

# Neither lapdogs nor puppets

NGOs continue to do good work, despite the many challenges

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ALEXANDER O'Riordan's treatise on the demise of Idasa (*The Witness*, April 1) creates an impression that local NGOs are passively facing extinction. It is based on a shallow piece of desk-top research and anecdotal remarks attributed to some faceless donors.

The most important aspect of the domestic NGO industry that needs to be appreciated is that we are extremely diverse, both in field and style of operation. We are believed collectively to employ more people and reach more vulnerable members of society than the government itself, with a fraction of the budget.

There are many funder impact studies in the public domain that have documented a flight of foreign capital from the NGO sector. They include prestigious bodies such as Inyathelo Institute for Social Advancement, which has a close finger on the pulse of the international donor community. It mapped a 70% decline in American philanthropy in 2010 alone.

NGOs operate in multiple service-delivery sectors, along a spectrum between pure service delivery and acting as watchdogs and advocates of change. The only commonality between us is that, as a rule, we reach the people whom government is failing. It is true that wages are uncompetitive and we suffer systemic losses of staff to the state and private sector. That is a yoke that we do not choose; it is thrust on us by donors demanding value for money and a government which exploits the sector as a source of cheap service delivery.

Let me focus on the governance field, where Idasa operated. I attended a national network meeting of NGOs involved in the sector, the Good Governance Learning Network, last week. There were only 18 members in the entire country out of tens of thousands of NGOs. Now there are 17. Many of us have contracted others before Idasa was forced to close shop.

The second largest member of the network after Idasa showed similar resilience to changing times under the "new dispensation". It successfully transformed itself from an organisation of landed liberal white women protesting the injustices of apartheid, to move deep into areas of poverty and administrative injustice suffered by the most vulnerable sections of our society. In the past two years, both organisations had to make deep cuts, in the process shedding 50% to 60% of their staff.

Smaller NGOs are also susceptible to haemorrhaging when donors withdraw. Our NGO, the Built Environment Support Group (BESG), supports a programme of democratising service delivery across uMgungundlovu District, the Deepening Democracy Project. The district municipality saw value in the work we proposed and entered into a strategic partnership with us to promote public participation in local government. An external evaluation of the project conducted last year gave positive acknowledgement to our ability to harness, train, and organise over 120 community-based organisations (CBOs) across the district into broad civil society clusters.

Those clusters are platforms for communities to engage collectively with their local municipalities, to ensure that planning and budgeting processes are no longer the work of planning consultants and bureaucrats alone, but are responsive to local needs as expressed by communities themselves. The evaluation also paid tribute to the struggles we face in working with many elected councillors and administrators who are, at best, indifferent and, at worst, hostile to being held accountable for poor decision-making and service delivery.

In spite of the visible success of the project, it faces two challenges with respect to funding. The first is the decline in the donor pool. Of the three donors that originally supported our project, one has left the

country and another has ceased funding civil society organisations in favour of bilateral (state-to-state) agreements. The second is the tendency of donors to give project-based funding for short periods and expect tangible results when we are involved in deep institutional change management processes.

A consultant, who has undertaken a deeper analysis of the OECD database quoted by O'Riordan, found that only 1,8% of the funds were allocated to NGOs in the governance sector. The overwhelming bulk of foreign government funding to the country is tied up in state departments. A trickle of it reaches civil society in the form of sub-contract arrangements. Some NGOs will grab it for economic survival — as has happened with the president's drive to create five million work opportunities through the Expanded Public Works and Community Works Programmes. We become service-delivery agents of the state, in what can best be described as a "lapdog" mentality. Some will baulk bravely at the strings attached to offers of funding, where they compromise or threaten the core values that underpin our work.

To give two examples from our own cupboard of skeletons: BESG has geared more than R100 million of state funding into community-driven infrastructure and housing projects — like the housing project by the Development Action Group featured in *The Witness* article. As a means of reaching more communities than we can through direct project work, we use a mixture of research and documenting pro-poor development practice to influence the way the government develops and implements enabling policy around service delivery.

In 2000, we led a research study into the impact of the national housing subsidy scheme. It exposed many of the ills associated with RDP housing that is poorly located, undersized, and shoddily built. The gov-

ernment has since made several changes in both policy and regulation of the housing industry. However, the local conduit for European Union funding that underpinned the study had its own agenda and hired a public relations company to raise banner headlines. A national newspaper carried a front-page story on the study headed, "Government service delivery a failure". It destroyed our relationship with the National Department of Housing for two years.

A similar instance arose in 2011, when we exposed the awarding of a R2,1 billion housing contract in Vulindlela without a tender. We are still picking up the pieces, but had we remained silent on these matters we would be betraying our core constituency and the CBOs that we were supporting at the time.

Therein lies a final chapter missing in O'Riordan's article: a government that speaks of civil society with a forked tongue. Our Constitution and local government legislation, and many prominent political leaders all talk to the need to promote and support a strong civil society to hold the government to account. But it was a blot on the copybook of our first two state presidents to accuse civil society of being "puppets of foreign governments" for speaking out. Similarly, look at the hostile response of the majority party when its alliance partner, Cosatu, convened a conference to engage with civil society.

Today, Stats SA cannot be challenged in demonstrating that we have deeper levels of poverty now than we did in 1994. And international NGOs cannot displace the rainbow nation of NGOs that supports and defends the poorest of the poor in our own backyard, simply because they are closer to those with the purse strings who call the shots.

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