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Shift the Power - Ghanaian NGOs at the Crossroads of Relinquishing Power to Local Communities



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I. Introduction

Over the last 40 years, Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) has received about \$48.634 billion of net official development assistance from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and other bilateral and multilateral donors according to the World Bank. The balance sheet of these colossal sums that have been 'invested' to recalibrate the African state has left many unsatisfied. Indeed, several critiques have called for an end to donor aid while others including celebrated global economist, Dambisa Moyo, are calling for a total overhaul of the aid architecture, favoring fairer trade over aid.

Critiques of the operational model of development aid programmes argue that aid to Africa has made the poor poorer and slowed down growth. They point to the fact that the insidious aid culture has left African countries debt-laden, inflation-prone, more vulnerable to the vagaries of the currency markets and unattractive to higher-quality investment. Therefore, any attempt to improve the effectiveness of aid lies in a complete rethinking of not just the policy agendas associated with aid but in the nature of the relationship between donors and recipients.

Deciphering from all that has been said and written about development cooperation, the crux of the matter ties with the effectiveness of aid. As resilient as the international aid system is, many actors within the industry are embracing these criticisms in good faith and have taken bold steps aimed at changing the status quo. Indeed, there have been a few staggering reforms within the sector, including the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and follow up Accra Agenda for Action (AAA), where harmonisation and alignment of aid, ownership, accountability, and other lofty idealisms aimed at a sector wide reform took center stage.

In recent times, an approach that is receiving critical acclaim and gaining momentum is shift the power. Perceivably, proponents of this idea are calling for a balance in the power dynamics between donor and recipient, as the panacea for improving the effectiveness of aid and transferring agency to the 'people'. As noted by Mawdsley et al. (2002), a recurring challenge that continues to be amplified over time is the asymmetry of power between donor, beneficiary communities and implementing civil society organisations. These issues have been a key reason for the failure of the effectiveness and efficiency of development interventions. Inadvertently, the frustrations have spurred debates, and ideas about innovative ways to shift power to communities.

Underlying the shift the power are principles which transcend all the approaches towards a power shift: flexibility, inclusivity, diversity, respect, and participation. In a recent discussion with Bond, a United Kingdom network for organisations working in international development themed, Going beyond Western models of value to shift the power, Nana Afadzina, Executive Director of the West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI), critically aimed at western models of packaging aid. She noted...

In the development sector, supported by the international aid architecture, the power scale is tipped in favour of organisations that have the right connections with aid bilaterals and multilaterals, and foundations that can absorb millions of dollars. The system favours those who write dazzling proposals with the right terminology, present excellent narrative and financial reports from their sophisticated monitoring and evaluation systems, in accordance with the log-frame and theory of change presented to donors.

Those who have high visibility and have an impressive website, who demonstrate an imposing presence within their context and their scope of operations. Those that function as a business.

In her closing remarks, she called for looking beyond western models as one of the antidotes noting, "We need to look at models from the global south of indigenous community groups that have been effective and learn how they have done it." As persuasive and revolutionary as these ideas may sound, it is the diverse perspective of this paper, they can only go far to achieve meaning and start yielding results when local NGOs are able to overcome the same patterns and dynamics they replicate in their relationship with the sub-altern (local communities).

This paper argues that for any meaningful change of power to happen, there is a need for a reordering of the relationship between local NGOs and communities. A deeper dive into how the Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) sector is organised and structured in Ghana, vis-à-vis the communities they 'represent' and draw legitimacy is needed.

II. Defining Shift the Power as a Concept

The shift the power initiative is situated in the broader discourse of localisation of aid, which has gained prominence in the past 5 years, following the 2016 World Humanitarian Summit in Johannesburg, yet its implementation is at an early stage. According to proponents of the initiative, the Shift the Power (project) aims for a more balanced humanitarian system, where the role of local and national humanitarian actors is valued, supported, and recognized by international humanitarian agencies, donors and International NGOs. Undergirding the logic of this paradigm are the tenets of deciding together and amplifying the

position and participation of communities in deciding their own development agenda. Shedding more light on the ethos of shift the power, Jennifer Lentfer, Communications Director at IDEX, notes,

... aid agencies and social sector actors continue to struggle to make such concepts as "community participation" and "local empowerment" a reality in their interventions. Communities whose lives are most affected by social problems are the best judges of the strategy employed to impact their lives. But the



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insufficient involvement of local communities (and CSOs in the global south) from the start of a project is a common phenomenon. This goes against the essential need for the recipient community to assume ownership of the project in terms of operation and management.

In essence, shift the power is about co creation, ownership, participation, and empowerment of local communities. It is about communities taking the lead in setting the agenda of their own development. It is also about restoring the balance, relinquishing, and reverting power to communities.

Ironically, most of the advocates of the shift the power are leading experts from INGOs in the global north, with a few experts from the global south joining the bandwagon. Like many concepts and approaches, shift the power did not originate from the South. Many in the region are still waking up to the buzz and understanding of the phrase.

III. Understanding the Context- The Rise of Ghanaian NGOs

During the last 25 years, civil society organisations (CSOs) in general, and more recently African NGOs, have increased dramatically in number and in influence in Africa (Igoe and Kelsall, 2005; Michael, 2004). Several reasons account for the rise of non-governmental organisation (NGOs) but most theorists stress the prominent role played by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the 1980s and 1990s in rolling back the state and enhancing the role of the private sector as the *raison d'être* (Townsend et al., 2004). NGOs were greeted as the 'magic bullet' and the panacea to failed top-down development and the means to poor people's empowerment (Hearn, 2007). This laid a solid base for the emergence of many

new local NGOs. Accompanying this was a growing demand from international (North) NGOs (INGOs) for local partners and a response to the growth of local needs as public expenditure declined across the continent (Townsend et al., 2004).

As NGOs grew in prominence in Ghana and the rest of Africa, so was the impetus to indigenise the system and sector. This goal however did not materialise as the very survival of African NGOs came to hinge on donors and the international aid system for legitimacy and funding (Hearn, 2007). Over time, this dependency has deepened and accentuated by a shift to direct funding of African NGOs from the hitherto practice of using international intermediary NGOs (Bebbington and Riddell, 1995). Currently, the African NGO sector is characterised by external financial dependence accompanied by an external orientation with the 'vast majority' of NGOs relying on foreign aid for more than 90 percent of their funding (Hearn, 2007). Shivji (2006) concurs, an overwhelming number of African NGOs do not have any independent source of funding and must seek donor funds through the procedures set by the funding agencies.

IV. Ghanaian NGOs and the International Aid System- Navigating Power Asymmetries

Ghana represents a "highly instructive case study for...

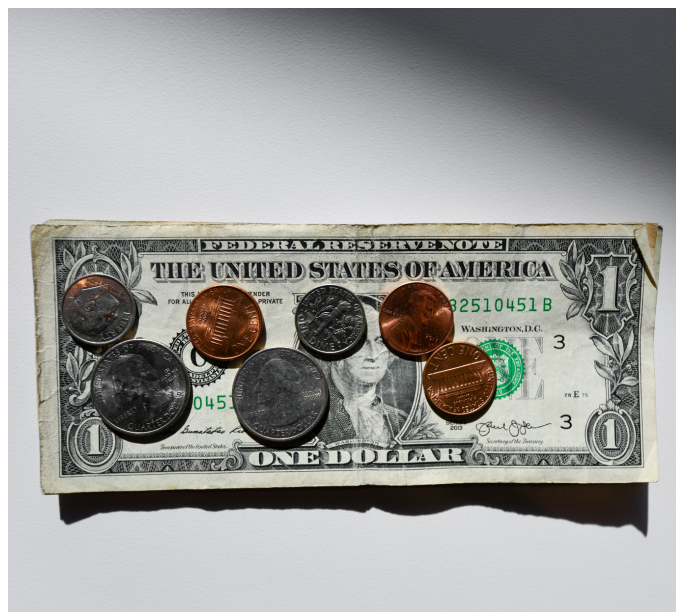


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research on the emergence and potential role of the nonprofit sector in developing countries" (Salamon et al., 1995) in (Krawczyk, 2013 p.101). The country provides a particularly interesting illustration of the complexities and challenges of state-civil society relations. More importantly, although its NGO sector is relatively young, it has had a long history of interaction with global actors and global agendas (Porter, 2003). Comprehensive data on the precise number of NGOs are lacking as many organisations fail to register with the Registrar General's Department and the Department of Social Welfare (DSW). However, data gathered from the DSW as of May 2016 put the number of registered NGOs at 6520 of which 6370 and 150 were local and international NGOs, respectively (Kumi 2017).

However, the Ghana Association of Private Voluntary Organisations in Development (GAPVOD), an umbrella body for nonprofits has under its canopy about 450 members, both national and international, spread across the country (Commonwealth Network, 2018). These NGOs operate in all sectors of the economy to promote social development, human rights, and good governance. Ghana's contemporary nonprofit sector includes indigenous grassroot organisations, government-sponsored community development organisations, religious organisations, international development and relief organisations, professional and business associations, local craft unions, women associations, migrant groups, and faith-based organisations (Krawczyk, 2013).

As a 'star pupil' of the neoliberal economic reforms in the 1980s and 1990s, the trajectory and posture of Ghanaian NGOs to a large extent reflects the wider developments in Sub-Saharan Africa. From a previously obscure position, NGOs in Ghana persevered through repression to prominence beginning in the 1980s and 1990s as the antidote to perceived state failure and bureaucratic inefficiencies. Even with the 'reinstated' role of the state, the focus on pro-poor sustainable livelihood approaches, linked to the growing emphasis on the role of civil society in promoting good governance, has attached, and furthered the importance and expansion of both International NGO and local NGO roles in Ghana (ibid, 2013).

With a diverse array and expansive network of NGOs, the competition for donor funding is intense, and there is a widespread lack of confidence in local ideas

as most NGOs exhibit unquestioning compliance with donor preferences and models (Porter 2003). This is corroborated by reports and assessments done by United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on Ghana, which concludes that majority of local NGOs, are simply not able to subsist without funding across all sectors of the Ghanaian economy (USAID, 2012).

A distinguishing feature of African NGOs including those in Ghana is their heavy dependence/reliance on foreign donor support and inability to find other ways of sustaining themselves. This has called into question their sustainability, representativeness, operational efficiency, and policy influence as well as their accountability to beneficiaries for which they draw their most salient source of legitimacy and of facilitating transformative outcomes (Kilby, 2006). Allied to this is the assertion that partnerships between donors and local NGOs are heavily skewed in favor of the former. Not only do the foreign partners (donors) control the bulk of financing, but also retain de facto veto power over the local counterpart. In this regard, the relationship between NGOs and donors is mostly supply-led which reflects a type of relationship where donors set the goals of programmes because of NGOs' high dependence for funding (AbouAssi 2013).

This relationship also reflects the situation that makes NGOs closer to their donors rather than the communities they claim to support (Banks et al. 2015). Invariably, the degree of independence and scope of action NGOs can exercise in relation to donor agendas is limited by even the most radical among them (Shivji, p.39).

V. Power Dynamics Between Local NGOs and Communities

From the ongoing discussions, within the value chain of development aid, Ghanaian NGOs occupy a strategic position of being sandwiched between (international) donors and communities. Some scholars have argued that this intermediary position and proximity to communities make them understand local needs and dynamics.

Srinivas (2015) affirms that the proximity, accountability, and flexibility in working with local communities make NGOs an ideal partner in project implementation in

less-developed countries. NGOs in Ghana can be seen as special purpose vehicles (SPOs), portraying, and presenting themselves as vanguards of the sub-altern, the voice of the voiceless among other accolades. Almost every nook and cranny in Ghana is festooned with signboards of one NGO doing one thing or the other. Identified NGOs include large well-funded international agencies as well as a litany of smaller operations involving faith and community-based organisations, all competing for space and attention in an overcrowded market space.

While the contributions of these NGOs can be visibly felt and seen in almost every aspect of the socio-economic, cultural, and political spheres of everyday Ghanaian life, the same cannot be said about their track record in 'giving power back to the people' or for want of a better expression, empowering people.

Despite their best efforts and intentions, it can still be seen that the same power asymmetries that undergird the relationship between NGOs and their donors, are replicated in nearly the same pattern in their dealings with local communities. A development



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agenda driven by the people remains elusive as NGOs continue to accentuate their power, consciously and unconsciously. This matrix of power accentuated and perpetuated by NGOs vis-à-vis the communities they serve includes the unilateral design and development of programmes and projects, the imposition of the concept of what constitutes progress through the usage of performance and measurement instruments devoid of local input, the creation of financial dependency and slow kill of local initiative inter alia.

For starters, it is useful consider how the agenda for local development is set in communities by NGOs.

Most NGOs claim they are responding to community needs but in fact, these priorities are pre-determined by overarching strategic objectives of foreign policy goals crafted in the corridors of Washington and Amsterdam, which are translated into country strategies and the granters' goals. As noted by Filipovic (2013), development aid is attached to a power dynamic in which the aid-givers are the ones who set the agenda and the recipients are expected to be grateful. Often, NGOs that are seen to be "helping the poor" are in fact victimising them further by providing support that these recipients do not necessarily want (Dearden, 2013).

To refute these assertions, some proponents argue that NGO initiatives are tied to achieving global milestones such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and country strategy goals of recipient countries. The question of, to what extent or what is the degree of influence of these countries in carving these global milestones still looms. Narrowing the debate to the local level, it is the practice of many NGOs to fabricate proposals for funding without community inputs. Consultation of community 'interest' usually comes

after funding is secured, and in most cases, these 'consultations' are nothing but 'tokenistic', where local communities have to fit supposed needs into a pre-determined strategic objective of both donor and implementor as brilliantly summed by Afadzina (2020):

...what should that be the motivation for an organisation's existence or the determinant of that existence? Should it not be for the constituency whose problems the organisation exists to help solve? How much of a say does that community have in the solution to their problems and the organisation's relevance in solving them? What ownership do they have in the ways devised to solve those problems? How do they identify with the organisation? Wherein lies their agency and their participation in solving their problems? Do they see the organisation's agenda as one that is of mutual benefit? Who plays the tune and who dances to it?

A concomitant effect of the failure to involve the community in determining the agenda at the initial stages of a project is definition and determination of success or failure. Rarely do communities participate in defining and designing matrices and tools for monitoring and evaluation even though some effort is made to do participatory M&E by a few NGOs. Performance matrices are set by international donors and handed down to most Ghanaian NGOs who serve as local implementing partners. In many instances, international donors lack a deeper understanding of local problems and dynamics while their local counterparts suffer from a dearth of results-based M&E skills and capabilities.

In some cases, external consultants are called in ensure 'objectivity' and 'sanity' in measuring performance and change. However, local communities are treated like specimen in a tube rather than active determinants of what change is or could be. As noted by (Hanchey & Berkelaar, 2015), donors often design and use quantitative checklists that do not align with the complex circumstances of the organizational work of NGOs (emphasis mine) on the ground. As such, when the donors increase resources to NGO projects, which are deemed successful by their own measurements, community's actual needs and priorities easily fall through the cracks.

This fixation on satisfying donor key performing indicators (KPIs) and accountability mechanisms then leads to imperialistically implementing programs and feigning change based on donor and NGO perspective rather than local understandings and underpinnings. In the end, burn rates may be achieved and log frames religiously adhered to, but very little social impact to justify investments.

Closely related to the issue of agenda setting and development planning is the inability of many Ghanaian NGOs to assert themselves in given thematic areas. Donor funding has increasingly become difficult to access, so several NGOs for survival have failed to properly carve a niche for themselves, doing everything, everywhere provided there is a pool of resources for it. **As noted by Kumi and Copstake (2021), many Ghanaian NGOs are generalists in scope and implement projects and programmes in multiple sectors with their activities. As pragmatic as this may seem, as far as local development and the agency of communities are concerned, there is a real potential/tendency for misalignment of communities' real needs in favour of organisational survival.**

Another worrying trend in Ghana is the unhealthy 'competition' of NGOs. As Mohan (2002) argues, the influx of donor funding results in the proliferation of NGOs, which has created unnecessary and unhealthy competition among NGOs and between local governments as more funds are channeled to NGOs.

He states emphatically, the proliferation of NGOs can create factionalism as local NGOs create their own 'fiefdom of client villages' and while manipulating and accentuating their position as 'owners' of local culture in their negotiations with both North NGOs and local governments. **The strengthening of NGOs, therefore, can create political tensions, which ultimately undermine development** (Mohan 2002).

An equally frustrating issue is the dependency it creates for local communities, sapping away any latent potential of them taking their development into their own hands. De Vet & Schoots (2016) posits, the non-governmental sector focuses primarily on the hidden power relations between organisations and the communities they serve. Manji and O'Coill (2002) liken today's NGO work to a continuation of the missionary

and voluntary organisations that cooperated in Europe's colonial control of Africa. They write that "today [NGOs] work contributes marginally to the relief of poverty, but significantly to undermining the struggle of African people to emancipate themselves from economic, social and political oppression."

A story is told of this once vibrant youth group in Wurudua in Tolon-Kumbungu district of the northern region of Ghana. This youth group was engaged in local community works earning it a good reputation among local NGOs, who in their desperation to work with them started to offer this group inducements and incentives. Fast forward, the once self-driven group has withered. The youth no longer take initiative nor show interest in community activities if there are no incentives. Anecdotal as this account may sound, it succeeds in illustrating the current trend of dependency and the dearth of initiative in many local communities in Ghana partly attributable to the byproducts of NGO activities.

The realisation that NGO programming is also marked by short termism needs to be mentioned. The average project funded or implemented by a project is 1 year, except for those that are done in partnership or consortium with funders like the USAID, Mastercard Foundation, which can last up to 5 years or more. Though difficult, the correlation of project length and effectiveness has yet to be established. Nonetheless, it remains problematic to see how short, sporadic, and intermittent programmes can be effective in creating durable changes that can significantly alter the lives of communities. Srinivas (2015) affirms with the view that long-term funding is a critical challenge for NGOs. Most NGOs grapple with one-off funding sources that do not enable them to carry out sustained work over the long-term.

VI. Moving from Shifting Power to Harnessing Power

A fundamental issue defining the power dynamics and agency of local communities vis-à-vis NGOs is one of funding. NGOs have come to stay in Ghana, occupying a strategic space and complementing government in delivering services and products to citizens. If there is any real possibility of empowering communities, some power will have to be 'given voluntarily' by those who currently exercise it. In the real world, power is not given up easily, so communities will have to 'seize'

and/or harness it from the bottom.

By harnessing power, what do we mean?

First, there is a need for a shift in mindset. Any positive and long-lasting change will have to begin with how communities think and perceive development. Regrettably several communities in Ghana have become beholden to the idea that government and to some extent, local NGOs are primarily responsible for development. Though it is not out of place to place so much responsibility on government by virtue of the social contract that exists between the state and citizens, the downside is the slow death of local initiative. **Communities have thus become passive actors and it is no wonder many have been left in utter hopelessness when the government and by extension NGOs fail to deliver. Until communities begin to realise that development is self-initiated and sustained, and begin to mobilise local resources, the status quo is unlikely to shift.**

In tandem with this reasoning, community actors and formations such as self-help, voluntary associations and groups need to rise and up their game. Fortunately, community associations are nothing new in Ghana with many dating back to the pre-colonial era. However, these 'formations' will require all the sophistry and technical competence to survive and become chief architects of development in today's global milieu.

As far as community empowerment goes, **there is a need for a renewed belief in local methods, processes and solutions that are not pegged to international aid 'standards'**. Existing in Ghana and elsewhere in Africa a plethora of solutions in virtually every sphere of human endeavour that can be tapped and harnessed.

Some of these indigenous ideas and knowledge products even have widespread application and can be exported to other continents. Thankfully, there are a few local organisations like Centre for Indigenous and Organisational Development (CIKOD), which have championed the use of local ideas in agro-ecology, biodiversity, and advocacy to create sustainable changes in communities across Northern Ghana. These kinds of initiatives represent a ray of hope and should be highlighted and supported to increase the power of communities.



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Quite critically, these formations will have to find means of generating their own resources or a significant proportion of these resources as this will guarantee them the autonomy required for self-determination and independence in diagnosing and prescribing their own remedies to key developmental challenges. Already, we are seeing a growing number of successes associated with Village Savings and Loans Associations (VLSAs) and other social enterprises in leading and spearheading change in communities in Ghana. This is a step in the right direction and many more of such initiatives should be encouraged.

As enduring as the work of **NGOs who seek to empower the vulnerable and poor in society is, they will also need to take local resource mobilisation efforts seriously and explore in detail alternative models of funding.** This point cannot be overemphasised given the gloomy outlook for external donor support. Firstly, this will play a key role in helping them to realign and harmonise their activities with community imperatives. Secondly, it will allow them greater flexibility in programming.

Critically, it would also help them to collaboratively work with communities in the design, planning, implementation, and measuring or tracking of change. Furthermore, it also increases the stakes for mutual accountability and the currency of trust and legitimacy of NGO operations in their communities. Fortunately, a good number of NGOs in Ghana are taking local resource mobilisation seriously and have made significant progress in that regard. Mention can be **made of seven Ghanaian CSOs including Resource Link Foundation, Hope for Children & Aged**



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Rehabilitation Centre, Safe Child Advocacy, Special Attention Project, Service Awareness Support Organisation, NORSAAC and Urban Poor Child Organisation who raised a total of USD47,093.73 using the skills and strategies acquired from the training from WACSI. These achievements however you view them, point to the fact that there is tremendous potential in Ghana for developing and harnessing local giving and philanthropy.

Finally, given the bright prospects of local giving in Ghana, there is a need for some form of policy to provide guidance, create the needed incentives, regulate the sector and prevent/mitigate abuse to stimulate local philanthropy in Ghana. Such a policy will also create and contribute to improving the climate and infrastructure on local giving. Currently, Ghana lacks an instructive policy on local philanthropy and charitable giving. **The only policy that is remotely close is the Crowdfunding policy that was promulgated by the Bank of Ghana, which is limited in scope and inadequate.** The NPO bill, which is touted as a game changer also falls short of expectations regarding local philanthropy.

To sum it up, existing regulations are mute on creating a regulatory framework tax regimes that will incentivise givers. Philanthropists and charities as well as conduct periodic monitoring, and evaluation, among other functions. Government agencies and bodies mandated to exercise oversight responsibility and sure sanity of the work of NGOs are also handicapped with internal capacity and resource challenges. As a result, NGOs

have voiced frustration citing problems with their methods, cost, and time of interfacing with them (The Ghana Philanthropy Forum, undated).

VII. Conclusion

While the shift the power is a nascent approach, this paper has attempted to question who it may ultimately empower. The shift the power initiative has managed to spark renewed optimism about the potential of aid to the development of communities after decades of frustration and disappointment. As a rallying cry, the #ShiftThePower campaign/movement "seemed to ignite something deep and powerful – both disappointment and frustration with existing systems of development, and a sense of opportunity, a feeling of hope and optimism that new ways of deciding and doing were not only possible, but that they were also starting to emerge." If nothing at all, the campaign has managed to bring communities to the very heart of the conversation about aid-assisted development. But once again, as this write up has tried to showcase, local communities like the biblical Moses, stand at the brink of the Promised Land, but are unlikely to enter it. Thanks to internal bottlenecks and 'gatekeeping' roles and the degree of paternalism local NGOs reinforce in the vain hope of empowering local communities. The Sub-altern and CSOs both have a role to play if these dynamics must change. **Local communities 'must wrestle' control by all legitimate means while CSOs must shy away from viewing them as passive actors to seeing them as co-creators and co-conveners and better yet owners of development.**

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