

Perspectives on The Effectiveness of NGO Initiatives in Urban Agriculture In Zimbabwe



Social Science

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ABSTRACT

NGO programmes in developing countries quickly fail after being transferred to beneficiaries. This study used FGDs and case studies to identify some perceived causes of failure of NGO urban agriculture initiatives in Zimbabwe. The study identified the principal-agent relationship between NNGOs and LNGOs as the epicenter of all initiative failures. The study thus recommends that LNGOs negotiate for greater discretion in implementing programmes as well as forge symbiotic long-term relationships with relevant government departments.

INTRODUCTION

The current approaches to development as supported by “Donor countries” and International Funding Institutions (IFI) e.g. World Bank, favour the channeling of aid via non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This approach is based on various purported advantages of NGOs over governments, especially in the developing world (Porter, 2003; Haque, 2004). Zimbabwe witnessed an increase in the activities of NGOs in the years leading to 2009 after the Government of Zimbabwe had declared a state of emergence. The Joint Initiative (JI) Programme wherein various Local NGOs (LNGOs) co-operated to provide assistance to urban vulnerable groups in parts of Zimbabwe was formed during this period. Part of the JI focused on the development of urban community gardens which were to be a source of nourishment and income (Oxfam, 2007).

In the years in which the LNGOs were involved with these urban garden projects they flourished but quickly diminished after being handed over to beneficiaries. This phenomenon of projects failing after being transferred to the beneficiaries is not limited to urban community gardens; it is common across the spectrum of NGO initiatives in developing nations (Shivje, 2007). Various reasons have been forwarded for this phenomenon; poor resource endowment of beneficiaries, lack of support or opposition from local leadership etc (Fisher, 1997; Haque, 2004). But this paper focuses on arguments that purport that failures of NGO initiatives in developing countries are inevitable because they are the brain children of northern hemisphere donors. That is, these initiatives are devoid of African perspectives and input (Porter, 2003; Shivje, 2007; Awortwi, 2012).

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To investigate the applicability of the abovementioned argument to Zimbabwe this study analyzed the perceptions held by government extension officers from the Department of Agricultural Technical and Extension Services (Agritex) toward LNGOs. This approach is based on the fact that LNGOs are the agents of Northern/international non-governmental organizations (NNGOs). As agents, LNGOs thus represent the agenda and philosophy of their principals, the NNGOs. Thus, even though the LNGOs’ officers are Zimbabweans they are expected to respond to Zimbabwean challenges in the manner prescribed by the NNGOs. Government extension officers represent the local/ Zimbabwean, on-the-ground expertise in the arena the NGOs are operating. It is the argument of this study that the expertise of extension officers should be used by NGOs on how “best” to tackle local problems since they have interacted for longer with the NGOs’ target beneficiaries. The study seeks to answer two questions on which the present emphasis of aid through NGOs is premised:

1. Are LNGOs actually knowledgeable about the actual problems affecting targeted groups?

2. Are NGO solutions to tackling these problems effective?

In exploring the answers to these questions the study put forward two propositions:

1. Proposition #1: LNGOs are not knowledgeable about the actual problems faced by their target beneficiaries.
2. Proposition #2: The solutions offered by NGOs are incongruent with the needs of the target beneficiaries.

METHODOLOGY

This study used case studies and a focused group discussion (FDG) approach. Agritex extension officers from the Seke and Gweru Districts of Zimbabwe participated in focused group discussions organized by the authors. Case studies were developed from field visits and surveys of various community gardens in the districts. These Districts were chosen because they contained roughly 87% of urban community garden projects initiated by JI (Oxfam, 2007). In addition, insights into the operations of, and interactions between NNGOs and LNGOs were gained from other published research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Problem identification process: LNGOs were said to work from “a solution to a problem” paradigm. That is, LNGOs first identify an approach that is being encouraged by NNGOs then look for conditions in their area of operation where that approach can be applied. LNGOs resort to such a strategy to secure funding for their proposals from NNGOs. For urban community gardens, LNGOs adopted such approaches from some Asian countries (Porter, 2003; Haque, 2004). This desktop prescription to a perceived societal problem however does not imply that the problem is non-existent. Surveys by both LNGOs and other reports from other organization such as WHO and UNICEF in the 2005-2007 period indicated and identified an actual case for rampant urban poverty and vulnerability in Zimbabwean (Oxfam, 2007). It thus can be said that in terms of identifying local problems LNGOs are actually effective.

The causes of urban poverty and associated vulnerability can be boiled down to livelihoods; how urban households obtain an income and other necessities of life. In Zimbabwean urban areas, most services and goods have to be directly purchased. In light of this fact the focus by NGOs on income generating projects is quite accurate. FGDs revealed that most extension officers concurred with this observation that projects should be income generating. This however, does not mean that the extension officers agreed with the type of projects being encouraged by NGOs.

In the final analysis of the raised issues it can be said that Proposition #1 is not true. LNGOs are actually knowledgeable about not only the problems of their target market, but also the root causes of these problems. This however, does not translate into LNGOs being more knowledgeable about these issues than the

Agritex officers as purported by proponents of channeling aid via NGOs (Haque, 2004; Peterson, 2010). In fact, Agritex officers feel that they are more knowledgeable than LNGOs simply because they are consulted by these LNGOs for information. It can thus be said that the relevancy of LNGOs is not in supplying information, but rather in their being better resourced to act on existing knowledge to better influence social change.

Effectiveness of NGO initiatives: It is purported that NGOs offer more effective and tailor-made solutions to societal problems because of their ability to disaggregate data provided by government departments. In the case under consideration, urban community gardens were specifically targeted at the “urban vulnerable”. A seemingly rigorous process involving surveys and group consultations was carried out by JI with the specific goal of reducing the “inclusion error” (Oxfam, 2007). However this purported effective and efficient use of data only exists in theory as nearly 80% of urban community gardens started under the JI initiative where found to be defunct.

It is thus reasonable to assume that the solutions offered by NGOs are incongruent with the needs of the beneficiaries. As previously discussed, to secure funding LNGOs have to produce projects that are congruent with the agendas and desires of the NNGOs (Guay, Doh and Sinclair, 2004). In addition, the “culture of accountability” and so-called “best practices” championed by NNGOs make it impossible for LNGOs to modify their original proposals to suit realities on the ground (Porter, 2003; Haque, 2004).

Case study: Community gardens for Mbare, Harare. Mbare is the location of the largest wholesale market for fresh agricultural produce in Zimbabwe, and as such there was an oversupply of the commodities produced in the community gardens. The community gardens were thus unprofitable and as a result were abandoned. This case also highlighted another pitfall in the LNGOs problem identification process. In building a technical case for the need of the project to NNGOs, LNGOs conducted and documented surveys and consultation meetings with the residents of the suburb and were thus able to “objectively” identify the need for the project. In reality however, neither the LNGOs nor the residents needed the project but both stood to benefit from the funding that would be availed if the need was demonstrated to exist. Residents were offered various incentives such as food hand-outs for “participating” in the problem identification process. In addition, it was public knowledge that those that were identified as needing the project would be given gardening equipment such as wheelbarrows and watering cans, all these incentives made it inevitable, even necessary that the need for

the project be identified. The extension officers pointed out that residents blatantly lied about their socio-economic standings to the LNGOs’ officers so as to benefit from the project.

Extension officers also pointed out that when representatives from the NNGOs were making follow ups they would be very rigid in assessing the progress made: it had to be as per the written project document. Thus, the “culture of accountability” made LNGOs inflexible. In the above case, it later emerged that most beneficiaries preferred other projects such as small-scheme-credit facilities to community gardens, but because the LNGOs had to follow religiously the NNGO approved proposal, they could not shift funds to the more promising projects.

Proposition #2 is true: LNGOs offer solutions that are incongruent with the needs of their target beneficiaries. However, this is not so much the result of ineptness on the part of LNGOs as it is the result of the unequal relationship between NNGOs and LNGOs. Most LNGOs are simply subsidiaries of NNGOs, and those that are not are largely dependent on NNGOs for funding. This situation makes it almost impossible for LNGOs to follow their own development agendas. Simply because they have to survive, LNGOs have to dance to the tune set by NNGOs. Unfortunately, this tune is subject to rapid and unpredictable changes due to volatility of international politics, global disasters and epidemics as well as the latest buzzwords/approaches in the donor community (Awortwi, 2012; Porter, 2003). In Zimbabwe this resulted in a number of urban community garden projects (e.g. in Mufakose and Senga suburbs) being abandoned prematurely by the LNGOs because the NNGOs had decided to channel funding to other areas such as health and child welfare. LNGOs are thus viewed by most government extension officers as vehicles of making money for their owners than vehicles of helping the vulnerable in society.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It can thus be concluded that most government extension officers view LNGOs not as important information providers but as agencies via which the vulnerable can be assisted. However, they view much of this assistance as incongruent with the needs of the target beneficiaries due to the LNGOs being misinformed by this constituency, in addition to being severely limited by the dictates of their principals, the NNGOs. For LNGOs to be more effective in gathering accurate information, it is recommended that they form more symbiotic, long-term relationships with government departments. In addition, LNGOs should negotiate for more freedom and discretion from NNGOs in effecting the implementation matrix for development goals.

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