

'A chameleon-like game' – educational NGOs in South Africa

By Seán Morrow

South Africa has a particularly rich NGO history, closely linked to the struggle for liberation. In the 1970s and '80s numerous organisations sprang up in response to the harsh political and social realities of the day. Some directly confronted the apartheid government. Others attempted to work for the welfare of the oppressed in whatever spaces they could find. Donors, especially those from abroad, supported such NGOs in solidarity with their opposition to racism and discrimination, even while in the world as a whole the discourse of value for money, accountability and delivery of services increasingly displaced that of ideological commitment to radical causes.

In South Africa, educational NGOs were particularly crucial. A study of NGOs and education in South Africa for the Washington-based Academy for Educational Development (AED), funded by USAID, showed that the struggle for freedom had always been linked to decent

education. The resistance to 'Bantu Education' from the 1950s further emphasised this relationship. The Soweto uprising of 1976 grew from educational discontents, and the link between education and resistance continued throughout the 1980s. NGOs were a crucial component of the United Democratic Front that led domestic opposition to apartheid in the 1980s.

Majority rule might have been expected to lead to the flowering of educational NGOs. Reality was more complex and ambiguous. The ANC-dominated government, anxious to satisfy the expectations of the masses, launched the RDP, and NGOs were to be harnessed to this national effort. Resources that had previously been directed to NGOs were now generally channelled towards a government elected by the overwhelming

majority of the people. Even when socio-economic policy changed in a market-oriented direction, with the implementation of GEAR, government continued to attract and disburse most donor funds.

One of the ironies of the time was therefore that political freedom was accompanied by the death of many NGOs. Some had no doubt outlived their use, caught in a resistance mode from which they found it impossible to emerge. Others, however, were doing useful work and were a real loss.

Those NGOs that survived often did so by becoming, or extending their role as, service providers, now in collaboration with government rather than in opposition to it. For some, this was a major shift from the critical, even oppositional mode in which they had grown, a shift further complicated by the loss of many personnel to the administrative and political arms of government. For others less directly political in orientation, the transition was easier.

In education, there was a pronounced move towards the commercialisation of NGOs, with some becoming Section 21 companies. Project Literacy, for example, by providing excellent service to companies and other institutions willing to pay for its services, flourishes in spite of overall neglect of adult basic education and training. It has done so by a business-oriented approach that includes cutting down permanent staff to a core of professionals and outsourcing aspects of its activities. The Molteno Project succeeds by focussing on the production and sale of excellent teaching and learning materials in South African languages. These and others are now even exporting their skills and services to other parts of Africa on a commercial basis. As Andrew Miller, the CEO of Project Literacy, puts it, it is 'a chameleon-like game'.

He cites the big United States NGOs. These are, he says, 'very good chameleons ... and they compete against private people for jobs'. In his view, given South African and world realities, this is the way forward.

Thus for NGOs the perhaps surprising outcome of ten years of democracy is a decline in direct donor funding; a corresponding emphasis on commercial success, mainly through a stress on service delivery; the demise of many NGOs, particularly though not solely those devoted to social activism, and a move away from the critical advocacy that many would see as central to the role of NGOs in a vibrant civil society.

Is this the full picture? Are NGOs forced or willing converts to commercial norms, now locked in a service-delivery embrace with government from which they cannot escape? Has the commitment to radical critique, so central to the earlier history of the sector, evaporated?

Perhaps not. There are indications that after a period of painful change, a new pattern of NGOs may be emerging. This may range from organisations barely distinguishable from commercial operations, through hybrid entities using whatever non-commercial resources they can generate to stake out a degree of independence, to bodies that concentrate on articulating various often dissenting and critical positions in the new context. In the latter category, the Treatment Action Campaign, working for the interests of those afflicted with the HIV virus, is prominent; in education, the Education Rights Project, for example, plays an analogous role. What the relative importance of these elements within the sector will be is yet to be determined. Certainly, for a healthy democracy, critical advocacy, as well as efficient and professional service provision, is crucial. *

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For further information on *A Study of NGOs and Education in South Africa*, please e-mail smorrow@hsrc.ac.za

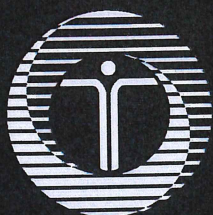
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