develop both a perspectives on and an influence with other major constituencies, such as government agencies or large donors, that is difficult for single NGOs to obtain on their own. As Networks working on issues of common concern, Support Organisations tend to strengthen the voice of the poor and the marginalized on issues that affect them.

Networking among NGOs in Bangladesh

The Association of Development Agencies of Bangladesh (ADAB) is a national network of development NGOs. Among other activities, it has recently brought together many of the largest NGOs to develop a common analysis of development issues in Bangladesh. As a consequence of their shared analysis, network members agreed to experiment with alliances to support federations of landless people's organisations in several regions as an approach to building local political influence. This decision represents a substantial innovation for Bangladeshi NGOs, who in the past have often found themselves competing for scarce resources.

Box 6

Networks on women, drugs, environment etc. have become very active in many of our countries.

As many grass-roots and small NGOs continue to require resources and funds to carry out their programmes and activities, many support organisations have begun to play the role of a **linkage to donors**. Some support organisations provide information to grass-roots NGOs and help build their capacities to prepare proposals and other documents needed to get funds from donor agencies (Box 7).

Some other support organisations have also begun to act as reference for a set of donor agencies and their endorsement and review of a particular proposal brings funds to that NGO. Some support organisations have also acquired small amounts of funds to be distributed to small projects on behalf of a single or a consortium of donor agencies from the North. While the requirements for small and newer NGO initiatives in any of our countries for resources and funds continues to increase, support organisations playing "conduit" and funding roles have serious implications about their effectiveness.

Another critical role played by Support Organisations, and especially NGO, networks is to influence policy and advocacy with government and other agencies. It is increasingly clear to many NGOs that expanding and sustaining development impacts will require increased influence on

national and international policies. Advocacy activities demand competencies in policy research, access to and influence with decision makers, ability to educate and influence public opinion, and a variety of other capacities (see Box 8). These capacities are not common or even particularly appropriate for small rural NGOs, but the sector as a whole needs such resources if it is to play a major role in shaping government policy and behaviour. Many Support Organisations have begun to specialise in sector-specific (health, literacy, women, etc.) advocacy activities. Some Network agencies are also emerging to play advocacy roles on behalf of the entire sector of voluntary development NGOs.

The above eight roles are not necessarily exhaustive. Many of these roles are not played in isolation; several of these roles are combined by many support organisations. For example, the information dissemination and research and documentation roles many a times go hand-in-hand; the training and organisational development, evaluation and technical assistance functions are also often combined by a single support organisation. The important thing is to recognise that each of these roles has emerged out of specific requirements of grass-roots NGOs and other voluntary development initiatives in each of our countries. Equally important is the fact that these functions can serve those requirements within the broader framework of **support** that we have discussed earlier, and that each of these support functions requires

Donor Linkage in the Philippines

The Philippines Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (PHIIDHRRRA) is a network of 55 NGOs. Among other activities, PHIIDHRRRA has a resource accessing programme through which it links its NGO members to donor agencies that might support their projects. The programme also provides training and technical assistance to NGOs to ensure that programmes are properly implemented. It also provides monitoring, evaluation, and endorsement services to donors concerned with identifying appropriate NGO partners.

Box 7

Advocacy with Policy-Makers in Indonesia and Thailand

The Indonesian Consumers Organisation (YLKI) has focuse many of its resources on increasing consumer awareness through education and distribution of information, and on advocacy activities on behalf of poor consumers, especially in urban areas. In the last 15 years, they have achieved a number of changes in government policies, good access to the public media, growth in regional consumers' groups, and some improvements in public services.

The Thai Development Support Committee (TDSC) disseminates information on development problems and work to local and overseas populations and coordinates links to the media for Thai development NGOs. It publishes a newsletter and provides translation and writing support to clarify issues of development NGOs to larger publics that may exert influence over policy matters.

Box 8

specialised competencies and mechanisms within such support organisations. It is important to keep in mind that with the development of the initiatives, activities and the sector of voluntary development NGOs in our countries and region, many new functions and roles may also emerge in the future. The

key question is whether support organisations will continue to have the capacity to evolve, to play those emerging support functions, and to respond to the demands and requirements of grass-roots voluntary development NGOs in the future.

THE EVOLUTION OF SUPPORT ORGANISATIONS

The evolution of the roles and functions of Support Organisations, their characteristics and contributions within a country can only be understood in the context of the evolution of the voluntary development sector in that country or region. Voluntary development NGOs evolve in different ways in different countries. This evolution is itself a complex process and relates to a wide variety of parameters. The socio-political context of a given country or region places important opportunities and constraints on the growth of the voluntary development sector. The existence of dictatorships, emergencies, freedom struggles in liberation-wars provides room for the growth of a particular type of voluntary development initiative. The culture and values of a country or region also have significant influence; some cultures inspire charity and giving for others. The emergence of the leadership of voluntary development NGOs owes much to its own experience in socio-political movements, and students movements. Activism is a common platform from which the leadership of voluntary development NGOs emerges in many countries of Asia.

The economic situation and the continued dis-functionality of development policies and programmes in a given country create the historical context for the growth of voluntary development organisations. This is where continued impoverishment of the poor and the displacement of tribals due to initiatives of development policies and schemes create conditions for the rise of voluntary development initiatives. Historical crisis or catastrophies (like floods) or man-made disasters (like wars, partitions and displacements) also encourage voluntary

development initiatives in our countries. Particularly in the 70s and the 80s, voluntary development initiatives and NGOs came into being in response to the failure of the State to be the single most effective and important factor on the development scene. State policies, programmes and schemes related to development have failed to deliver the goods and this in itself has become the basis for the creation of alternative initiatives, experiments and NGO programmes.

TRENDS

The evolution of the voluntary sector is **grounded in the culture and values** of the country concerned. The values for which people will voluntarily invest time and energy and talent vary across cultures. In some countries the tradition of voluntary action for development has a long history. In India, for example, voluntary organisations have been at work for more than a hundred years. But there is also tremendous cultural and linguistic diversity in India. Thus some regions have many active NGOs and others have few or none. In other countries, such as Bangladesh, a homogeneous culture and high population densities make it possible to serve large groups with programmed services. This encourages the growth of very large NGOs rather than a wide range of small, locally-adapted NGOs which are common in more heterogeneous settings. This pattern is reflected in the growth of Support Organisations as well.

The **pace of growth** of NGOs in a country or region may affect the evolution of Support Organisations. Support Organisations in countries characterised by slow **growth** may

Sector Evolution and Support Organisation In India

In India social reform movements in the 1800s provided education, charity, welfare, relief and rehabilitation services to "backward groups." During the first half of the Twentieth Century the Freedom Movement mobilized voluntary energies in the service of self-reliance and independence. During the fifteen years following Independence much of the nation's voluntary energies were absorbed in nation-building, and many idealists went to work for government agencies.

In the 1960s disillusionment with the political system, a serious drought in Bihar, and the failure of government community development programmes led to more student activism and local organising with an emphasis on development rather than relief. The role of NGOs as development actors was increasingly recognised in the 1970s and the early 80s by the Government and by international agencies, and NGOs placed more emphasis on professionalism and special issue-oriented concerns. In the 1980s the Government sought more control over NGOs, especially those engaged in "political" organising.

Initial support functions for NGOs were undertaken by individuals experienced in the sector. They offered advice and counsel. In the last twenty years the government has sponsored Support Organisations to provide research, training, and information to the NGO community. More recently professional Support Organisations have emerged to offer information, training, advocacy, networking, and organisational capacity-building support to the sector. Those Support Organisations have included federations, self-mandated Support Organisations and support units of implementing NGOs.

Box 9

first take the form of "sages," who give wise counsel on the basis of many years of experience. India, for example, has many senior leaders willing to provide individual support to newcomers. As NGOs get larger and problems get more complicated, however, organisations with new kinds of technical expertise may be required. Many years of experience at the village level is not necessarily good preparation for the specialised demands of, for example, policy research. As NGO sectors grow, Support Organisations that can provide specialised expertise in training, research, technical assistance and capacity-building may be required.

The evolution of the voluntary development sector has been strongly affected by the **political space** provided to NGOs by the Asian political context. Multiparty democratic regimes (like India) allow the growth of a highly diverse and contentious voluntary development sector.

Military dictatorships and single-party States, on the other hand, are likely to see NGOs as a political threat and act to constrain the evolution of the sector. The impact of "democratic space" on the evolution of the sector and its Support Organisations is particularly obvious when there are abrupt changes in space available (as in the constraints induced by the Emergency in India or the space created by the overthrow of Marcos in the Philippines). Political space for NGO activity is a key variable in the evolution of the sector. Since Support Organisations are often highly visible as national agencies or as representatives of NGOs concerns, through advocacy or representation of their interests to governments and international donors, they are often particularly sensitive to, and affected by, changes in political space.

The evolution of the sector is also influenced by the **economic context** within which it grows. In countries where absolute

Support Organisation Evolution in the Philippines

The first indigenous NGOs, such as Philippines Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM), emerged in the 1950s. They mobilized student activists to work in the urban barrios and to do rural community development work. This period also saw the initial rise of farmers' movements. Martial law in the 70s and 80s pressed a number of grass-roots groups to go underground or to take cover under the protection of the Catholic Church. Others became more ideologically polarized or aligned with armed resistance to the Marcos regime. The development of cooperatives and more specialised networks (in community organising, primary health care, and appropriate technology) was expanded during this period.

After the overthrow of Marcos, the NGO sector expanded dramatically. Existing networks grew and others were created to link together hundreds of grass-roots NGOs and peoples' organisations that sprang up in the wake of the "people power" termination of martial law. Many of these networks soon became concerned with influencing national and international policies, and coalition-building across the ideological chasms separating NGOs began in earnest in the late 1980s. Coalitions that unite NGOs and people's organisations across a wide spectrum began to play an important role, and NGOs and peoples' organisations were explicitly recognized as major contributors to development in the 1987 Constitution.

Support Organisations began to emerge from the specialised networks formed in the 50s and 60s. In the 1970s networks formed around ideological commonalities began to proliferate their own Support Organisations. In the 1980s these informal networks became more formalized, and they began to support their members through information-sharing, policy analysis, training and capacity building, and representation to foreign funders.

Box 10

Support Organisation Evolution in Thailand

The NGO sector in Thailand has evolved from a rural reconstruction movement that began grass-roots work and political activism in the 1970s. During the 1980s two kinds of NGOs developed: issue and target group oriented NGOs in urban areas, and grass-roots NGOs working in villages. These NGOs focused more on disparities and problems caused by all-out economic growth rather than absolute poverty. In the 1980s there was political space at the national level for campaigns and policy influence, but it remained risky to challenge government authorities and elites in villages.

Support Organisations were started by urban groups, but shifted their work to serve rural NGOs. They took the initiative to build the government-sponsored NGO coordinating network (NGO-CORD) into an effective national coalition. Thai Support Organisations are now more concerned with supporting networks/movements than with individual NGOs; more interested in collaboration with rural NGOs (re-training, studying issues, reconducting campaigns) than in "giving" support; more concerned with programmes and processes than with discrete events; more engaged in strengthening strategies than in building institutions; emphasizing collective work more than individual efforts. Regional Support Organisations are emerging to replace Bangkok - based Support Organisations, but both still depend on outside funding. Support Organisations are firmly rooted in grassroots; they share capabilities and resources among Support Organisations and grass-roots organisations; they are active in learning together. But they still lack the status to influence major national decisions; they are short of resources; they have high personnel turnover; and they have "big brains but small hands and feet," so they cannot implement all the things they want to do.

Box 11

Support Organisation Evolution in Bangladesh

Although there have been voluntary agencies in Bangladesh for many years, existing charitable and social welfare activities disappeared under martial law. The government saw the provision of social services to be its own responsibility, and brooked no competition.

After the war of Liberation, the country was in a disastrous state. Foreign NGOs brought in desperately needed resources for relief and rehabilitation. During the next several years national NGOs became active in relief and welfare activities and also in community development work. During the latter part of the 1970s, NGOs focused on working with the landless and very poor populations. The larger NGOs began to develop sub-units to provide support services within the organisation and later to other NGOs in the sector. Since 1980, there has been rapid growth of small NGOs and more activity by national networks in the face of increased regulation and sometimes harassment by government agencies.

Support Organisations originated inside the larger NGOs, to serve their own internal needs. Increasingly, however, the smaller NGOs need support and external donors are willing to finance those services. Continued threats and harassment from government agencies are also helping to build more cohesion among NGOs and encourage them to seek influence over policy issues. While there have been substantial external resources available to NGOs, many suspect that these funds will not be available for much longer.

Box 12

poverty is a central issue, like Bangladesh and India, the character of NGO evolution may emphasize services and work with the very poor. In other countries where basic economic needs are less in question, the role of NGOs may focus on other matters of concern at the grass-roots. In Thailand, for example, NGOs seek to deal with the present and future challenges of a newly-industrialising country and the consequences of an all-out drive for economic growth that may destroy irreplaceable cultural and environmental resources. Support Organisations in Thailand, therefore, do Advocacy on reforestation policies of the State.

The evolution of the NGO sector and Support Organisations also appears to owe a good deal to the impact of catalytic events. For many countries, major crises or catastrophes play an important part in the growth (or decline) of the NGO sector.

Sometimes individuals play key roles in launching NGO movements (like Gandhi and J.P. Narayan in India). In other cases,

catastrophes like the war of Liberation or floods in Bangladesh spark national and international movements for voluntary action. An important aspect of such events is their ability to mobilise resources, such as commitment by key leaders or the deployment of resources by multilateral aid agencies or international PVOs. Leadership and financial resources can accelerate the development of an NGO sector dramatically. Support Organisations may evolve to strengthen the capacities of such rapidly growing NGOs, their programmes and staff.

PATTERNS

What are the ways in which Support Organisations emerge? This question was addressed by the consultation and different trends were identified. In many situations, support functions emerged from an individual's own initiatives and remained a personalised support function for a long time. As an organised activity in the form of a support organisation, broadly four types of patterns became visible. The first is where a

CHALLENGES

Discussions on the evolution of NGO sectors and Support Organisations in different countries provided the base for a more general reflection on the problems and challenges faced by Support organisations. Discussions in the plenary generated a dozen problem areas, and then small groups composed of participants, across countries generated their own lists and chose high priority problems for analysis and identification of coping strategies.

This section describes the most common problems identified. We will discuss these problems under three headings:

- 1) Relations with external constituencies,
- 2) Support Organisations and activities, and
- 3) Support Organisation strategic perspectives.

A. Problems with External Constituents

Support Organisations, like other NGOs, must work effectively with many different constituencies in the larger environment. They must work with the NGOs and POs they seek to support; they must deal with government agencies and regulators concerned with their activities; they must develop relations with international donors and government agencies that fund their activities; they must deal with other NGOs or SOs that seek to promote the interests of grass-roots groups. Unlike other NGOs, Support Organisations inevitably tend to serve a larger area. To be visible on a larger scale than the NGOs they serve, given the fact that they tend to serve regional and national roles, they are often called to represent the sector as a whole to

governments and to outsiders in the areas in which they claim special competence. Thus they often become highly visible and vulnerable to challenges by outsiders.

1. Acceptance and Legitimacy

Legitimacy is often a key issue for Support Organisations. This is truer still when the concept of "support" does not have a long and well-developed history in the sector. NGOs and POs do not automatically recognise the roles and contributions of Support Organisations. They may be understandably suspicious of organisations whose leaders do not have a great deal of experience in the sector and/or those who come with high professional training to show NGOs "the error of their ways." Developing acceptance and credibility with grass roots NGOs requires commitment, effective action, and considerable time.

Similarly, acceptance and legitimacy in the eyes of actors like the State or donors can be critical for getting resources. It is often easier to find support for specific grass-roots projects and services to poor populations than to get resources for the activities of Support Organisations, even though the latter may greatly increase the ability of the former to carry out projects and offer services. There is a general feeling of primacy to grass-roots work, as opposed to support functions.

Problems of acceptance and legitimacy may make it easier for many Support Organisations to start out as sub units of implementing NGOs or NGO networks. The parent organisations offer some

legitimacy and provide immediate work with other parts of the organisation or linked groups that need SO services. This solution to the acceptance and legitimacy problem, however, contains the seeds of later dilemmas that will be discussed below.

2. Relations with the State

Relations with the State is widely recognised as a problem area by Support Organisations from many countries. In part this may flow from the fact that the NGO sector in many countries is subject to regulation and harassment by the agents of the State, especially in one-party States or military dictatorships where NGOs are regarded as competitors for power and allegiance at the grass-roots. But there are also aspects of the Support Organisation role that make relations with the State of special importance.

Because of their role, Support Organisations are likely to be headquartered at regional and national centres where they can easily serve large numbers of NGOs. Just by location they are often quite visible to state agencies. If they grow out of the organisational base of a large implementing NGO or an NGO association, that history may also increase their visibility.

Support Organisation activities may also be visible and controversial from the State perspective. Support Organisation policy research and advocacy are easily seen as a challenge by state agencies, particularly if they encourage large scale popular campaigns and critiques of government policies. Support Organisations that act as liaisons between the NGO community and foreign donors may also be seen as threats or as operating "under foreign control." Even apparently innocuous

activities like training, information sharing or research may be seen as cause for suspicion or harassment by the State, especially when the areas of concern are politically sensitive (such as land reform) or when the government is concerned about social and political "stability". Support Organisations serve to strengthen the capacities of the NGO sector, and so are perhaps realistically seen as a threat by governments who seek to limit those capacities. Consequently, Support Organisations may unintentionally become the "bellwethers" of relations between the State and the NGO sector as a whole.

Relations with state agencies involve conflict and collaboration, sometimes both in the same relationship. Support Organisations tend to challenge State activities that are inconsistent with sustainable development. The emergence of the Voluntary Action Network India (VANI) to challenge proposed legislations that would undermine NGO participation in development is an example. But it is possible to fall into a permanent adversary role that is unproductive in the long run. It was argued that in some circumstances Support Organisations should be prepared to collaborate with state agencies, when joint action can better serve shared development objectives. The emerging experiments with government-NGO partnerships in the Philippines may be an example of constructive collaboration. Too much collaboration, on the other hand, may result in long-term coopting of the Support Organisation by the government.

3. Support Organisations and Organisations in the Field

Support Organisations seek to support NGOs and POs doing development work at the grass-roots, and many Support

Organisations encounter dilemmas in trying to work with those field organisations. A critical issue in this relationship is the nature of the support offered, and the ways in which the Support Organisation can work to empower the field organisations.

On one hand, field organisations sometimes complain that the Support Organisation staff do not have adequate field experience to provide credible support. At the extreme, veterans of years of grass-roots struggle may find it difficult to accept the "advice" of a young person with high technical qualifications but little grass-roots experience. This problem may be particularly common among Support Organisations that provide technical support (new agriculture, irrigations, afforestation technology, etc.). Such Support Organisations have to be careful about the relevance and limits of the support they can offer to the field.

On the other hand, Support Organisation staff with much grass-roots experience may be tempted to provide "too much" support. Support Organisations staff may get too involved in implementation, and field organisations may become too dependent on Support Organisation advice. This problem may be particularly common in situations where Support Organisations that have grown out of implementing organisations assign staff with vast experience to provide support to new organisations.

Another aspect of relations with the field is the problem of preserving Support Organisation accountability to the NGOs and the peoples' organisations they serve. When Support Organisations are subject to pressure from donor agencies and government organisations, they may lose sight of the long-term interests of the organisations they intend to

support. It is the same dilemma that confronts NGOs who must balance the demands of funders and "beneficiaries", when the latter are often less organised and less able to make clear and explicit demands.

Support Organisations gain legitimacy from their services to field organisations, in the eyes of both those organisations and themselves. They are consequently strongly affected by challenges from field organisations. Many Support Organisation staff identify with grass-roots NGOs and POs, and find it difficult to recognise or accept the idea that Support Organisations may best serve the development process when they challenge as well as cooperate with grass-roots organisations. The position "in the middle" - - as intermediaries between grass-roots organisations, state agencies, donors, and other actors - - gives Support Organisations a perspective on the larger picture of development that is often not available to grass-roots organisations. Support Organisations may have to support grass-roots organisations in some circumstances by confronting them and challenging them to deal more effectively with difficult realities.

4. Support Organisations and Donors

Donors, like field organisations and state agencies, are often unclear about the roles to be played by Support Organisations. They often seek to coopt Support Organisations to serve their own purposes. Many donors have invited Support Organisations with research and management capacities to conduct research and evaluation on operating NGOs. If Support Organisations are not careful about such contracts, their support function may be transformed to serve donors' interests rather than those of the field

organisations. Other donors have enthusiastically subscribed to the concept of Support Organisations, and invited Support Organisations to take over the task of giving out funds to NGOs. This role can transform relations between Support Organisations and the seekers of funds, for funding can distort the relationships between Support Organisations and the organisations they seek to support.

Existing patterns of donor allocation of funds favour easily bounded projects and activities that provide direct services to poor populations at the grass-roots. These patterns do not favour Support Organisations, who would prefer to develop long-term programmes of support that benefit the poor indirectly through the field organisations supported. If donors are going to provide the external support that most Support Organisations require to carry out their activities, substantial donor education by Support Organisations is required. Again, the Support Organisations position "in the middle" is at once the source of many of their dilemmas and the basis for their potential contributions.

B. Internal Problems of Support Organisations

NGOs in general are often confused about the systems and structures that govern their day-to-day activities. Many NGOs start as tiny organisations in which many decisions are made by a single individual or a small group. They then have great difficulty coping with coordination problems created by growth and expansion. Support Organisations often take on many characteristics of their parents: SOs that are sub units of implementing NGOs organise themselves for implementation, and Support Organisations that grow out of NGO associations organise themselves for networking. There are several patterns of

internal problems that appear quite common among Support Organisations.

1. Specialist vs. Generalist

Many Support Organisations find it difficult to balance generalist and specialist support roles. Generalist Support Organisations respond to many needs defined by the field organisations, emphasizing responsive support to concerns raised by their partners. They are willing to forego the focus and development of expertise in some areas in order to be responsive to a relatively wide range of needs.

Specialist Support Organisations emphasize sectorally specialised responses (e.g., health, environment, literacy, women, etc.) to the needs of field organisations. They focus their resources on providing services in limited areas, sacrificing more general responsiveness in order to clarify their goals and avoid spreading themselves too thin. Thus AFPRO in India, for example, is predominantly an agency that specialises in technical assistance in areas of agriculture, watershed and biogas. Specialisation around roles is also possible -- training, research, documentation, etc. Generalist SO's may provide organisation strengthening and capacity-building support: specialists give technical expertise and advice.

There is no simple answer to this dilemma. It seems clear that narrow specialisation risks the solidarity and commitment to a shared vision that is inherent in the concept of a "support organisation." On the other hand, vague generalisation may dissipate scarce resources in ways that contribute relatively little to strengthening the NGO sector as a development actor. Probably specific decisions about the

degree of general or specialist focus need to be made in the context of a careful analysis of the needs of the sector, the capacities of the Support Organisation, and the nature of the development problems that the sector seeks to solve. It is possible to have specialised competence in one area, but a generalised responsiveness to the needs of the partners.

2. **Dilemmas of Multiple Approaches**

Many support organisations undertake several activities. Some mix support activities with implementation; some combine support work with networking and information sharing; some work both as funders and as support organisations. While these combinations often have historical roots (as in Support Organisations that began as implementing NGOs or as NGO networks), they also may introduce contradictions with the support roles.

Support Organisations that started as implementing agencies, for example, may find themselves facing difficult decisions about priorities between support and implementation. How should the different demands of support (e.g., more resources into technical expertise) and implementation (e.g., more resources into grass-roots work) be balanced? How can the demands of the parent organisation (e.g., more training for its staff) be balanced against the needs of other NGOs (e.g., more training for wider populations)? How will tensions between implementing and support priorities be resolved?

Support Organisations that emerge as part of a membership association face another set of challenges too. These relate to the tension between being a secretariat (doing what members tell them to do) on the one hand, and

proactive support function demanding specific influencing and futuristic interventions. The character of the membership of that association (within the national NGO sector) also limits their scope.

Many Support Organisations have been offered opportunities to administer (or act as conduits) the funds of donor agencies, and so become miniature donors themselves. NGOs often need financial support, and Support Organisations that administer funds can often provide that support in ways that are more appropriate than the foreign or government donors that initially provided the funds. But there are important side-effects to fundgiving that may undermine the Support Organisations' ability to provide other kinds of support. When Support Organisations become donors, they also risk changing their relationships to the NGOs they serve. Financial dependence often produces guarded relationships and caution by donees in discussing problem areas. If NGOs cannot feel free to discuss problem areas with Support Organisations, can the Support Organisations continue to provide useful support? While fundgiving is an important activity, it may be incompatible in the longer term with other kinds of support functions.

3. **"Professionalisation" and Staff Development**

The demand for more highly trained human resources is felt in many NGOs, particularly those involved in rapid growth and increasingly complex activities. For Support Organisations the concern with professionalisation is particularly acute, since they seek to provide services that implementing NGOs and POs cannot provide for themselves. Those services typically

require a level of expertise - - in training, research, technical assistance, and so on - - that is not available from the average staff members of an NGO.

There has been much debate about whether "professional" training should be valued over "commitment" to NGO values and beliefs. Ideally, of course, Support Organisations will recruit "committed professionals" who embody both. But highly trained professionals willing to forego all the rewards associated with their skills are not common. Some Support Organisations have been quite successful in recruiting volunteer professionals in specific areas, and much can be done if Support Organisations are willing to accept limited commitments from highly skilled individuals.

More generally, Support Organisations face the general issue of human resource development of their own staffs as well as for the voluntary development sector as a whole. How can Support Organisations ensure that individuals who commit their lives to support work are not making a choice with catastrophic long-term implications? Can Support Organisations enable continued personal growth for their staffs? Are there ways in which their children can be assured of an adequate education? Can their staffs have adequate pensions when they retire? These questions are important for the NGO sector as a whole, but they are particularly pressing for Support Organisations as potential catalysts of sector development and as agencies dependent on attracting staff with qualifications and expertise that allow them many different employment options.

C. Maintaining a Strategic Focus

Support Organisations face pulls and tugs from many important external constituents - -

the NGOs they support, agencies of the state, donors, and others. They also must cope with a variety of internal pressures - - multiple priorities, competing activities, demands from human resources, and so on. It is often easy to take on another activity and another responsibility, to the detriment of work that is more important in the larger context. Maintaining a focus that will have the greatest strategic impact on development is difficult for most NGOs, and the visible position of Support Organisations makes maintaining such a focus particularly difficult for them.

Support Organisation strategies serve at least two functions: (1) they guide choices in responding to immediate external and internal pressures, and (2) they enable Support Organisations to identify activities that will strengthen the development contributions of the NGO sector in the long term. Initially Support Organisations tend to emphasize their resources for supporting NGOs in the short term, especially as they seek to establish the legitimacy of their role. As they become more accepted, however, they are increasingly subject to multiple demands and opportunities. Coping with those pressures in ways that lead to increasing NGOs' impact on development requires a longer-term perspective on the social change and development process that enables strategic choices among activities for the sector as a whole.

As the NGO sector evolves, Support Organisations may play critical roles in the evolution of sectoral strategies that guide the activities of many NGOs. It was noted in the seminar that NGO communities in many countries are beginning to discuss shared strategies for influencing state agencies and international donors. Associations and coalitions of NGOs in India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines are beginning to articulate and advocate the interests of their members in national and international fora. Such joint campaigns require sector-wide analyses and

linkages, and Support Organisations in those countries are playing catalytic roles in sectoral strategy formulation. The problem of formulating and implementing strategic

interventions is increasingly critical both to Support Organisations as institutions and to their role as catalysts for strengthening the NGO sector.

FUTURE TRENDS AND DEMANDS

Participants met in South and Southeast Asian groups to discuss the trends they saw emerging in the future in their regions and the implications of those trends for Support Organisations. The trends will be identified briefly here to set the context for the capacities that the participating Support Organisations need to respond effectively to these demands.

A. Future Trends

Several trends were anticipated and discussed during the seminar. Some of these are briefly elaborated here.

1. Many participants were concerned about **growing involvement with government organisations** for NGOs in their regions. In some cases, governments are seen as threats to NGO contributions to development, harassing NGOs and seeking to control their activities. In other cases, work with government organisations was viewed as an opportunity. Such NGOs felt (through collaboration with appropriate agencies) their innovations and solutions could be spread to a wider area.

More NGO engagements with government organisations will require a better understanding of political and bureaucratic perspectives, more sophistication with regard to policy alternatives and implications, more ability to advocate and negotiate for desired alternatives, and more capacity to both confront and cooperate with government officials.

2. Seminar participants also expected more **pressures from international**

donors, given the scarcity of resources and donor disillusionment with the efficacy of past programmes. These pressures may take the form of more donor interference with NGO activities, increased donor pressure on government agencies that influence NGOs, more demands for early withdrawal from grass-roots organising activities, and even outright withdrawal of financial support.

To deal with these pressures NGOs may need to learn more about the forces that shape the actions and policies of international donors, to build North South NGO alliances to balance the power of donors, to "educate" donors in the realities of work at the grass-roots, to build coalitions with governments to influence donor decisions, and to find alternative resources to replace the reduced flows from international donors.

3. Many NGOs are concerned about **increasing the impact of the NGO sector**. NGOs have been more successful at grass-roots work than at influencing national policies or in "scaling-up" local successes to influence larger populations. They tend to remain small and fiercely independent, even when some issues can only be influenced by larger organisations or networks of many small organisations that can act cohesively on shared concerns.

In many countries there is increasing concern with building networks and associations of NGOs that can share information and ideas, cooperate to solve problems that they cannot handle

as individuals, represent the interests of the NGO community at large both to government regulators and to donor agencies. There is also concern about the development of sector-wide mechanisms that can support the development of new leaderships, provide satisfying and secure careers to large numbers of voluntary workers, and increase the sector's capacity to attract and hold technical and professional staffs needed for increasingly complex development activities.

4. Most of the seminar participants also foresaw serious challenges to the **organisational sustainability of individual NGOs** in the immediate future. Some of those problems have to do with relations with key external agencies, such as governments and donors (as suggested above). Many are also concerned with how to position themselves and their work to have a more strategic impact on the development problems they seek to solve.

Many NGOs are also concerned with problems of their own development as organisations. Aging leaderships that have not developed successors, problems with growth and "institutionalisations," demands for higher technical competence and "professionalisation" of staff, as well as ongoing struggles over values and beliefs within NGOs may all threaten their long-term viability. These problems may become especially acute at times of resource scarcity and political turbulence foreseen by participants from many countries.

5. Some participants also expressed concern about the **bankruptcy of existing development models**. Models that focus on either the market or the State as the institutional leaders of development have become irrelevant

now. NGOs are all too aware of the consequences of centralisation of power and resources in either state or corporate agencies. Some of them have developed innovative approaches to development at the grass-roots, but clear alternative development models that deal with large scale economic and political dynamics still need to be articulated.

B. Implications for capacity building

What are the implications of these regional trends for support organisations? What kinds of capacities will Support Organisations have to develop if they are to provide support that is relevant to NGOs trying to deal with such trends? The capacities described below are required in part by emerging trends and in part by the characteristic Support Organisation dilemmas described earlier. The seven capacities are often additions to the kinds of roles and functions already played by Support Organisations — training, research, technical assistance, and so on. We believe that more Support Organisations will have to develop such capacities in the immediate future.

1. Strategic Thinking

The proliferation of demands on Support Organisations requires them to think strategically about their own allocations of resources if they are to have a wide impact on the basis of severely limited resources. The development of Support Organisation capacity for helping other NGOs think strategically about effective use of their resources is also important to the effectiveness of individual NGOs and the NGO development sector as a whole. At a time of shrinking resources and expanding problems, organisations committed to voluntary action have no substitute for strategic interventions if they are to make a real difference.

Strategic thinking suggests paying attention to larger scales and longer time frames than tactical thinking. Support Organisations that provide opportunities to NGOs for thinking strategically, can have a big impact on how they influence the world in the larger social context.

2. **Leadership Development**

If the NGO sector is going to play a larger role in development, it will need a larger and more diverse cadre of leaders. Leadership development is a problem within NGOs, as older leaders become ready to move on. It is also an issue for the sector as a whole, especially when the requirements for NGO roles and activities is growing more rapidly than existing organisations can respond. Leadership at the sectoral level may call for skills and perspectives that are quite different from those in leading single organisations.

Support Organisations that can facilitate the emergence of new leadership will make such a crucial contribution. It is not very clear under what sort of circumstances such leadership develops. It may involve, for example, individual consultations, workshops with other leaders, or team building activities that involve leaders and their subordinates and peers. The need for new leadership suggests that Support Organisation capacities for leadership development will be a critical resource over the next decade.

3. **Organisation Development and Capacity-Building**

Individual NGOs need to build better systems and organisations if they are to cope with the demands of expanding programmes and impacts. Support Organisations themselves need to build

systems and structures appropriate to the dilemmas posed by their multiple constituencies and approaches. The more Support Organisations understand the possibilities of organisation development and capacity-building, the more likely it is that they can organise their own scarce resources in an effective way.

For NGOs and NGO sectors, the organisational demands of expanding and taking on new tasks can be crippling if resources to help them conceive and manage change and capacity-building are not available. If Support Organisations can provide consulting, training, and other forms of support to organisational capacity-building, the likelihood of NGOs playing significant roles in the next decade may increase.

4. **Policy Analysis and Advocacy**

This capacity involves the analytical and conceptual abilities to examine and understand policy alternatives, to articulate alternatives that serve the NGO sector and its goals, and to influence the policy-making process. Many NGOs are beginning to recognize that sustaining and expanding their development impacts is impossible without ensuring that appropriate policy contexts are established.

Few topics at the seminar evoked such widespread interest as that of advocacy and policy strategies that could strengthen grass-roots voices in the policy-making process. Increased Support Organisation capacity to promote NGO policy research and advocacy might help NGOs deal with their growing involvement with governments as well as with interference or pressure from donor agencies. While many NGOs have relatively little

experience with policy advocacy, some (in areas like human rights, consumer protection, environmental protection) have extensive histories and well-developed capacities for influencing public policy.

5. **Alliance and Coalition Building**

Coalition-building involves bringing together organisations and groups that have many diverse interests but at least one concern in common around which the coalition is organised. Coalitions bring together "strange bedfellows" for the sake of mobilizing more political and economic power on some issue. Negotiations involve working out agreements among parties that share some interests (but not all). Historically many NGOs have been reluctant to work with agencies and groups from other sectors (e.g., government organisations, political parties, trade unions, corporations, etc.) because of such differences. It is increasingly clear that some problems can only be solved by coalitions.

Alliance and coalition-building skills may seem quite alien to many NGOs. If Support Organisations develop the capacity to help NGOs learn to build coalitions and alliance more effectively, they may be able to consolidate and collectivise the work of the NGO sector and make larger and more substantial impact on a larger scale.

6. **Reflection and Learning**

The capacity to facilitate reflection and learning is increasingly a critical one. It involves skills in bringing together key

actors, creating a social setting in which they can share perspectives and expertise, and catalyzing a joint process of reflection that uses their experiences to generate new understanding and action plans. Ideally such learning process can develop perspectives and paradigms beyond anything the participants could create by themselves as well as agreements for joint action that would not be considered if the parties had not been part of the process that produced them.

Support Organisations that develop and share capacities for facilitating reflection and learning processes can play catalytic roles in the emergence of networks and coalitions among NGOs that can enhance the sector's contributions to influencing macro trends. They may also improve the potential for collaborative problem-solving among organisations from many sectors; NGOs, government organisations, peoples' organisations. Perhaps most important, it is out of such reflection and learning processes that new perspectives on social change and new models of political and economic transformation may emerge.

These then are the issues and challenges of Support Organisations. Though the analysis outlined above emerged from the experiences of Asian Support Organisations, it may perhaps be relevant to other contexts. We hope that this reflection will stimulate additional discussion and analysis elsewhere. Support Organisations need to rise to the challenges discussed here, in a manner that can strengthen the contributions of grass-roots NGOs in the future.

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