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**NGOs, PARTICIPATION
AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Testing the Assumptions with Evidence
from Zimbabwe**

by Jessica Vivian and Gladys Maseko

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PREFACE

UNRISD has been involved in research concerning participation and development for well over a decade now, and has published more than a dozen books and numerous articles dealing with these issues. In recent years, the rising profile of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in development recommendations and policy initiatives, as well as their increased share of development funding, has reaffirmed the centrality of an understanding of the dynamics of "participation" in development studies. With the establishment of a consensus that participation is necessary for development, the question becomes how participatory strategies are to be implemented.

The research presented in this paper was designed to explore factors affecting the implementation of strategies for participatory development through non-governmental organizations, especially local-level NGOs. The study was conducted in Zimbabwe, and while some of its findings are context-specific, many of them will be much more widely relevant.

The authors compare the often idealized picture of development NGOs which appears in the extensive NGO literature with evidence they gathered concerning the range of organizations which make up the rural development NGO sector in Zimbabwe. The approach taken is to enumerate the prevailing assumptions about the characteristics, strategies, and impacts of development NGOs, to test these assumptions against the research findings, and where necessary to account for the differences between the assumptions and the observations. The analysis is based on ten months of fieldwork in Zimbabwe, which included interviews with rural NGO beneficiaries, rural leaders and administrators, NGO staff members and central development planners, as well as a formal survey of rural development NGOs in the country.

The paper argues that the individual organizations which comprise the development NGO sector make up a wide spectrum of organizational types, with a similarly wide range of project strategies and outcomes. Some NGOs are truly creative, independent, and committed to the egalitarian and participatory ideals upon which they were founded. At the opposite extreme, others act essentially as members of a service industry, developing and carrying out their activities in response to requests from donors. Some estimates are given of the proportion of organizations which fall into each extreme of this range. More importantly, however, the paper argues that it is the latter type of NGO - that which acts as part of a service industry - which is most likely to appear as a result of the current growth of interest in NGOs as agents of development.

The authors also analyse some of the reasons that rural development NGOs find it difficult to accomplish all that is expected of them. Among other questions, they discuss the logistical implications of truly participatory initiatives, the institutional constraints involved in reaching the poor, the complexity of the question of how to benefit rural women, the difficulty of going beyond the project approach, and the ambiguity of the concept of NGOs representing the "grassroots".

The paper constitutes a critique, not of the NGO approach, but of the overwhelming expectations placed upon the NGO sector, especially in recent years. The fact that some

NGOs have been very successful does not mean that the entire NGO sector should be expected to match their accomplishments.

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Director

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, a large literature has emerged to explore the possible contribution of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to rural development, and has described a significant potential for development NGOs. By undertaking comparative or case study analysis, it has been able to establish many factors that have contributed to the success of certain NGO initiatives. Partly because of this literature, NGOs are increasingly being called upon to play a larger role in development efforts.

However, this same literature also recognizes that the potential shown by some NGOs has not been realized more generally, and that "development NGOs cannot yet claim collectively to have made a contribution to be proud of" (Clark, 1991: 210). Therefore calls are increasingly being made for research which explores the impact of the NGO sector as a whole on development efforts in a particular country. The study described here was designed in part to meet this challenge. The approach taken was to enumerate the assumptions made about development NGOs, and then to test these assumptions in a particular country context: that of Zimbabwe. The study design was based on the premise that a set of relatively untested assumptions are currently held regarding development NGOs, and that these assumptions form the basis of the general understanding of the NGO sector, the policy approach taken to NGOs, and the operations of development NGOs themselves.

The study was comprised of three different elements, designed to address different aspects of, and perspectives on, NGO operations. First, a series of interviews was held with groups of rural NGO members. Second, interviews were conducted with professionals - governmental and non-governmental - who deal with problems of rural development. Third, a formal survey of the rural development NGOs operating in the country was carried out. The main findings of the study are given below. As the report indicates, evidence for some of the questions addressed by the research is more conclusive than that for others. In particular, it should be stressed that the research was concerned with only one particular category of NGOs - those carrying out rural development initiatives. Obviously, evidence from this sector is not indicative of the experiences of the entire NGO community. This subset of NGOs was selected because it is quite clearly the fastest growing element of the NGO community, and that to which the bulk of external funds are allocated.

A Note on Terminology

The term "NGO" has acquired a wide range of meanings, and has been exhaustively defined and variously subdivided within the literature. Obviously, a great many types of organizations are not associated with the government, and thus the category "NGO" is enormous. This study is concerned with what we term "**operational rural development NGOs**": that subset of NGOs which identify their function primarily as undertaking work with their own personnel meant to foster rural development.¹ Typically, such NGOs employ staff (or have volunteers) who live in or travel to rural villages to initiate and/or support development projects or programmes.

The study included both national and international operational rural development NGOs. However, many of the international NGOs undertake their work primarily through

¹. This term is shortened to "development NGO" or simply "NGO" below. The remainder of the report is concerned with operational rural development NGOs unless otherwise specified.

funding local NGO "partners" rather than directly involving themselves in field projects; such donor NGOs did not form part of the study. More importantly, it should be stressed that specifically political, advocacy, research, service and urban organizations which are not directly involved in development initiatives were not included in the study. This is not to imply that such organizations are unimportant - indeed, the findings suggest that they may well have a key role to play in development. However, they are not the focus here.

THE CONTEXT: NGOS IN RURAL ZIMBABWE

The problems that rural development NGOs are attempting to address in Zimbabwe are similar to those elsewhere in Africa. Although communal land ownership has meant that absolute landlessness is relatively rare, nearly half the land of the country is still alienated from the majority of the population, and land hunger is becoming an increasing problem. Almost 40 per cent of the land of Zimbabwe is classified as large-scale farming areas, and is owned by fewer than 5,000, mostly white, farmers. Fifty-seven per cent of the population of Zimbabwe, or approximately six million people, live on the 42 per cent of the land area which is classified as communal land (S. Moyo, 1987; CSO, 1992). Already by 1982, 37 per cent of the land in the communal areas was defined as being under great pressure (Muir, 1992), while the population of the country has increased over 38 per cent in the decade since then (CSO, 1992).

Growth in the communal agricultural sector has been significant since independence. However, production increases were largely limited to a small sector of the rural population (Amin, 1992). Moreover, evidence indicates that much of the investment in small-scale and communal agriculture comes from remittances from wage-earners rather than from within the agricultural sector itself (Cousins et al., 1990). Thus farmers who do not have access to wage employment or remittances are unable to invest productively in agricultural inputs. Statistics on drought relief recipients indicate persistent poverty and the absence of food self-sufficiency among the rural population: even in good agricultural years, 12 per cent of households living in good agricultural regions fail to produce enough maize to feed themselves, and 25 per cent of those in the poorer regions must rely on food assistance. In poor years, 24-60 per cent of households receive drought relief (Muir, 1992). In the western provinces of Zimbabwe, which are classified as poor agricultural land, all but one of the years since 1984 have been poor. Thus the majority of the rural population of the western provinces has depended on drought relief assistance for close to a decade.

Since independence there have been notable advances in education and health services in the rural areas. Primary school enrolment doubled from 1980 to 1990, and secondary school enrolment increased more than ninefold. The percentage of the relevant age group enrolled in secondary school grew from six per cent in 1960 to 46 per cent in 1986 (Muir, 1992). The number of schools in the country nearly tripled over the same period (ROZ, 1991). A programme to improve community health services trained over 8,000 village health workers from 1981-1987, with plans to train 12,500 by 1993, so that there will be a village health worker for every 500 people in the rural areas (CSO, 1989). However, there are still significant disparities in the availability of health care between urban and rural areas. Only about 20 per cent of health care staff, and only six per cent of doctors, were in rural areas (ibid.). While life expectancy increased from 45 to 60 years between 1960 and 1990, the under five mortality rate actually increased slightly over this period (Muir, 1992).

In addition, progress on education and health provisioning has slowed with the economic downturn of the late 1980s and the structural adjustment programme begun in 1991. The policy of seeking cost recovery in health services and education has led to reduced access to these services, especially in the rural areas. Our interviews, as well as newspaper reports, suggest that increases in school fees have become a particular burden, and that many children, especially girls, are being withdrawn from school because of parents' inability to pay fees.

These problems were compounded by the severe drought which occurred in the 1991-1992 growing season. The drought affected the whole country, including the usually productive agricultural zones. Because the country's grain stockpiles had been reduced the previous season, in line with the requirements of the structural adjustment programme, food shortages and escalating food prices began in early 1992. The drought also caused a very high number of livestock deaths, which created tillage problems for communal farmers in the 1992 planting season, when the drought broke.

Although NGOs are significant service providers in the rural areas of Zimbabwe, operating clinics and schools, NGOs who see themselves as "development" oriented typically want to go beyond service provisioning to attack the causes of poverty. Their perceptions of the problem of poverty and its solutions are based largely on the assumption that rural productivity must be improved, and their programmes take a similar approach to the development efforts of the government. Most commonly, they attempt to increase the incomes of communal farmers by undertaking training programmes, and providing material and support services for income generating projects. In addition, they have projects designed to make more efficient use of existing resources, improving consumption levels and the quality of life through such projects as building improved grain storage structures and improved latrines. NGOs are also very active in the provision of infrastructure, especially water supply, in projects which are meant to complement government efforts to reduce the cost of productive inputs in communal areas.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

A particular combination of circumstances in recent years has led to a marked rise in emphasis on NGOs as agents of development. A broadly-based consensus is emerging among groups concerned with development - including academics, donors, and governments - that NGOs are not the marginal actors they were perceived to be through much of the 1970s and 1980s, but rather are key players who can have a substantial impact on development. This attitude is increasingly backed up by funds: in 1989, NGOs collectively provided a higher net transfer of funds to developing countries than did the World Bank (Clark, 1991). Much of the NGO funding comes from official sources, and it is not unusual, especially for the larger northern NGOs to obtain 80 per cent of their funding from their government (*ibid.*). The total official funding to NGOs has also risen dramatically: ODA's joint funding scheme for NGOs was £2.25 million in 1983/84, and was scheduled to rise to £28 million in 1992/93. The income of the Save the Children Fund (U.K.) grew 10-fold over the last decade, from £6 million in 1981 to £60 million in 1991 (Dolan, 1992).

There are several reasons for the increasing visibility and influence of NGOs. First, a number of "success stories" illustrating the potential of local organizations to provide innovative, participatory and sustainable solutions to rural development problems have

been reported in the academic and popular press (e.g. Esman and Uphoff, 1984; Korten, 1990; Clark, 1991). Those who criticize mainstream development efforts see NGOs as a means through which an "alternative development", which involves the "empowerment" of disadvantaged groups, can be effected (e.g. Stiefel and Wolfe, 1994; Friedmann, 1992).

At the same time, there are widespread reports of the "retreat of the state" within developing countries, and it is argued that local organizations, and especially local NGOs, are in a position to fill the space left by the state's withdrawal from production, service, and organizational activities (e.g. Nugent, 1993). The economic crises of the 1980s have left governments with fewer resources for service provisioning and development programmes. In addition, the structural adjustment policies meant to address macro-economic problems have been developed within a neo-liberal framework which calls for state disinvestment in virtually normative terms. The free market is portrayed not merely as a means to improved economic performance, but as an end in itself; as not only more efficient than the state, but also as a morally superior way to allocate resources (Doyal and Gough, 1991). Government involvement in economic enterprise is portrayed as necessarily inefficient and almost inevitably corrupt, and donors are not only increasing grants to NGOs, but in some cases are shifting funding from government to NGOs (Sanyal, 1991; Meyer, 1992; Vivian, 1993). NGO programmes are seen as a private sector alternative to government investment, and NGOs are even urged to take over some essential service provisioning as part of privatization. The role of NGOs in stimulating institutional changes which facilitate development is considered to be especially important.

The accelerating trend to move NGOs to a more prominent position in development strategies has been welcomed in many quarters. However, there are some misgivings, even within the NGO sector itself, that this emphasis comes at a time when the capacity of NGOs collectively to effectively expand their activities and to utilize the additional resources being made available to them is not known (Edwards and Hulme, 1992). The main analytical approach which has been taken with regard to NGOs and their activities has focused on comparative case studies. Such analysis seeks to define the conditions necessary for NGO success by surveying the experiences of different NGOs and distinguishing the factors which led to the success or failure of particular aspects of their activities (e.g. Esman and Uphoff, 1984; Conyers and Kaul, 1990).

This approach is helpful, but only up to a point - it serves to indicate that a potential for NGO success exists, but does not disclose how to create the conditions which would allow such potential to be fulfilled on a scale wide enough to have a significant impact on development problems. In fact, NGO successes have been relatively rare, they have proven difficult to replicate, and attempts to increase the overall impact of the NGO sector by expanding NGO projects have had ambiguous results. These problems are acknowledged within the mainstream NGO community. An influential study of NGO projects recommended, as early as 1982, that "the evaluator should treat any successes she runs across with a sense of awe" (Tendler, 1982:143). A typical question posed in the mainstream literature has become: "why are we disappointed?" (e.g. Poulton, 1988).

It is now becoming generally accepted that broader and more rigorous studies of the development NGO sector are needed to increase the understanding of NGOs' possible contribution to development (e.g. Paul, 1988). Presently, reports of NGO projects tend to concentrate on success stories because these are seen to yield more interesting lessons than do failures. It has also been argued, however, that donors do not want to see more critical

studies, because they have a faith in the NGO approach that they do not want to be forced to question (Clark, 1990). Whatever the reason, the NGO literature tends to concentrate on the potential shown by successful NGOs rather than to explore the full range of the NGO experience. The resulting policy prescriptions are thus based on analysis that is often too heavily reliant on anecdotal evidence and wishful thinking.

The case study or project evaluation approach can over-emphasize and idealize the work of NGOs, and can thus obscure the inherent limitations of their initiatives, especially as they concern macro-level policy and structural change. Although writers in this field are generally careful not to present NGOs as a panacea for development problems, there is a prevailing tendency to regard the development of "voluntary" organizations to be possible, and their promotion to be desirable, under virtually all circumstances. Arguably, however, there are some conditions under which the attempt to substitute local-level efforts for national or international action will be counter-productive: not only is the NGO sector limited in its scope, but in particular circumstances it may be weak or nonexistent, fragmented, or structurally unable to address the problems at hand. These issues must be addressed before local experiences can be used to inform development policy formulation.

RESEARCH METHODS

Fieldwork was carried out in Zimbabwe over a ten-month period in 1992. The research was undertaken in three parts. First, a series of interviews was carried out with groups of rural NGO members.² This stage was designed to establish the extent of NGO activities in the rural areas, the types of activities undertaken, people's perceptions of NGO activities, people's economic situation, and their perceptions of how they are represented by government structures and by NGOs. A total of 39 groups were interviewed, with discussions usually lasting between one and two hours.

Second, interviews were conducted with three professional groups associated with rural development NGOs: civil servants from various ministries; elected officials holding village- to national-level offices; and extension workers, teachers, and NGO fieldworkers working directly with rural development problems. These served to give an overview of NGO priorities, strategies, and accomplishments. Approximately 70 such interviews were held.

Third, a formal survey of NGOs who defined themselves as undertaking development work in rural areas was conducted. Thirty-four such NGOs were identified from a list of NGOs compiled by the National Association of NGOs (NANGO). (Although several hundred NGOs were listed by NANGO, most of them did not fall in the category of rural development NGOs.) Out of the population of 34 NGOs originally identified, 28 were successfully interviewed. In addition, three new NGOs which were not included in the NANGO list were identified during the course of the survey, and these were also interviewed. Thus the total number of respondents was 31. Because of the current rapid rate of NGO formation in Zimbabwe, it is likely that some smaller and younger NGOs were not included in the survey. Respondents were generally from the upper levels of their

². The term "NGO members" will be used throughout the paper to refer to the people who benefit from NGO projects and programmes. Although the term "beneficiary" is perhaps more clear, "member" is in common usage and conveys the sense that beneficiaries are expected to be active participants in NGO projects. The term "NGO staff" will refer to personnel, paid or unpaid, who are responsible for implementing NGO programmes, and who report to NGO headquarters.

organizations. Confidentiality was guaranteed to each respondent, and none was asked to answer questions with which s/he was not comfortable.³ Most survey interviews were one to two hours long.

The research design was meant to address some of the limitations of the more common case study approach - in particular, the difficulty in generalizing case study results. In the process, other limitations were necessarily introduced, including restrictions on the dynamic element possible in the analysis. The research method and its limitations are discussed in more detail in Vivian (1993).

OVERVIEW OF THE RURAL DEVELOPMENT NGO SECTOR IN ZIMBABWE

Nongovernmental rural development organizations have existed for several decades in Zimbabwe. Their activities were restricted prior to independence in 1980, and they were largely a welfare-oriented sector focusing on disadvantaged groups such as orphans, the disabled, and the elderly. Since independence, some NGOs have expanded their activities to incorporate explicitly developmental goals, and have moved into services and provision and repair of physical and socio-economic infrastructure (Kerkhoven, 1992). In 1992 there were 642 officially registered NGOs in Zimbabwe, although many of these were primarily social organizations or had interests other than development - the "Wives of the Air Force Pilots" or the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, for instance (ibid.). There are also more than 50 international NGOs working in Zimbabwe, although the majority of these operate essentially as donors to local NGOs, and do not directly undertake development initiatives themselves.

The 31 rural development NGOs which were included in the survey undertaken for this research corresponded roughly with the 34 NGOs identified by VOICE (Voluntary Organisations in Community Enterprise) as involved in assisting groups with income generating projects (VOICE, 1987). There are also a number of newly established rural development NGOs, often the initiatives of one or two individuals, which have not yet been officially registered.

The NGO survey asked the respondents to classify their organization according to the typology used in a recent ODI report on NGOs in Zimbabwe (Muir, 1992). The results are given in Table 1. Sixteen per cent of the respondents classified their organization as foreign based, 58 per cent as local, 10 per cent as a local association of groups, and 16 per cent as church based (these included some foreign affiliated NGOs). None classified themselves as politically linked, although at least two are commonly described by others as having links to a political party.

Table 1: Types of NGOs
Number and per cent of NGOs responding. N=31

	Number	Per cent
Local	18	58

³. Because of the very strong concern of a significant number of respondents that both they and their organization remain anonymous, the list of organizations participating in the survey is not given here. The response rate was quite high for most questions, with the exception of questions dealing with salaries and organizational finances and, to a lesser extent, those dealing with numbers of beneficiaries.

Foreign based	5	16
Church based	5	16
Local association of groups	3	10
Politically linked	0	0

The survey of NGOs included an open question regarding the NGOs' goals: "Describe the organization's goals and philosophy - what are you trying to do?" The responses received are summarized in Table 2. The most common category of response included the provision of either services - usually credit or training - or of resources - usually start-up capital for income generating projects or inputs to infrastructure projects. "Development", described in general terms (for instance, "improving the lives of the people") was also frequently mentioned as a goal. The next most important response concerned mobilization and consciousness-raising. This goal was usually stated in terms such as "we help people to realize their own potential". Lobbying and advocacy work and empowerment were each mentioned less frequently. The category of "institutional experimentation" covers those NGOs who mentioned they were experimenting with different forms of community organization in the provision of goods or services.

Table 2: Goals and Philosophies of NGOs

Number and per cent of those responding who mentioned each category.
More than one response possible. N=29

	Number	Per cent
Provision of services or resources	12	41
General development, raising living standards, etc.	11	38
Mobilization and consciousness raising	9	31
Promotion of self-reliance	6	21
Lobbying and advocacy work	3	10
Empowerment	3	10
Institutional experimentation	2	7

THE ASSUMPTIONS: NGO OBJECTIVES, STRATEGIES AND ACTIVITIES

An influential study of NGOs published over a decade ago listed several "articles of faith" regarding NGO goals and activities which emerged from a review of NGO self-descriptions, and which were accepted largely without question by those working with NGOs (Tendler, 1982). The NGO community, and those who write about it, still share a common body of assumptions regarding the goals they are working for and how they expect to achieve them. The prevalent assumptions regarding NGO goals, strategies and activities are discussed below in the light of the research findings.

Participation

According to widely-held theory, the approach generally taken by NGOs is a participatory one. In contrast with the "top down" operational strategies of governments and large aid agencies, rural development NGOs are typically described as working within rural communities, ascertaining local needs and preferences, and involving their target population in the planning of their activities. This perception was supported by the responses to one of the questions on the NGO survey. In response to an open question, "How are projects initiated?", 92 per cent of those who responded indicated that the beneficiaries were involved in initiating NGO activities. "By the people", and "at village level" were each common responses. Those who discussed this question in more detail typically explained that community groups identified their needs, sometimes with the help of the NGO, and then requested support from the NGO. Decisions were then taken at a more central level regarding whether the NGO would supply the support requested.

However, responses to other questions suggested that such a participatory strategy may be more an ideal than a reality for many NGOs, because of the logistical difficulties they have in carrying out such a strategy given their organizational structure. The NGO literature which describes NGOs as participatory seldom considers the logistics of implementing a truly participatory programme: a very large amount of staff time is involved in stimulating community organization and discussion, tailoring projects to the needs of various groups, manoeuvring around political obstacles, and providing the support services necessary for project success. Some organizations are able to provide such an intensive, long-term community interaction - most notably those who work with volunteers prepared to devote a year or more of their time to one or two communities. More commonly, however, NGOs attempting to operate in a participatory manner face severe operational constraints. As shown by Table 3, the vast majority of NGOs have three or fewer field-based staff (paid or voluntary) to carry out their entire field operations.

Table 3: Number of Field-Based Staff

Number and per cent of those responding. N=27

	Number	Per cent
More than 100	4	15
4-15*	2	8
0-3	20	77

*No respondents reported 16-100 field staff

Field-based staff were defined as NGO workers, paid or unpaid, who resided outside of the cities where the national or regional headquarters of the NGOs were located. In a few cases, NGOs had in place a large network of workers living at the village level, and had mechanisms which enabled these workers to transmit information and requests to headquarters. In the great majority of cases, however, such a system of field staff was not in place. For most NGO beneficiaries to participate in NGO decision-making in a meaningful way, therefore, a large initial logistical hurdle had to be overcome. There were very few channels through which people living in isolated rural areas could make their wishes known to the NGO. A few NGOs attempted to overcome this obstacle by sharing field duties among headquarters staff, and, in some cases, by spatially limiting their activities to a few communities which could be visited regularly. In other cases, however, there was no indication of the mechanisms through which "bottom up" planning could occur.

Another indication that participatory planning may be more an ideal than a reality for some NGOs came from the unstructured interviews with NGO personnel. Workers from four different NGOs made statements to the effect of, "this year we are concentrating on doing x, y, and z".⁴ When asked why, they responded, "because a, b, and c, which we were working on last year, didn't do as well as we had hoped". Thus it seems clear that, at least for some NGOs, the major decisions regarding programme priorities are taken at central level. More significantly, these NGO workers did not seem to consider a more "bottom-up" implementation style to be either a goal or an option.

In fact, it is difficult for NGOs to be "participatory" in a meaningful sense because NGO activities are almost exclusively based on projects which, by their nature, can be participatory only in a limited way. Most NGOs undertake consciousness-raising, mobilization, training, and other organizational activities, but these activities are typically connected with income generating or infrastructure projects, and such projects form the basis of their operations.⁵

Moreover, the rural interviews with groups of NGO members suggested that people join NGOs not with the intention of joining a "participatory process", but rather in the hopes of gaining access to resources that are disbursed as parts of NGO projects. The responses of some of the groups of NGOs members interviewed to a question regarding what they hoped to gain from involvement with an NGO are given in Table 4.⁶

⁴. These statements were spontaneous. This is not a question that was addressed in the questionnaire, and it is not known how many of the other NGOs would have responded similarly.

⁵. Although the goals and philosophies of NGOs were not always stated in project terms, the activities undertaken by NGOs were virtually always projects. Eighty-one percent of respondents in the NGO survey reported their organization supported income-generating projects. More evidence of the prevalence of the project approach is presented below.

⁶. The question, "What do you hope to gain from NGO membership?" was not part of the original set of questions, and was only added at the end of the interview stage of the research. Thus the number of responses is smaller than the total number of groups interviewed (N = 13 rather than N = 39).

Table 4: Goals of Rural NGO Members

Number and per cent of groups who mentioned each category.

More than one response possible. N=13

	Number	Per cent
Benefit from income generating projects	8	62
Social benefits (improved community relations, etc.)	3	23
Receiving resources from NGO	1	7
Sharing house or farm work with other members	1	7
None or unspecified	2	13

Because of the project-based nature of much of NGO work, when people are invited to "participate" in development by NGOs, their participation often takes the form of making a selection between a limited range of options presented to them - deciding whether they want a bakery or a chicken project, for instance. Even so, their selections are often overruled - people do not understand, explained one NGO worker, that they shouldn't have a second bakery in a community just because the first one was successful. In fact, "people don't understand" was a surprisingly common refrain among the NGO personnel interviewed in the course of this research.

These findings regarding the participatory aspects of NGO activities are echoed by the findings of a recent report on NGOs in Zimbabwe:

Although many NGOs claim to follow a participatory approach in their project documents, very few NGOs have defined their approach clearly. *Most NGOs appear to think for their intended beneficiaries.* The requirement of accounting procedures and implementation schedules by donor agencies tends to lead NGOs to take over the decision making process, the role of beneficiaries is then reduced to participation in labour provision, there is also no real transfer of management skills to local leaders (Kerkhoven, 1992:12, emphasis in original).

More positively, however, the present research indicates that the idea of participation as being merely a labour contribution to large projects is losing ground within the NGO community. Most of the large infrastructure projects which were observed relied on machinery and hired labour. Those which did not generally had insufficient funds, and were forced to rely on volunteer labour, although project staff generally indicated that if they could get the funds they would hire an earth-mover or other equipment.

In addition, it is important to note that, even though "participation" has come to be understood as an ideal operational strategy for NGOs, measuring participation does not necessarily measure NGO success by other standards. In fact, participation is not strictly necessary for the success of all NGO endeavours: at times outsiders are better able to initiate developmental changes in a community because of their skills, experience, or, most importantly, because of their relative impartiality. Thus assessing NGO performance strictly on the basis of how they live up to the "participation" rhetoric (even when it is their

own), can actually obscure other accomplishments and make NGOs appear to be less successful than they deserve (see also Tendler, 1982).

Mobilization, Consciousness-Raising and Organization

"Consciousness-raising" was mentioned as a goal by almost one-third of the NGOs responding to the survey. A question asking specifically whether the activities of NGOs included consciousness-raising received a 95 per cent positive response rate. This emphasis among NGOs operating in Zimbabwe reflects that of the international NGO literature, in which the argument is made that people must first be mobilized and made aware of the causes of their problems, and then must be helped to understand what actions they can take to address them. Finally, they must be organized, so that collectively they will have the strength to overcome their difficulties.

A raised consciousness is, of course, a very difficult thing to measure. One striking thing about the rural interviews, however, is that in virtually every group with whom discussions took place, at least one person volunteered an analysis of how the structural adjustment programme was affecting rural life. They explained that imported goods were becoming more expensive because of the currency devaluation, remittances from employed relations were threatened by the retrenchment programme, and, most significantly, school fees were approaching prohibitive levels because of the cost recovery educational policy. However, analyses of local-level factors affecting development were offered much less frequently: only on two occasions was this done. The first discussion centred on a hereditary leader's manipulation of land use rights to the advantage of his family; the second concerned the corruption of an elected leader.⁷

Another indication of the consciousness-raising efforts of NGOs was the very high incidence of spontaneous explanations of the benefits of group activity. All alone we have nothing", explained one woman, "but when we work together we can accomplish things". Of course, it is impossible to tell whether such opinions predated NGO efforts; communal work is a long-standing tradition in Zimbabwe, as it is in much of Africa.

It is also difficult to ascertain the overall results of the organizational work undertaken by NGOs. Again, when NGO personnel were asked directly whether they undertook organizational activities, a large proportion - 92 per cent - replied in the affirmative. A subsequent question asked whether the NGOs worked with previously existing groups, or whether they organized their groups. The results, given in Table 5, suggest that organization is not as central to NGO activities as is often assumed. Only one NGO reported that all the groups with which it worked with were formed as a result of its own organizational efforts, while one-third of the NGOs interviewed worked *only* with groups that had organized themselves, or had been organized by others. Interviews suggest that attracting "good" groups to join their organization was an important goal of NGO field staff, and conflict over "ownership" of groups was a frequently cited source of stress among different NGOs, as well as between NGOs and government agencies. Several of the rural groups interviewed received resources from more than one NGO; one of them had obtained resources from three different sources for the same project.

⁷. This does not necessarily mean that local level dynamics were not understood. Usually elected or traditional leaders or both were present during the discussions. This would obviously inhibit criticism of them.

Table 5: Organization of NGO Member Groups

Number and per cent of those responding. N=24

	Number	Per cent
NGOs who work only with previously existing groups	8	33
NGOs who work only with groups they have organized	1	4
NGOs who work with both	15	63

Volunteerism and Collective Action

A third assumption about the NGO sector is that it is composed largely of volunteer workers. "Voluntary sector" is frequently used as a synonym for NGOs, which are described as undertaking "voluntary action" (e.g. Clark, 1991). However, "voluntary organization" is clearly a misnomer for most NGOs working in Zimbabwe. Only 17 per cent of the NGOs surveyed said they had more volunteers than paid staff. Sixty-nine per cent had either no volunteers, or only one or two volunteers (see Table 6). Of the organizations which reported one or two volunteers, almost half of these volunteers were foreign and were recruited and supported by an international agency. Some of the organizations which reported large numbers of volunteers counted all former beneficiaries as volunteers, attributing to them a sort of non-specific, "spreading the word" type of role. A few, however, did seem to rely on volunteers for a substantial proportion of their activities.

Table 6: Volunteers Working in NGOs

Number and per cent of those responding. N=29

Total number of volunteers working in the organization	Number	Per cent
0-2	20	69
3-10	1	3
11-20	4	14
21-30	1	3
More than 100*	3	10
Volunteers as compared to paid staff		
More volunteers than paid staff	5	17
Number of volunteers 25-100% of number of paid staff	5	17
Number of volunteers less than 25% of number of paid staff	19	66

*No respondents reported 31-100 volunteers

Another aspect of NGO operational strategies, however, more closely resembles voluntary action. This is their work with and through rural groups whose members contribute to a common goal. Sixty-three per cent of the NGOs surveyed for this study reported that their development work was carried out with groups, and a further 27 per cent reported they worked with both groups and individuals. The collective action aspect of NGO operations is designed to maximize the benefits of NGO work by taking advantage of the increased returns made possible by collective activities.

The subject of group work was a major focus of the rural interviews. Even though the interviews were conducted with group members, many of the respondents reported that they preferred to work individually rather than as part of a group, both on development projects and on their own land holdings.⁸ The reasons given conformed to the expectations of the classical models of collective action: the problems of "free riders" and the inability to trust members of a large group were frequently noted, even by those who said they did prefer group work. On the other side of the question, many people mentioned that group activities were more productive than individual activities.

Another common, and interesting, response to the question regarding group work was that the formation of groups was required by donors - this was the only way people could access external resources. Questioning regarding how such groups actually operated once the resources were received often revealed that a *de facto* privatization took place almost immediately. Elaborate mechanisms were drawn up to assign to each member his or her share of the funds or materials, production was undertaken privately and any profits retained by individuals, but accounts were combined to maintain the appearance of group activity.

Grassroots Representation

The NGO sector worldwide has become more active in claiming a place for itself in development policy debates. NGO representatives are invited to attend international fora not only on the strength of their positions as development actors, but also, increasingly, on the basis of their ability to act as the voice of "the people". Their claim to represent the grassroots serves to legitimize the work of the sector as a whole, and to reinforce their influence in the international development arena.

The belief that development NGOs represent the grassroots rests on two assumptions. First, that they are in contact with the sectors of society which they are supposed to represent - typically described as "the poorest of the poor". Second, that they are either receptive to the people's wishes, or that they have a sufficient understanding of people's problems and needs to act as advocates for their cause. The validity of both of these assumptions is difficult to assess. The study yielded some indications regarding the extent to which Zimbabwean NGOs are likely to reach the poorest sectors of rural society: it appears that this is a difficult problem for any external agency, including NGOs.⁹

⁸. Quantification of this response poses a problem, as groups typically did not come to a consensus on the question, and many individuals within the groups did not express opinions. Some individuals agreed with both sides of the question. However, the comments received for and against group work were roughly evenly divided.

⁹. This question is discussed in more detail below.

The extent to which NGOs are participatory is relevant to the second assumption. As was described above, grassroots participation is in fact a very difficult way for NGOs to operate. In addition, the rural interviews gave other indications that NGOs are unlikely to be acting as the "voice of the people" in a literal sense. Although NGO members, especially of the more explicitly "participatory" NGOs, seemed outwardly to feel a sense of ownership of their organization, people were very puzzled to be asked for their opinions about what NGOs ought to do. In the rural interviews, this question invariably had to be explained and examples provided - for instance: "would you like them to provide more training, or more dams, or more information, or something else?" The responses were generally non-committal: the beneficiaries of NGO projects clearly felt that they were not in a position to tell NGOs what to do, although they were glad to accept the services NGOs offered. On the other hand, the same people had strong ideas about government policies and programmes: they readily expressed their opinions about what government ought to do, although this was offset by the fact that people seldom seemed to think that they could have any influence over government, even at the village level. This shows a sense of identity (albeit powerless) with government that does not seem to be there with NGOs.

The rural NGO members were also asked whether they felt NGOs represented their interests better than local government authorities. This question yielded essentially no useful responses, in spite of attempts at rephrasing it in various ways. The idea that NGOs represented their interests to others did not seem to be one that made any sense to the NGO beneficiaries who were interviewed. NGOs were seen primarily as sources of aid in the form of resources or training; if people believed that NGOs acted on their behalf in other ways they gave no indication of it.

Of course, even if NGOs do not directly act as channels through which poor rural people can express themselves, they can be grassroots representatives in the sense that they are advocates for the rural poor. NGO personnel, especially senior staff, generally expressed a sympathy with the people with whom they worked and an understanding of their problems, and because of this can be considered "grassroots representatives". However, on this basis NGOs cannot claim to be the sole or even the best representatives of the poor: numerous other actors in the development arena can make claims of representivity on the same basis.

Idealism and Commitment to Equitable Development

NGOs, especially local development NGOs, are often seen as being the agencies which are most committed to the goal of equitable development. It is undoubtedly true that NGO workers are devoted to their cause. But again, this does not mean that they are the *only* actors so committed: the provincial- and district-level civil servants interviewed during this study, with one or two exceptions, were knowledgeable, concerned, and active in response to the problems of the people within their jurisdiction. Often, in fact, they expressed a more sophisticated assessment of intra-community dynamics than was heard from NGO personnel. Civil servants typically volunteered information about the interests of the élite in rural communities, and how they affected efforts on behalf of the poor. NGO staff, on the other hand, often stated explicitly their belief that rural communities were basically homogeneous: "all rural people are poor".¹⁰

¹⁰. This is discussed in more detail below.

In addition, the idealism of development NGOs is not always effective: in general, it lacks the theoretical grounding necessary to give it direction and impact. Terms such as "empowerment", "participation", "transformation", and "community" are used without establishing any explicit understanding regarding their meaning. Thus NGOs are vulnerable to manipulation by outsiders who employ the same terms for distinctly different purposes. The use of the term "empowerment" gives the clearest example of the divergence between rhetoric and actual practice among NGOs. NGOs call for the empowerment of communities. In practice, what this "empowerment" typically consists of is attaining "self-reliance" - that is, the ability of people to reduce their "dependence" on government or donors. It does not entail any changes in actual power relationships or in control over resources. "Community" is another term which is generally used uncritically. It often refers, in reality, to a very limited segment of society centred on community leaders and élites. The "empowerment of communities", therefore, could often be as well expressed as the "enrichment of individuals".

The indications are that "empowerment" was originally used by development NGOs in a much more fundamental sense, and that the initial goals of NGOs established ten or more years ago actually involved addressing questions of power. But the appropriation of the term "empowerment" by the political right wing in some northern countries, and its redefinition to mean "self-reliance", has led to an unacknowledged shift in emphasis by the NGOs which receive funding from industrialized countries. Because NGOs did not establish their operations on a theoretical foundation, their shifts in strategies are not always internally recognized.¹¹

In addition, the donor community's growing emphasis on "self-reliance" on an institutional level is having serious consequences for development NGOs' ability meet their goals, even if they retain a clear vision of what those goals are. NGOs are increasingly called upon to prove that their activities are "sustainable" - that is, that they can generate a surplus which will allow them to continue once funding is withdrawn. This "sustainability" is required not only of field projects, but sometimes of the organization itself - NGOs are expected to come up with plans by which they would be able to meet at least their core administrative and staffing costs. Two-thirds of the NGOs surveyed reported that their donors promoted greater economic self-sufficiency at the organizational level. An even greater proportion of NGOs (81 per cent) revealed that they considered economic self-sufficiency to be a goal of their organization. They hope that, by engaging in activities which could result in a profit for the organization, NGOs will become less subject to the vagaries of donor fashions, and will be able to reduce their fund raising efforts.

The result of this trend is not only a resurgence of "income generating" projects at the field level, but also a growing commercial dimension to NGO activities. NGOs devote an increasing proportion of their time to establishing for-profit commercial enterprises. Although sometimes such enterprises have a "socially-conscious" or developmental dimension, such is not always the case. In addition, very few of the enterprises have as yet been able to yield a profit which could be used by the organization for their development activities. Thus NGOs remain as dependent as ever on donors, and still must expend

¹¹. Vandergeest (1991) describes this definitional shift as being based on the assumption that development is a gift, which must be "paid for" by the recipients, rather than a right. Thus Clark (1991) sees empowerment as a process of increasing "self reliance" and decreasing "beggary". But what Clark terms "self reliance", Vandergeest would characterize as "corvee labour", and what Clark terms "beggary", Vandergeest would characterize as "demanding rights" - i.e. "empowerment".

considerable energies in fund raising, while a significant proportion of their energies has turned from rural development to profit-seeking.¹²

The Project Approach

The new conventional wisdom regarding rural development NGOs is that they must go beyond the project approach - they must work to change systems, institutions, and structures which create and maintain rural poverty. The strategies which could help lead to such changes are recognized in general terms - participation, empowerment, and granting a voice to the people are described as the first steps of development. However, the evidence is that, at least in Zimbabwe, these general goals are difficult to translate into activities which are substantially different from the projects which NGOs have traditionally undertaken. The ODI report on Zimbabwean NGOs described the contradiction between NGO goals and their activities:

NGOs in Zimbabwe have tended not to enter the stage of national public policy advocacy, either to lobby for improvement in group interests or in advocacy for changes in national or indeed provincial policies which might lead to a greater allocation of resources to the poor or a strengthening of their power to act themselves in this manner. ...This is doubly strange because of the stress laid by so many NGOs working among the rural poor ... to the concept of empowerment and the benefits obtained from group action. Group work has been dominated by trying to maximise the gains that groups could obtain *within the wider context*, rather than in trying to alter that environment or engage in debate to initiate change (Muir, 1992:19, emphasis in original).

Projects, in fact, remain the major focus of the activities of most rural development NGOs. Several major types of activities became evident from the field work and the survey of other studies of Zimbabwean NGOs. Small-scale income generating projects remain a very important component of NGO activities, in spite of the well-documented problems with such projects, and increasing frustration with them at the organizational level. Another very common activity is involvement in infrastructure construction projects. Some NGOs undertake training as a primary activity, although many of the NGOs which provide training or other services (such as credit or marketing assistance) offer such services as a way to support the projects with which they were also involved. A few of the NGOs interviewed combined these kinds of project-based activities with advocacy work, although such advocacy was only observed to have an impact in one instance.

There are several reasons for this continuing project emphasis. First, and perhaps most importantly, projects are what NGO staff members know how to do. This is what they have done in the past, and the training they receive is often project focused - cost-benefit analysis and marketing evaluation, for instance. Second, projects and project support are what NGO beneficiaries want and expect from NGOs. Third, projects are what NGOs can get funding for: 80 per cent of the NGOs responding to the survey reported that at least part of their funds were tied on a project basis. Fourth, projects are what the government expects NGOs to do, and the resources they are able to bring into the country through their project activities serve to offset the sometimes troubling (to the government) rhetoric in which NGOs engage.

¹². See Sanyal (1991) for a more detailed description of this dynamic in the Bangladesh context.

Thus, given their organizational structure, experience, and fund raising strategies, it would be very difficult for most NGOs to abandon a project orientation. Moreover, even though the confidence of the NGO community in the project approach has been shaken in recent years, there often remains a belief among individual NGOs that their own projects are better designed and more effective than those of other NGOs or of the government. However, the research revealed that the projects undertaken by NGOs still suffer from a high failure rate. Income generating projects show particularly low benefits, while "participatory" or community-based infrastructure projects are usually disappointing in terms of completion rates, quality of structure and maintenance. The beneficial impacts of the least participatory projects - those, such as dam and borehole construction, where input from the community was not sought either in terms of planning or labour - were more impressive. However, the indications were that the institutional arrangements made to maintain the facilities provided in this manner were often inadequate, and thus the long-term impact of such projects is uncertain.

Income generating projects (IGPs) have been assessed and criticized for many years now. It is generally agreed that it is unusual for such projects to yield a significant income to their participants, and that it is even more rare that the true benefits exceed the true costs when the value of donations and labour are accounted for. A comprehensive study of the income generating projects of Zimbabwean NGOs was carried out in 1987. This study had a generally negative assessment of IGPs: "It is clear that the IGP activities of NGOs in Zimbabwe have had little impact on income generation and virtually no impact on employment generation" (VOICE, 1987:6).

The findings of the VOICE study largely correspond with the indications regarding the success rates of income generating projects obtained during the present research. On numerous occasions evidence of previous unsuccessful projects was observed: chicken runs with no chickens, or gardens with no produce. Descriptions of the difficulties faced by people attempting income generating projects were heard often during the course of the rural interviews: "we used to have chickens, but we couldn't afford to buy the feed"; "we started a garden, but could not get water for it because of the drought"; "we have made many baskets, but we can't sell them".

More specific information was obtained about the expenditures and income associated with 13 projects. The participants involved in nine of these initially reported receiving a positive income from them. However, of these nine, five revealed on further questioning that they had actually contributed more to the costs of the project than they had received: for instance, a poultry project was considered a success by participants because they were able to sell their chickens; however, what they received was less than the amount spent by the group on feed. The initial expenditure to purchase the chicks had been made by the NGO, and had not been acknowledged as an expense at all (either by the group or by the NGO). At the time of the interview, the group was asking the NGO to supply them with another batch of chicks so that they could repeat their "success". Thus, out of the nine projects originally reported as successes, only four actually yielded a net positive income to participants. Of these four, two had received very large contributions from NGOs: successful bakery had been supplied with ovens, a shop, and start-up capital, a successful agricultural project had received substantial donations of cash and materials from two different NGOs and a government agency. These donations were not considered to be costs.

In addition, the level of income reported was very low: between Z\$ 50 and Z\$ 400 per person per year.¹³ In no case was the value of labour counted as an expenditure.

A series of questions regarding income generating projects was also included in the survey of NGO staff members. Eighty-one per cent of respondents reported that their organizations were involved in IGPs. These respondents were asked what kind of support they gave to the projects. The results are given in Table 7. Only one NGO reported that it only provided material support. A total of 96 per cent provided support services, which generally included training in technical skills and bookkeeping, and might also include marketing support, transportation of supplies or materials, and market analysis. This finding corresponds with that of the VOICE study, which reported that 91 per cent of the NGOs interviewed provided training. That study also yielded additional information on the type of training provided: 83 per cent of the training was less than a month in length, and training most frequently dealt with management and leadership rather than with specific production skills (VOICE, 1987).¹⁴

Table 7: Support Given to Income Generating Projects

Number and per cent of responding NGOs who reported involvement in IGPs. N=23

	Number	Per cent
Material support (funds, supplies credit*)	1	4
Services (training, marketing, advice)	5	22
Both	17	74

*Credit is considered material support rather than a service because of the very low payback rates, and the fact that interest is generally not charged or is set well below market rates.

The survey also asked respondents about the success rate of income generating projects. The results are given in Table 8. The question was an open one, but the responses are categorized according to the types of comments received. Negative comments were usually along the lines of "pretty bad", or "we really have to think of another way to approach these projects". Comments considered to be somewhat negative included "not too good", and "not as good as we would like". Somewhat positive comments were "encouraging", and "pretty good". Positive comments were those that reported the success rate to be "good", or that "we're happy with them".

¹³. By comparison, the minimum agricultural wage in 1992 was Z\$ 160 per month. The price of a 90-kilogramme bag of maize in September 1992 was Z\$ 105.

¹⁴. The "leadership training" observed during the course of this study concentrated more on formal (Western) rules of debate - what constitutes a quorum, how to second a motion, and so forth - rather than how to motivate people or organize groups.

Table 8: Comments on Success Rate of Income Generating Projects

Number and per cent of responding NGOs who reported involvement in IGPs. N=21

	Number	Per cent
Negative	9	43
Somewhat negative	3	14
Somewhat positive	7	33
Positive	2	10

The survey revealed a more optimistic assessment of income generating projects among NGO staff (43 per cent at least somewhat positive) than was obtained from the interviews with rural NGO members. There are several possible explanations for this. First, NGO personnel seemed very likely to undercount the costs of projects: grants were often not considered costs, for instance. Second, in many cases the projects which had failed and therefore no longer existed were not considered when calculating the success rate. Only those projects currently underway (which were therefore either successful or relatively new) were considered. A third possibility for the discrepancy is that the performance of IGPs was not accurately reported during the rural interviews.¹⁵

The second most common type of project undertaken by rural development NGOs in Zimbabwe was the provision of infrastructure. Often this was water supply, although the construction of training centres and preschools were also popular projects. Two different attitudes about the provision of infrastructure were evident among the NGOs interviewed. First, some NGOs implemented the projects with a minimum of participation from the beneficiaries. They ascertained, for instance, the best siting for a dam, they submitted their plans to the government for approval, they provided equipment and supplies and hired the labour to build the dams. They saw themselves as providing a necessary resource which would improve the lives of rural communities, and did not concern themselves too much about whether what they were doing was "true development" or "only relief". In fact, these projects were among the most successful, in terms of providing benefits to all sectors of the rural poor, of all those observed in the course of the fieldwork.¹⁶ Implementation was completed in a timely manner (dams typically were constructed over the course of a single dry season, while dams constructed in a more participatory manner could easily take five to ten years), the structures were sound and generally served their purpose well,¹⁷ and appropriation of the benefits by any particular group seldom seemed to be an issue.¹⁸ Evidence on the long-term impact of these projects was less clear, however. In some cases, lack of maintenance did seem to be a real problem, although other projects were observed which had been successfully maintained over a period of years.

The other approach taken by NGOs to infrastructure projects is more explicitly participatory. The communities involved are expected to request assistance on the basis of

¹⁵. Although most of the information provided on this question was judged to be relatively accurate, in a few cases there did appear to be reporting inaccuracies - although usually these seemed to involve over-reporting rather than under-reporting of project benefits.

¹⁶. The dams constructed were very small, and displacement was never raised as an adverse result.

¹⁷. Although there were some stories of spectacular failures - dams useless because they were sited incorrectly, for instance.

¹⁸. There were conflicts on occasion, for instance over the siting of boreholes, but the actual exclusion of any group of people from the benefits of these types of projects seemed very rare.

their own assessment of their needs, and they are expected to provide a substantial proportion of the labour and materials necessary for the project. The project is meant to be "self-help", with the NGO providing minimal assistance, acting more as a facilitator than a donor. Most of these projects are undertaken as food-for-work or voluntary labour schemes "to avoid dependency relationships". However, virtually all such projects require a massive (by rural standards) expenditure for materials and supplies. Here the self-help and "participation" dimension of the project rhetoric becomes problematic. Even if rural communities provide all the necessary labour for the project, they are still entering into a dependency relationship with the organization or agency which provides the materials and technical skills necessary.

A further source of frustration with self-help projects comes from the fact that many rural communities have seen or have heard of projects provided almost solely by external agencies. Such projects bring in heavy equipment, hire labour, and complete a dam in a matter of months. In contrast, communities contemplating building their own dam in a self-help manner must count on a minimum of a three to five year effort, moving earth and stones by hand or with carts. In addition, they must face the organizational effort and conflict involved in ensuring that all members of the community do their share of the work. Under these conditions, it would not be surprising if many communities decided they would rather wait to see whether someone would come and build a dam for them, before venturing to undertake the task themselves.

In addition, the institutional constraints involved in relatively large "self-help" projects are often underestimated, even by local NGOs. There are several reasons for this. In spite of the often described communal aspects of Zimbabwean production systems, group activities are actually fairly limited by tradition. For heavy, occasional labour required by an individual, people from the community will come together to complete the task in return for beer and food prepared for the occasion, and in return for an understanding that the labour exchange will be reciprocated at a later date.¹⁹ More sustained co-operative arrangements usually take place on a very limited basis: brothers will share an ox, for instance, or two or three neighbours will contribute towards the cost of farm implements. There is thus little precedent in the country for the sustained, large-group development work required by many NGO projects, and there seems to be little spontaneous enthusiasm for it. This is illustrated by the experiences of one district where three different projects are being undertaken by members of the same NGO: the first is the repair of a dam, a project in which 80 people participate, and which is supposed to benefit the community as a whole. The second is the repair of another dam in which 15 people participate: water from the dam will be available to the whole community, but the working group expects to be able to charge a fee to anyone who uses the water for irrigation purposes. The third project is an irrigated vegetable garden scheme, essentially a profit-making enterprise shared by four people. In the same amount of time, more work had been done by the group of 15 than the group of 80, and still more had been accomplished by the group of four.

The other types of problems which were observed with NGO projects involved conflict and competition. Conflicts between communities can arise because of the different types of projects sponsored by NGOs: if one provides beans as well as maize in a food-for-work project, another project which provides only maize will be resented. Communities

¹⁹. It has been argued that this seemingly egalitarian labour exchange is actually a form of labour extraction that favours the rural elite. See Drinkwater (1991).

compete for the sponsorship of the most generous NGOs, and resent government projects, which seem miserly by comparison. Intra-community conflicts were also observed over NGO projects. NGO members, who have invested their time or materials (or simply their connections and influence) to gain benefits, are naturally reluctant to share those benefits with the community as a whole. Therefore NGO member groups are sometimes seen as exclusionary and élitist by the rest of the community. This problem is compounded where NGO groups are church-based in religiously mixed communities.

To some extent, NGOs are now more frequently acknowledging the problems of incentive and organization as obstacles to the success of their projects. Interviews with NGO personnel describing how their approach had changed over the past several years revealed that material returns to individuals or small groups are now given increasing emphasis in project design, and the collective benefit to communities which projects might have is accorded less weight, because there is a growing sense that such collective benefits are often not realized.

Innovation

Another major hypothesis about development NGO activities characterizes their work as innovative. It is assumed that NGOs are less bound by development orthodoxy than are official agencies and government, and that NGOs enjoy greater flexibility to experiment with new approaches (e.g. Clark, 1991). Some have argued, however, that although a few notable NGO projects have been truly original, the NGO sector as a whole cannot claim to be innovative (Tendler, 1982). Indeed, Tendler found that the persistence of the use of discredited or outmoded techniques was a real problem among NGOs. The findings of the present research tends to support the view that most NGOs act within an established development orthodoxy of their own. Although many new development ideas have come from NGOs, and NGOs have the ability to adopt new ideas quickly, the presence of a pattern of NGO activity that is similar throughout the world - savings clubs, nutrition gardens, sewing projects, and so forth - is one indication that the belief that NGOs are innovative, and in particular that they tailor their programmes to local communities, may not be well founded.

Although some projects based on original ideas were observed during the course of the fieldwork, most NGO activities fell within a predictable range. Animal husbandry, gardens, sewing, baking, handicrafts, brick-making, and carpentry are all popular. Preschools are becoming ubiquitous. Overall, NGOs conform to development fashions much more often than they develop their own. (As Table 1 showed, only two of the NGOs surveyed mentioned experimentation as one of their goals.) There are several reasons for this. First, the logistical difficulties described above, which make bottom-up planning problematic, also work against tailor-made projects. In addition, the NGO staff is typically small and overworked, untrained and inexperienced in conducting research, and has little contact with external research which may be relevant to them. The newsletters and publications put out by NGOs and NGO support organizations are of some help in this regard, but these publications have become so numerous that, even in NGOs which are able to appoint an information officer, merely keeping up with the literature becomes a difficult task.

Another factor inhibiting innovation is the influence of donors. Although some NGOs claim independence from donors, two-thirds of those questioned in the NGO survey acknowledged writing proposals in response to donor invitations for grant requests for

specific types of projects. That is, donors write to NGOs to say that they have money available for particular types of projects, and NGOs develop their plans accordingly. For most development NGOs, programme development is therefore piecemeal and *ad hoc*, following the disparate and sometimes mutually contradictory requirements of the various donor "partners" with whom they are involved. Constraints to innovative activities are often compounded by donors' reluctance to increase staff funding, which thus limits NGOs' ability to conduct research into possible new approaches. In addition, donors commonly insist that project costs be shared by more than one donor. Thus the "safest" projects, widely seen as acceptable, have the best chance of being funded.

Sustainability and Replicability

A much-discussed criterion for evaluating development NGO activities concerns their "sustainability" - that is, their ability to remain viable after external support ceases - and their replicability - the degree to which groups not directly assisted by the NGO take up the NGO projects on their own. The assumption here is not that all NGO projects are sustainable or replicable, but rather that they should all *try* to be: if the benefits of NGO work cease when the resources do, the NGO is merely providing "aid"; if the benefits continue past the period of NGO involvement, "development" has been initiated (Korten, 1990).

Interviews with staff of a number of Zimbabwean NGOs, however, suggest that the difficulties NGOs have experienced in achieving sustainability and replicability in their projects is leading at least some of them to rethink their position on this issue. Although the rhetoric of empowerment and self-reliance remains pervasive, there seems to be a growing gap between the goals of sustainability and replicability and project practice. Some NGOs seem to be simply getting tired of the effort and continual monitoring involved in maintaining the community involvement which is the prerequisite of a sustainable project. They are discouraged by the number of failed projects, the number of abandoned projects, and the number of groups who make no attempt to break their dependency on the NGO, but simply solicit new resources year after year.

The general pattern of NGO reaction to these conditions includes greater concern with the profitability of the projects undertaken, more attempts to privatize the returns from projects which had been previously considered to be public goods, and an increased emphasis on establishing revolving loan funds and reducing the proportion of resources disbursed as grants or as untied contributions. For some, the emphasis on profitability has led to larger projects, with less direct community involvement, a higher component of paid staff in relation to voluntary labour, and a greater degree of oversight and control on the part of the NGO. For instance, at one large irrigated market garden under construction an NGO staff member explained that all labour for the project would be hired by the NGO "because people don't want to work for nothing". The NGO would manage the garden as a business, make production decisions, and reinvest the proceeds according to profitability criteria. The garden was still described as a "community project" because "the community will be able to buy the vegetables".

Concern with sustainability, and problems with establishing incentives for people to maintain their involvement in a community project have also led, in some instances, to NGOs taking a privatization approach. The dam repair project mentioned above, for example, was undertaken by a group of people with the understanding that they would be

able to obtain some material returns for their efforts by charging individuals for use of the water.²⁰ More commonly, NGOs have simply abandoned their efforts to encourage community involvement in the provision of public goods, and have begun to stress in their training and their project evaluations ways to ensure that the benefits of projects could be restricted to those who participated in them. Thus gardens may no longer produce vegetables to be donated to the schools, often these are instead sold to the school - or to anyone else who can buy them.

In addition, more NGOs are getting interested in establishing revolving credit schemes, which appear to be a way to get more productive results from the resources available to them. A shift from grants to credit is seen as a way to ensure sustainability, which in turn will allow replicability. Beginning or increasing the credit component of projects was the programme change mentioned most often during the NGO survey.²¹ However, many NGOs which gave information on their existing credit programmes indicated that they had substantial difficulty recovering their loans, and interest rates, when charged, were set well below market rates (interest was typically set at 0-12 per cent, while interest on savings accounts paid by commercial banks was about 35 per cent). At the same time, a shift in emphasis from grants to loans means that NGOs must be increasingly concerned with the short-term profitability of their projects, and the goals of longer term development through institutional change, though still expressed, must often in practice be set aside.

Efficiency and Effectiveness

Another assumption about development NGO activities is that NGOs are more efficient and more effective than official agencies and governments in implementing projects. Local NGOs especially are often portrayed as knowing the people and being able to respond to their needs better than "outsiders" (e.g. Clark, 1991). It has been also argued, however, that local NGO staff tend to be élites, and to have connections with and be sympathetic to existing power structures more than to the rural poor (e.g. Tendler, 1982). Quantifiable data were not collected on this question, but the present research suggests that the latter situation does at times exist (the extent to which NGOs reach the poor is discussed further below). In addition, the research showed two other factors which contribute, in some cases, to limiting the effectiveness of local NGOs. First, staff salaries in local NGOs tend to be lower and staff positions are less secure than in foreign NGOs or in government agencies, with the result that other agencies often have the opportunity to attract the best-qualified staff. Second, the fund raising, accounting and reporting requirements of local NGOs, which obtain their funds from a variety of sources, tend to be more demanding than those of international NGOs, whose funding is relatively secure. Local NGO staff therefore have less time to spend on their programmes.

The relative efficiency of development NGOs is also a widely-held assumption, especially among those who have had to confront government bureaucracy. The belief that NGOs are much more efficient than government was, in fact, a commonly voiced opinion

²⁰. Since there is no tradition in Zimbabwe of private water rights or of payments to individuals for water access, it is not clear that the payments envisioned by the group would ever be made.

²¹. It is interesting to note that the 1987 VOICE survey found that 62 percent of the NGOs made loans for projects (VOICE, 1987), while the present survey found that only 27 percent did so. It is not known whether NGOs abandoned loans for a few years, and are now returning to them, or whether one or both surveys were in error on this question.

of government administrators themselves during the course of the fieldwork. Because the Zimbabwean government is not only highly centralized, but also sectorally-based, the amount of time and paper work involved in even relatively simple initiatives undertaken by government is often stifling. NGOs can act on their decisions more promptly, and can accomplish many things much more quickly, than can government bureaucracies.

It is also important to recognize, however, that not all kinds of activities are suited to the operational systems of NGOs. The distribution of food relief is a case in point. Early in 1992 the Zimbabwean government appealed to NGOs to assist in drought relief efforts, and a huge amount of food aid, donated by USAID and the World Food Programme, was earmarked for distribution by NGOs. Many NGOs organized resources and set up food distribution structures to contribute to the drought relief efforts. However, the NGO drought relief programme, overall, was characterized by patchiness and duplication of the government programme. Despite the assurances of NGOs that they were distributing the food relief to everyone, many NGOs made little attempt to reach outside their constituencies or their existing membership base. Complaints were most often heard about the church-based NGOs denying food to non-members, but this apparently happened in many of the secular NGOs as well.

As part of the drought relief co-ordination effort, government requested that NGOs identify geographical areas in which they would undertake to feed all those who required drought relief. This would allow government to withdraw from those areas, and enable them to concentrate their resources to adequately meet the needs of people who were not involved with NGOs. However, NGOs proved reluctant to make any changes in their usual targeting approach. Some selected a few schools for feeding, some concentrated on certain vulnerable groups, others distributed through their churches. The result was that the government was forced to continue its drought relief programme for the whole country, with woefully inadequate supplies. In the end, the government drought relief programme, in spite of numerous glitches and delays, proved much more efficient in getting at least some food to all the people than the NGO efforts.

Reaching the Poorest

Another long-held article of faith about development NGOs is that their projects are more successful in reaching the poorest, and especially the most isolated groups than are other development efforts. However, this is an assumption about NGOs that is increasingly being challenged (e.g. Riddell, 1990). Indications from the present research also raise doubts that the poorest will benefit substantially from the kinds of rural development work that NGOs usually undertake. There are several reasons for this, centring on issues of access, class, and the implementing strategies of NGOs.

First, the same factors that make the poorest groups unreachable to official development channels keep them away from NGO assistance. Even "grassroots" NGOs must work through the same points of entry into a community that government does - elected and traditional leaders, and sometimes church leaders. The usual pattern is that one or two people control the inflow of all resources into their community. In some areas the traditional hereditary leaders hold this power, in other areas the newer elected leaders have gained this ability. These individuals have a large part in deciding from whom the community will accept resources, to whom the resources will go, and for what purposes they will be used. It is quite common for leaders to block development projects in their area

because "proper" channels were not followed - the NGO or aid workers did not get the leaders' approval and advice first.²² This resource control and insistence on oversight of aid projects seems to act primarily as a mechanism used by leaders for retaining power by ensuring that the people see that resources can only be obtained through the leaders. In some cases, however, it is clear that community leaders have used their power for their personal gain, obtaining a large proportion of the resources allocated to the community for themselves.

Rural development NGOs tend not to confront these leadership structures, but rather to work through them. In fact, working through village leaders is often portrayed in the NGO literature as working *with* the *community* - the leaders are presumed to have the people's trust and respect, and to act for the good of the community as a whole. But it is quite clear that leaders do not command universal loyalty within rural communities. In many cases, they are regarded with suspicion by what seems to be the majority of the community (this is especially true of the elected leaders, although quantifiable data on this question were impossible to obtain). However, the turnover in elections is very low, with most ward leaders having retained power since independence.²³

Because they work through these existing power structures, it is very difficult for development NGOs to reach the powerless - people who, for reasons of poverty, class, gender, or other factors are not reached by other development initiatives. In fact, the research uncovered very few instances in which NGOs even tried to do so. The only situations observed where the poorest were truly targeted were in two initiatives taken by teachers and extension workers - people who are much more "outsiders" than are NGO fieldworkers. In both cases the workers involved had to live within a hostile social environment as a consequence of their activities.

A second reason that NGOs have difficulty in reaching the poorest is that there is a small, active stratum of the rural population which tends to take advantage of the majority of the opportunities that NGOs provide. These groups tend to come from the élite, politically or economically or both. One point of focus of the interviews with NGO members was the extent of organization in rural areas. We were commonly told that only people who are active and organize themselves into groups are able to get benefits, either from the state or from NGOs. Yet, when questioned about the proportion of the rural population which did so organize, the invariable response was that the majority of people do *not* form groups.

It proved very difficult to independently ascertain the proportion of the rural population which had organized themselves into groups and who had been reached by NGOs. This is because many NGOs did not attempt to quantify their beneficiaries. Even if they could do so, however, the fact that many groups are counted as members by more than one organization means that the proportion of the population actually reached by NGO efforts would still be hard to judge.

²². We heard numerous reports along these lines during the fieldwork. In addition, several newspaper reports during this period indicated that situations in which local leaders blocked development projects happened all over the country, and that government as well as NGO projects were susceptible to such interference.

²³. One explanation for the low turnover is that village and ward-level leaders are elected by the queuing system, in which people line up behind the person they are voting for, rather than by secret ballots. In addition, scheduled local elections are not always actually held.

The ODI study on Zimbabwean NGOs also found group formation to be a key to limiting NGOs' ability to reach the poorest (Muir, 1992). It reported that, aside from interventions meant to provide infrastructure, rural development NGOs in Zimbabwe work with and through groups. But NGOs do not form groups, rather they work with groups already in existence (this finding is supported by the findings of the present research; see Table 4). However, because they work through existing, self-selected groups, NGOs not able to reach the poorest:

The evidence which is available (although far from comprehensive) would tend to suggest that the poorest families and households tend disproportionately to be excluded from groups which are in existence in the communal areas. This generalisation would also appear to hold true for women's groups. Women's groups already in existence tend to draw their members from those most active and dynamic within particular localities. The outcome is that the poorest households, including those headed by single or divorced women and those without access to income from formal sector migrancy sources, tend disproportionately (though by no means totally) to be excluded from NGO interventions in the communal areas (Muir, 1992:20).

A third reason that development NGOs do not generally reach the poorest sectors of society is that they do not particularly try to do so. Although some NGO leaders are very articulate about the needs of the rural poor, many NGO staff members and fieldworkers do not actively look for class distinctions among the rural populations with whom they work, and many seem unaware of class heterogeneity in rural areas: people who were poor were generally considered to be so because of their laziness (or their adult children's laziness and failure to support them).

More direct evidence that NGOs typically do not directly target the poor came from the NGO survey. Respondents were asked an open question: "Who are the main targeted beneficiaries?". The results are given in Table 9. Two-thirds replied that their NGO targeted everyone, or all rural people. A further 20 per cent reported targeting all women. Ten per cent targeted groups such as children or the disabled. Only one respondent specifically mentioned that the targeted beneficiaries of the NGO were the poor.

Table 9: Reported Beneficiaries Targeted by NGOs

Number and per cent of NGOs responding. N=29

	Number	Per cent
All/all rural people	19	66
Women/rural women	6	21
Poor	1	3
Other groups	3	10

However, a subsequent question asking what percentage of the NGO's beneficiaries were among the "poorest of the poor" showed that many NGOs thought they were reaching the poorest, even though they were not trying to do so. The responses to this question are summarized in Table 10. Although the high non-response rate reflects many respondents' justifiable concern with the ambiguity of the term "poorest", it is interesting to note that a third of all those questioned, and half of all those responding, claimed that more than 75 per cent of their beneficiaries were among the poorest, even though none of those so responding reported targeting the poor. (The only NGO which reported targeting the poor

estimated that less than 25 per cent of its beneficiaries were actually among the poorest.) Several NGOs asserted with confidence that 100 per cent of their beneficiaries were from the poorest sectors of society: it was often explained that all rural people are poor.

Table 10: Reported Per Cent of NGO Beneficiaries Who are among the Poorest

Number and per cent of NGOs surveyed. N=31

	Number	Per cent
Don't know/no response	11	35
0-25 per cent	4	13
26-50 per cent	3	10
51-75 per cent	3	10
76-100 per cent	10	32

In fact, however, it is fairly clear that there is a high degree of stratification within rural Zimbabwean society. Landholdings in the communal sector range from one to three hectares/household to over 30 hectares (Mazambani, 1990; Moyo et al., 1991); around 50 per cent of the sector's cattle is held by 10 per cent of the population; more than one-third of households have insufficient draft power for their needs (Cousins et al., 1990). Several household surveys taken in recent years show a consistent pattern in their findings regarding rural differentiation. They indicate that: first, remittances are an integral part of the rural economy; second, the number of households who successfully rely solely on their rural production activities is low and declining; third, the number and proportion of households which are marginalized and dependent on external assistance is high and growing; and fourth, inequality is increasing in rural areas (CSO, 1988; Ruzvidzo, 1989; Chopak, 1991; Cousins et al., 1990; Mazambani, 1990; Drinkwater, 1991; Moyo et al., 1991).

A fourth reason that NGOs can fail to reach the poorest is that the costs of joining NGO activities are prohibitive to many poor people. In their efforts to avoid creating "aid dependency", NGOs generally require some sort of contribution from project beneficiaries. At times this is a membership fee, sometimes it is a contribution towards the food and transportation expenses of meetings, sometimes it is labour. Although any one of these contributions will be relatively small, returns from projects are generally realized only after a long period of activity during which these inputs are required. The poorest cannot afford the resources or the time to stick with the project until the end. Several of the groups interviewed during the course of the research indicated that when the project began, the group was much bigger - with as many as five times more people. People dropped out when they no longer wanted to, or were able to, maintain their contributions. The people who remained with projects which were nearing completion were adamant that those who dropped out would not share in the benefits, and that no latecomers to the group would be admitted.

Women in Development

It has been recognized for some time now that many types of development can worsen women's economic and social standing, and that steps should be taken to alleviate

this tendency. One result has been the implementation of "women in development" (WID) projects, often meant to increase women's income or control of resources, and sometimes having a training or awareness-raising component. It is widely assumed that NGOs are better able to implement WID projects than are other development agencies, for reasons which parallel NGOs' presumed advantages in reaching the poor: they are thought to have better targeting capacities, to be more aware of the need to involve women, and to be better able to determine what will help them.

The present research indicates that rural development NGOs in Zimbabwe do indeed reach women. Of the 39 groups interviewed during the fieldwork, in only seven were men more than 50 per cent of those present. The NGOs surveyed also reported a high level of involvement with women. Although only one-fifth specifically targeted women (see Table 9), three-fourths of those interviewed reported that the majority of their beneficiaries were women (see Table 11).²⁴ In general, the high level of women's participation stems not from efforts to target women or women's greater need for NGO services, but rather from the fact that women are more willing than men to participate in the kinds of activities sponsored by NGOs. In fact, several NGOs mentioned that they would like to involve more men in their projects, but that they had difficulty attracting them.

Table 11: Reported Per Cent of NGO Beneficiaries Who are Women

Number and per cent of NGOs responding. N=27

	Number	Per cent
0-25 per cent women	1	4
26-50 per cent women	5	18
51-75 per cent women	9	33
76-100 per cent women	12	44

However, recent evaluations of women in development projects have suggested that merely reaching women is not enough to overcome the problems that rural women face: WID projects are often unsuccessful or of very limited value both in terms of providing material benefits to the women with whom they work, and in changing the economic and social structures which keep many women in poverty (Buvinic, 1986; Clark, 1991). The study findings generally support these criticisms of WID projects. Most of the projects are meant to generate an income from productive activities, but, like other income generating projects, they have a very high failure rate due to labour constraints, poor production conditions, and limited markets.

The usual approach to addressing the deficiencies of WID projects is to attempt to develop more and better-designed projects for women. Training and support services are provided in an effort to make such projects more viable. However, the observations and interviews of this study suggest that improved projects for women will not have a significant impact on problems of women in development. This is because the problem

²⁴. In contrast, out of the four NGOs discussed in a recent ODI report, three benefited more men than women (Muir, 1992). It should be noted that the projects analyzed in the ODI study were significantly larger than the projects typically undertaken by the NGOs surveyed here, and that the larger the project, the more likely men are to be involved.

with WID projects is not simply that projects designed for women are unprofitable, but also that unprofitable projects are the only ones over which women retain control - because men are not interested in them. Several NGO staff members, discussing their difficulties in involving men in their work, spoke of the need to make projects more profitable: "then the men would join soon enough". Most of the women's NGOs did not exclude men from their activities, and several of them mentioned that once WID projects became profitable, men soon asked to join. Moreover, one women's NGO staff member reported that once men joined WID projects, they usually attained leadership positions. These impressions of NGO staff were supported by indications from the rural interviews. Of the seven groups in which men were a majority, only two were clearly unprofitable. In groups which included only one or two men, these men dominated discussions.

Another common criticism of WID projects is that they reinforce the traditional gender roles that have limited women's productive options and have led to their disadvantaged position. Again, this criticism was supported by the findings of the research: although there were some projects which involved women in traditional male occupations such as construction, most WID projects remain largely within women's traditional productive domain. Women undertake handicraft, sewing, baking, and small-scale agricultural activities that generally yield very small returns for their labour.

Part of the reason for the willingness of women to participate in projects with such minimal returns for their efforts is what has been called "motherism" in the African context - the readiness of many women to increase their workload in the hope of benefiting their family, even if the returns are very slight (Lewis, 1992). Women (and men) typically ascribe a very low value to women's labour. Some women interviewed reported, with pride, that they work so hard that they do not sit down all day, and that when the rest of their work is done, and they can sit down at night, they take up the handicraft or sewing work through which they hope to make a little extra money for their family. Other evidence confirms this picture of women's workload: one study found that rural Zimbabwean women spend 30 hours per week on trip generating chores alone - primarily water and firewood collection and marketing (Mehretu and Mutambirwa, 1992).

But even if such a work pattern were not the experience of all women, such stories are indicative of the perceptions women have of their role, and of the very high goals they set for themselves. This situation sets up the conditions for what could be described as an essentially exploitative relationship between NGOs and rural women. Women spend a great deal of time in WID projects that yield, if anything, no more than a few dollars a year, while NGOs get credit - and funding - for addressing "women in development" problems. Because women are willing to work for so little, NGOs have had little incentive to improve their women's programme, and thus women's projects remain the least remunerative to their participants.

Real control over resources is generally not challenged by rural development NGOs, even when gender inequalities have serious consequences for the community as a whole. In perhaps a majority of households in rural Zimbabwe, for instance, women are responsible for all agricultural work while men are employed in the cities or mines, or in South Africa.²⁵ However, women do not usually own cattle, and cannot make decisions regarding cattle sales or slaughter. The environmental impact of this situation can be

²⁵. The proportion of *de facto* female headed households has been estimated to be in the range of 40 to 60 percent (Ruzvidzo, 1989; Moyo et al., 1991; Fortmann and Nabane, 1992).

severe, especially in drought years, and over the past several years the trend in rural areas has been increasing erosion, as the numbers of cattle become unsustainable. Women manage the farms and can see the problems of overstocking, and experience the difficulty in obtaining fodder in the dry season. But the male cattle owners, who must be consulted by letter, are reluctant to sell their cattle. In the drought of 1992, great numbers of cattle died, although problems with obtaining fodder were evident early on, and at least some income with which to cushion the effects of the drought could have been obtained had the cattle been slaughtered.

It also became apparent that, even when development NGO leaders have an intention to address gender inequality as part of their programme, this objective is not always successfully implemented at the level of the rural NGO members. Seven NGO fieldworkers, associated with an organization which had progressive views of gender issues informed by the international debate on women in development, were asked about their understanding of the social issues related to women and development problems. None of these fieldworkers gave the responses that the NGO headquarters stressed - gender awareness, women's empowerment, equality, legal rights, and leadership training. Instead, all mentioned typical "women's" projects - baking, sewing, and chickens, for instance. One (male) fieldworker elaborated: "Before these women joined [the NGO] they used to go to social clubs and neglect their work, and that led to quarrels with their husbands. Now they do their work better. They know their role better. They used to think that only men should work, but we encourage women to work too".

It is not clear, however, that rural women would be receptive to efforts to change gender relations. If the men interviewed generally consider themselves to be superior to women, the reverse is also true: the women interviewed take pride in being the backbone of the family, and the ones who take the ultimate responsibility for the welfare of the children. They express pity for men, who feel useless if their income falls, but whose sense of pride keeps them from resorting to the labour-intensive and poorly paid activities that women undertake in difficult times. Because men rely on cattle or material possessions for their sense of self-worth, women consider them to be especially vulnerable to economic hardships. Women describe a situation in which, because of the drought and the structural adjustment programme, men are collectively reverting to childlike behaviour, and to dependency on their wives. Women find this behaviour pathetic, and express the opinion that men should be especially targeted for relief from the effects of structural adjustment.²⁶

Again, these comments from women do not necessarily give an exact portrayal of rural gender relations, nor do they mean that women's lives would not be significantly improved if their opportunities were increased. They do indicate, however, how women see themselves and their roles, and how they acquire their own sense of self-worth within existing social structures. This explains why Zimbabwean women are typically reluctant to attempt to restructure gender relations, within which they have created a position for themselves that may seem less than ideal to outsiders, but which is of great value to them.

A separate question relevant to the gender-specific impact of development NGO work is the extent to which, even when WID projects are not economically profitable,

²⁶. It is not yet clear what the overall impact of the economic crisis will be on gender relations. Women clearly have a sense of their strength and importance in such times, but some resentment toward women was heard from men, and both women and men saw male-headed and supported households as the ideal which should be sought when economic circumstances permitted.

women gain more intangible benefits from their association with such projects.²⁷ Information on this question is obviously difficult to obtain and to quantify, but it does seem that the encouragement to organize themselves contributes to an increased sense among women of the value of their work. The long-term implications of this are even more difficult to judge. Some would argue that this sense of identity and pride will strengthen women in the long run, others would say that it serves to legitimize and support existing inequitable gender structures.

A more concrete indication of how women benefit from activities that are not economically productive, in the narrowly defined sense, comes from the study's observations of the rotational savings clubs which are common in rural areas. Each member of these groups contributes a certain amount of money each month, and one member, in rotation, receives the total. There are various ways to collect interest on the savings. Food savings clubs also exist, in which each member contributes what grain she can each month. She (or he) is able to draw out a constant amount of food from the collective store each month, so the food bank serves as an insurance against food scarcity. These types of savings schemes are promoted by NGOs²⁸ yet they do not actually produce anything, and savings are typically spent on consumer goods. Thus any benefits they yield are not, strictly speaking, productive - they do not create economic surplus for reinvestment.

But the savings clubs do serve an important function in resource *distribution*, especially within households. Once a woman gives money to her savings club, it is no longer hers. She cannot, therefore, give it to her husband, or her sister, or to others if they request a loan or a gift. When she collects her savings, strict rules prevent her from spending it on anything other than the purchases agreed upon by the group. If a group is formed to buy household utensils, for instance, each member *must* buy the household utensils with her savings, she *cannot* buy shoes for her husband instead. Similarly when people form food co-operatives to which they contribute all food they receive (often these are elderly people, who receive food as remittances from their adult children), the food is no longer theirs, and they cannot give it to neighbours who ask to "borrow" some. In this way relatively powerless groups have developed mechanisms to protect themselves from the cultural rules mandating collective access to resources.

Reaching a Significant Proportion of the Population in Need

One of the common concerns expressed about the activities of the rural development NGO sector is that the combined efforts of NGOs might remain at levels insufficient to affect development problems except in a very localized fashion. This problem has been described as the "salt and pepper syndrome" (Poulton, 1988). However, it is becoming part of the conventional wisdom about NGOs that the "small-scale problem" is not insurmountable: that NGOs could become a part of "large-scale, small-scale development", in which local organizations would form a "thickening web" and intertwine in a way which would bring the benefits of the small-scale approach of NGOs to a significant proportion of the poor (Annis, 1987). This is the vision often described as the long-term goal of NGO activities - the formation of a web of grassroots groups and NGOs

²⁷. For instance, in response to a question on the profitability of WID income generating projects, one NGO responded, "they make no profit, but they are quite happy." This implies that, at least for some women, the organizational activities themselves are of significant value.

²⁸. Although it should be noted that most of the clubs observed were started independently of NGOs.

which will together achieve real, equitable development for everyone, not just isolated sectors.

However, the research suggests that this goal is not a realistic one in Zimbabwe, given the present orientation of development NGO activities. The difficulties that NGOs have in reaching the poorer groups in society were described above. In addition, it appears that NGOs do not have the means to reach a substantially larger proportion of the population than that they now serve. Because they have not solved the problems of sustainability and replicability, NGOs are necessarily exclusionary, both at the grassroots level and the organizational level. At the grassroots level, rural groups are seldom anxious for new members. They more often want to prevent outsiders from joining so that their benefits are not diluted. In general, people who participate in NGO activities are not working for "development", in an abstract sense, and they are seldom interested in working for the collective good unless they are assured that they will be able to capture a significant portion of the collective benefit. Rather, people join NGOs because they are trying to improve their own individual situations. Even if they become members of a group to do so, they are acting in an individual capacity. Therefore, when NGO resources become too scarce to serve the whole community, people's "community spirit" suffers.

At the organizational level, a growing number of NGOs compete for resources: of the 31 NGOs surveyed, five had five or fewer staff members, and four of these had been established within the last year. It is not uncommon for one or two people to form an NGO, hoping that they will be able to obtain sufficient funds to maintain the organization, and thus their employment. While the amount of funds allocated to local NGOs by donors is growing, local NGOs are mushrooming even faster. Development NGOs thus come into conflicts over spheres of influence, and of "ownership" of the grassroots groups in whose name they request funding.

The obvious answer to NGO fragmentation is networking, and there are very active NGO networks in Zimbabwe. Ninety per cent of the NGOs surveyed responded positively to a question asking if they ever co-operated in projects with other NGOs, and the collaborative effort in response to the drought was quite impressive. Such networking probably helps most to ensure there is no gross overlap of relief activities, but there are still areas where people are relatively skilled at attracting publicity and NGO projects, and others which receive little attention.

In addition, NGOs still compete among themselves for funding, for publicity, and for the most attractive projects. If an NGO gets an invitation from a donor to submit a proposal for project x, it is not going to tell the donor that another organization has more experience with x, or that x will duplicate existing efforts.²⁹ Networking and co-ordination are limited by this competition: NGOs are unwilling to grant co-ordinating authority to their umbrella organization, and some are even unwilling to share information about their activities. A recent UNDP study of Zimbabwean NGOs gave special attention to relations between local NGOs. It characterized them as divided and mistrustful of one another, and found that "although the NGOs talk a great deal about exchange of information and experiences and co-ordination, their actions show a certain amount of ambiguity to this, especially amongst identical organizations" (Kerkhoven, 1992:32).

²⁹. Similarly, donors compete among themselves to fund the most attractive and visible projects, with the result that some projects are overfunded.

Overall, the "salt and pepper syndrome" appears to remain a very real problem for Zimbabwean rural development NGOs. Although, as noted above, the aggregate impact that NGOs have had in rural areas is difficult to establish with any certainty, the VOICE study of 1987 calculated that only a small proportion of the population was reached by the income generating projects which were the mainstay of NGO activities:

A generous estimate would put the number of persons involved in these IGP groups at 100,000, which is just over one per cent of the population. The small proportion of the population reached and the marginal profitability of the IGPs means that the IGP activities of NGOs have, so far, had little impact on the problems of employment in Zimbabwe (VOICE, 1987:1).

Another much-discussed phenomenon in the literature is the emergence of spontaneous "grassroots organizations" - small, independent local groups who work for development. These are the basic units which are supposed to compose the "thickening web" of development efforts, and they have been described most frequently in the Latin American context, in which small grassroots groups are portrayed as part of a "myriad" of voluntary activities which have the potential to effect development. Again, the research did not uncover any instances in which such groups were significant for rural development in Zimbabwe outside of the more formal NGO context. It is true that people form self-help, co-operative groups. But these are formed around projects: they are not a "voluntary sector" in the sense used in the North, rather they are a profit-seeking sector, with all this implies for development (for instance, they are not working to provide public goods except in a very limited sense or under very specific conditions). Neither can they be considered social movements of disadvantaged groups: they are composed largely of the better-off sectors of rural society. Third, they are seldom economically successful, so that even the hoped-for spread and multiplier and trickle down effects are essentially nonexistent.

NGO-Government Relations

Another common assumption about development NGOs is that, even if they do not act as a political opposition to the government, they are frequently in conflict with government policies. The usual NGO-government relations have been characterized as ranging from "benign neglect to outright hostility" (Edwards and Hulme, 1992:16). The presumed tension between NGOs and governments is attributed in part to governments' authoritarian relationships with their citizens and their "natural tendency to centralization, bureaucracy and control" (ibid.), and in part to the fact that government objectives are different from those of NGOs. It is assumed that NGOs' purpose is to help the poor, while government must balance any consideration for improving the welfare of disadvantaged groups with concerns about maintaining the support of more powerful groups.

Several Zimbabwean NGO leaders expressed opinions in the meetings and open fora which were attended during the course of the study about their basically oppositional role: they argued that NGOs are propping up the government by providing relief where government policies have failed. Thus they are beginning to assert that they are in a position to make demands on the government. They believe that the government has failed because of waste, corruption, and paralyzing bureaucracy, and that government will never be in a position to take over the services that NGOs now provide: NGOs are a permanent,

and increasingly important, part of society.³⁰ There is talk that, because of their role, NGOs should demand a voice in certain policy decisions, including budgeting: "we are the ones who have to pick up the pieces after them, we should have a say in what goes into the national budget".³¹

However, the NGO survey indicated that the rural development NGO sector in Zimbabwe, as a whole, has much better relations with government than is indicated by the statements of the more vocal NGO leaders. The responses to the survey questions on relations with government are summarized in Table 12. The first question asked respondents whether they found government to be primarily co-operative, and to help with their work, or to be primarily interfering with their work through regulations, taxes, or bureaucracy. Sixty per cent of respondents replied they considered government to be primarily co-operative. Asked in an open question to comment on their relations with government, 43 per cent of respondents gave a purely positive response, 14 per cent gave a negative response, and the rest mentioned mixed relations or cited isolated problems (most commonly, they mentioned an individual with whom they had conflicts). It is also interesting to note that, while only 17 per cent of the NGOs reported taking funding from the government of Zimbabwe, 22 per cent of the respondents spontaneously mentioned that they thought government ought to fund them.³² Thus over a third of the NGOs surveyed either took or wished to take funds from government, with apparently no fear of government co-optation.³³

These findings coincide with those of Tendler (1982) and Sanyal (1991), both of whom suggest that NGOs tend to stress their conflicts with government as a way of distinguishing themselves from government, primarily to provide justification for separate funding for their activities. Both of these studies found, as we did in Zimbabwe, that the actual degree of antagonism between NGOs and government was not as high as would be expected from a review of NGO statements.

³⁰. At the same time, the NGOs themselves develop bureaucracies which rival those of government as they get larger and better funded. In some, decisions were centralized, operational details kept secret, and rank and command pathways well established, with mid-level officers unable and unwilling to take responsibility for actions (or even to make statements) without clearance from headquarters.

³¹. Although there have been some attempts to influence policy, Zimbabwean NGOs as a sector have not yet attained much real policy influence. See Muir, 1992 and Bratton, 1989 and 1990.

³². This came up in response to a question on government co-operation which did not mention funding.

³³. It should also be noted, however, that among the NGOs who did not wish to take funding from government, concern with co-optation was frequently raised.

Table 12: NGO Perceptions of Government

Number and per cent of those responding.

Perceptions of government co-operation with NGOs (N=30)	Number	Per cent
Government is primarily co-operative	18	60
Government is primarily interfering	3	10
Government is both co-operative and interfering	8	27
Government has no effect on NGO work	1	3
Reported relations with government (N=28)		
Generally positive	12	43
Generally negative	4	14
Mixed relations	5	18
Isolated problems cited	7	25

Overall, in spite of the anti-government rhetoric, it is clear that NGO activities are helped rather than hindered (or "co-opted") by government co-operation. In addition, at the level of project implementation, at least, the interviews suggested that government personnel are generally favourably disposed to NGOs and inclined to co-operate with them. District-level civil servants see NGOs as sources of funding which will make their jobs easier by supplementing the inadequate resources received from the central government. To some extent, there is agreement within government (or at least the civil service) with the NGOs' assessment of government weaknesses. The view was expressed in government interviews that additional aid money should go through NGOs rather than through the government: the amount of time it takes to obtain funds at the district level, and then to obtain the approval to disburse the funds, greatly reduces the effectiveness of district development schemes.

The benefits of increased co-ordination and co-operation between government and NGOs are now beginning to be discussed as a way to take advantage of the strengths of both the state and NGO sectors (e.g. Paul, 1988; Clark, 1991; Edwards and Hulme, 1992). However, the research shows that questions of how NGO-state relations should or could change are more complex than is commonly portrayed. In Zimbabwe, there are presently - and have been for several years - formal structures and processes designed precisely to ensure that government and the rural development NGO sector work together efficiently, from the planning to implementation to evaluation stages of development initiatives. NGOs are issued formal invitations to participate in district and provincial development planning exercises, they are asked to liaise with government administrators when they establish their programmes, and they can request technical assistance from government staff when necessary. However, such co-ordination actually takes place only on a relatively limited basis. Interviews suggested that this is in part due to NGOs' wish for independence, in part to their impatience with government bureaucracy, and in part to their concern that government does not address the right questions - all of which are valid concerns. Civil servants, on the other hand, have expressed reservations about NGOs' tendency to not engage in long-term projects, their vulnerability to external funding cuts, and their lack of accountability to their constituency (Mungate and Mvududu, 1991). Again, all of these are

valid concerns. Thus government policy mandating co-operation with NGOs is not sufficient to obtain such co-operation, implying that the suggestions currently being made in the NGO literature for increasing NGO-government co-operation need to be bolstered by indications of how such recommendations are to be implemented.

NGO-Donor Relations

It is commonly assumed that NGOs, especially local development NGOs, have a problematic relationship with donors: they depend on donors, but must constantly attempt to evade the constraints that donors put on them. Because, it is argued, donors do not fully understand the work of NGOs, and particularly the importance of the *process* of NGO activity, as opposed to merely the end product, donors are portrayed as tending to stifle NGO initiatives. Donors are assumed to have a particular reluctance to support undertakings which address structural and institutional issues affecting development. Donors are urged to become more flexible, to recognize the strengths of local NGOs, to give more staff and overhead funding, to fund whole programmes rather than just projects, to be more reasonable about accounting requirements (Antrobus, 1987; Hellinger, 1987).

These perceptions of the NGO-donor relationship were heard from several of the more vocal NGO leaders during the course of the study. Again, however, there appears to be a difference between the views of such leaders and those of the NGO sector as a whole: the NGO survey showed the NGO-donor relations in Zimbabwe to be much better than expected (see Table 13).³⁴ In response to an open question inviting comments on relations with donors, 80 per cent gave a wholly positive response. For many respondents, relations with donors did not seem to be an issue they had considered. "They give us money", said one respondent, explaining why relations were good, and seeming rather surprised to be asked the question. The prevailing attitude toward donors was not one of grudging dependency, but rather one of appreciation. Even donors' accounting requirements drew fewer complaints than expected: 62 per cent of respondents thought the requirements were moderate, 14 per cent thought they were minimal, and 24 per cent thought they were burdensome. One respondent who thought they were burdensome added "but they should be".

However, there were indications that donors had a significant influence over the activities of NGOs (see Table 14). Two-thirds said they wrote proposals in response to donors' indications that funds were available for a certain activity. Asked about donors' influence on projects undertaken in country, 31 per cent said it was great, 41 per cent moderate, and 28 per cent minimal. Fifty-eight per cent characterized all their funding as tied, while a total of 81 per cent indicated that at least part of their funds were tied.

³⁴. Care was taken to assure respondents that the interviewers did not represent donors. It is conceivable that some responses were influenced by the belief that we were connected to donor organizations; however, in the majority of interviews this did not seem to be the case.

Table 13: NGO Relations with Donors

Number and per cent responding.

Reported relations with donors (N=25)	Number	Per cent
Positive	20	80
Negative	2	8
Mixed	3	12
Perceptions of donors' accounting requirements (N=29)		
Burdensome	7	24
Moderate	18	62
Minimal	4	14

Table 14: Donor Influence over NGO Activities

Number and per cent of those responding.

Writes funding proposal in response to donor invitation (N=30)	Number	Per cent
Yes	20	67
No	10	33
Reported donor influence over projects (N=29)		
Great	9	31
Moderate	12	41
Minimal	8	28
Funds tied on a project basis, or untied (N=26)		
Tied	15	58
Untied	5	19
Both	6	23

Funding problems also did not materialize to the extent expected (see Table 15). Only 11 per cent of the respondents said their funding sources were unreliable, while 41 per cent classed them as somewhat reliable and 48 per cent considered them reliable. Because of the common perception that core costs are especially difficult to obtain funding for, respondents were asked an open question about any specific areas or parts of their programme for which they had particular difficulty finding funds. Only 21 per cent mentioned core administrative costs or staff development in response to this question, while 29 per cent said they had no such problems.

Table 15: NGO Funding
Number and per cent of those responding

Number of funding sources (N=28)	Number	Per cent
One main source	1	4
Two-three main sources	5	18
More than three sources	22	79
Reported reliability of funding sources (N=27)		
Reliable	13	48
Somewhat reliable	11	41
Unreliable	3	11
Areas of funding difficulty (N=28)		
Core/institutional costs	6	21
Training	6	21
Other/specific projects	8	29
No areas of funding difficulty	8	29
Funding received from Zimbabwe government (N=30)		
Yes	5	17
No	25	83

These findings imply that the prevailing view that NGOs are significantly hindered by governments and donors in their development efforts is overly simplistic, and suggest that NGO criticisms of governments and donors are not always justified. In Zimbabwe, the local government structures, at least, are more willing to co-operate with NGOs than they are generally given credit for. And, even though donors have a great deal of responsibility for the outcome of most NGO efforts, NGOs have fewer objections to donor control than would appear from the statements of NGO leaders.

CONCLUSIONS: NGOS AS AN ALTERNATIVE

The major, and most general, assumption about rural development NGOs which becomes evident from a review of the NGO literature is that NGOs take an "alternative" approach to development. According to who is making this assertion, it may mean that the NGO approach addresses different problems, or that it uses different processes. In most views, however, NGO activities are seen as somehow qualitatively different from those of government and international agencies. This assumption was also called into question by the results of the study. The field research did not reveal many instances where NGOs were undertaking activities not undertaken by the government, were working in different ways, or were accomplishing different things. Moreover, the NGO survey indicated that most NGOs do not perceive the creation of alternative development options to be part of their role. When asked whether their organization's activities were meant primarily to fill in gaps for government, or to do something different from government, a large majority (74 per cent) of the respondents indicated that they were filling gaps (23 per cent said they were

doing something different, 3 per cent said both).³⁵ As one respondent explained, "the government does not have enough resources to reach everywhere, so we help out".

Some hypotheses about why NGO activities are often limited in scope centre on government relations: the suggestion is made that governments typically will not tolerate any NGO activities which challenge the status quo. Again, the results of the present study do not support this contention in the Zimbabwean context: the data suggest that NGO-government relations are not what would be expected if government constraints were felt by NGOs to be truly limiting. The responses to questions on NGO relations with government and NGOs acting as gap fillers are cross-tabulated in Table 16. Of the three respondents who discussed in detail what they felt to be conflictual relations with government, none seemed to fear that their activities would provoke significant government retaliation. These data may be taken to imply either that the Zimbabwean government is relatively open to NGO activities, or that Zimbabwean rural development NGOs do not in fact make substantial efforts to challenge the status quo (or some combination of these).

**Table 16: Relations with Government and NGOs
Considering Themselves to be Filling Gaps**
Number of NGOs responding.

NGOs filling gaps	Reported government relations				
	Positive	Negative	Isolated problems	Mixed	Total
Yes	9	2	7	4	22
No	2	2	0	1	5
Total	11	4	7	5	27

The level of donor influence, however, does seem to be related to whether NGOs attempt to go beyond filling gaps. The responses to the questions about whether NGOs see themselves as filling gaps, and to that about responding to donor invitations for funding proposals are cross-tabulated in Table 17: those NGOs who said they were filling gaps were significantly more likely to develop projects in response to donors' invitations, and those who considered themselves to be doing something besides filling gaps were significantly less likely to design their projects in response to donors' suggestions.³⁶

³⁵. The phrase, "filling gaps" is a somewhat ambiguous one: it could be taken to mean filling either qualitative or quantitative gaps. However, in the sense it is used among the NGO community in Zimbabwe, "filling gaps" is quantitatively defined, and denotes an extension of existing activities.

³⁶. The chi-square test yielded a significant statistic: chi-square = 3.468, degrees of freedom = 1, significant at alpha = 0.10. Note that this implies a relation, not necessarily a causal link.

Table 17: Responding to Donor Suggestions and NGOs Considering Themselves to be Filling Gaps

Number of NGOs responding.

NGO primarily filling gaps	Responds to donor suggestions		
	Yes	No	Total
Yes	17	6	23
No	2	4	6
Total	19	10	29

Table 17 also shows the distribution of NGOs along a spectrum, ranging from those who see themselves as lending a hand to the development initiatives of others (those who are acting to fill gaps, and who respond to donor direction), to those which see themselves as an alternative to other initiatives, and who act more independently. The first group - the 17 NGOs which make up the [yes, yes] cell of Table 17 - acts essentially as a service industry. These NGOs have formed and operate to meet a demand for specific types of services. The second group - the four NGOs which make up the [no, no] cell of Table 17 - corresponds more closely to how NGOs are pictured (and idealized) in the NGO literature.

The fact that there are different types of NGOs, which have different types of agendas, is well-recognized. Korten (1990) refers to different "generations" of NGOs; Clark (1991) distinguishes between "non-radical" and "radical" NGOs; Sanyal (1991) distinguishes between NGOs which favour income generating projects and those which do not. The present findings give some indication of the relative weight of different types of NGOs within the rural development NGO sector in Zimbabwe: the majority (59 per cent) are distinctly "non-radical", while only 14 per cent seem to match the expectations of the literature that NGOs be "alternative". More importantly - and contrary to Korten's generational analogy which implies that NGOs are evolving from service projects to more activist orientations over time - it is the non-radical type of NGO which is more likely to emerge to fill the demand for NGO services created by increased NGO funding.

It should not be surprising that so many NGOs act as service providers within a service market, and there is nothing particularly wrong with this. There is no reason that NGO staff members should be held to higher standards of idealism, commitment, effectiveness or even morality than other sectors of the population. As one of the respondents in Meyer's (1992) study notes, the people now working in the mushrooming NGO sector are the same ones who were previously in business or the public sector: "they aren't extra-terrestrials". Indeed, it would be more surprising if, given the growing demand for rural development project implementation from all types of donor agencies, such a service industry did *not* materialize. The problem in the development NGO sector is not so much how NGOs *are*, but how they are *perceived* to be - there is a real danger that inaccurate and idealized perceptions of NGO capacities and constraints will lead to inappropriate policy formation.

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