Advocacy by NGOs in India

Some Reflections

by

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I was wondering whether this phrase “NGO Advocacy” or “Voluntary Action Advocacy” existed at the time Raja Ram Mohan Roy took initiative to pursue social reforms; or even at the time of Mahatma Gandhi’s work where significant policy changes were brought about. I was humbled by this reflection that advocacy in India has such historical roots and is not something which we have just discovered. To my mind as a citizen’s action to influence policies that affect their lives, advocacy has a long history; perhaps as long as citizenship itself. In more recent years, what have been examples of effective impact of the work of voluntary organisations in framing important policies in our country? I remember that in 1975 I attended a rural labour camp; emergency had been declared at that time and it was in the hills of UP Dehradun among the tribals, nomadic people and the camp was discussing the new Abolition of Bonded Labour Act which was then promulgated during the emergency and I was wondering what was the history to that and it became clear during the course of the camp. In 1973 some social activities, working in the hills of Dehradun began to talk about ‘bonded labour’ and ways to deal with it and they brought a minister and a bureaucrat – two sympathetic persons, to the area. Significant policy formulation has taken place as a consequence of this social action. Bonded Labour Abolition Act was promulgated during the Emergency to release and rehabilitate bonded labour in the country. The 1977 Primary Health Care policy of the Government of India was largely fashioned after the work of many voluntary organisations in the field of health care; the emphasis on promotive and preventive health care that was brought into the policy (not just curative), had its base in the work of a large number of voluntary organisations. And, likewise, around that period the National Adult Education Programme was actually crafted by a group of adult educators active in voluntary organisations in the country. This is to put into perspective that while the concept ‘NGO advocacy’ may be a recent concern but the practice in reality has been here for long. And as a consequence of the work of voluntary organisations, many a times indirectly, there have been significant policy formulations that have occurred in our history.

By this recognition then, one could count a number of other issues around which impact on Public Policy has occurred as a consequence of the work of voluntary organisations. If one looks at the issues of women’s rights, environment, children’s rights, NGOs, directly or indirectly, have led to policy articulation. I am continuously using the phrase ‘Public Policy’ because I like the idea of Advocacy being defined broader than lobbying and defining it as process as opposed to an event. I am
concerned that we do not subsume under this phrase everything that we do in our work. If the work was organizing people or making them aware of their rights – to include that in this definition of advocacy in my view would be to dilute the meaning of the term itself. Therefore, I am looking at the question of Advocacy largely in the context of Public Policy, largely in the context of formulation, influencing, altering, modifying, implementing, discarding, resisting, encouraging – whatever to do with Public Policy. Without reference to Public Policy, the use of the term is very generic and not meaningful at all. I would not include organising, awareness raising, conscientising, skill building as advocacy. In my view it must specifically focus on the question of Public Policy. There may be different ways of influencing Public Policy; it may include the involvement of people themselves in influencing Public Policy, use of media, academic research, etc. But I think without focus on Public Policy, the meaning of the word advocacy will get diluted.

Many people think that influencing Public Policy is not the area of work of NGOs and many others think that this is the only contribution that we can make. If we view influencing Public Policy as the primary work of advocacy action on our behalf, then the apparent contradiction between grassroots - action and advocacy disappears. It is on the basis of the cumulative experience of working at the grassroots that we actually can come up with interesting, insightful, relevant, appropriate suggestions for the content of the Public Policy itself. I think the experience of people working in the areas of health care, in the areas of bondage, literacy, was the reason why they were able to bring in that substantive focus in the policy that they were influencing. It is the work at the grass-roots that becomes the basis of generating ideas which may provide the substance of a particular Public Policy. Yet, it is not to say that influencing Public Policy can only happen if you have worked at the grass -roots. There are numerous examples of influencing Public Policy very much in the favour of the poor even in our country by those who never had any direct work at the grass -root level. Therefore, the challenge that we are facing may be how to link the work at the grass-roots with the task of influencing, framing, formulating and interpreting appropriate pro - poor Public Policy in our country. The question is not whether one can lead to the other – it inevitably does. Those who were engaged in the work of primary health care or literacy in 1950s or 1960s were not doing that work because they wanted to influence Policy in the 1970s. They were doing that work because it was important to them. But when circumstances materialised in a manner and their experiences were known, it became an important basis of new policies on health
care, adult education, etc. In recent years, much of the NGO response, has been largely in rejecting or reacting to Public Policy formulations; it has been successful at times stopping implementation of a policy because it seemed anti-poor. But if we are in the business of influencing Public Policy, we may have to also taken upon ourselves the task of formulating or providing positive contents to what the policy should look like. This task may entail dirtying our hands in sitting in the same room with those who ultimately write that policy. Merely resisting anti-poor Public Policy may not necessarily lead to desirable Public Policies in favour of the poor.

The second comment I wanted to make was the importance of recognising the national and global dimension in Public Policy formulation. Throughout the period of post-World War II, the concept of Development itself, the concept of Development Aid, the concept of Development Planning, etc. are inherited from the countries of the North. Despite our pretensions that we were formulating National Policy, a lot of those policies were influenced by global forces and agendas. By late 1970’s, many World Conference influenced our own Public Policies. The Alms Ata Conference on Primary Health Care; FAO WCARRD Conference on Integrated Rural Development; the Women's Decade (Mexico and Nairobi), Environment (Rio), Human Rights Conference (Vienna) are clear examples. All I am trying to say is that the global dimension of development policy formulation has existed as long as development has been on the agenda. It is only in the economic liberalisation trends that we may be seeing something more visibly in the last couple of years. And therefore, there is a need to at least take a global view in Public Policy influencing, even if we are operating at a micro or a local level or state or district level policy matters.

**Opportunities**

One of the major opportunities that are available today is the reasonable recognition, nationally and internationally, of the legitimacy of Voluntary organization, NGO-kind-of work. Reasonable I am saying deliberately because at times it is unreasonable but I think there is a reasonable recognition that the voluntary organization/NGOs have a role to play in the development arena.

Second opportunity is arising out of the maturity of our own experiences. We went through a period in the 50s and 60s where the previous variety of voluntary action inspired by Gandhian movement was starting – it was in the mid/late 60s that a new spurt of what we see as contemporary kind of Voluntary Organisations in our country emerged. So we can see 20 to 25 years maturity period on the basis of our
experiences, our analysis, our ability to work with each other with all its limitations, bindings, etc. So there is a maturity of experiences, we have scale, macro policy influencing.

The third opportunity I see in the current nature of flux in which the State and its apparatus finds itself in. The dominance of State as pre-eminent, primary instrument of development which was established in our country in 60s and 70s has been shaken in the last couple of years. There is a flux in the way in which State apparatus is functioning and that creates a great deal of opportunity to influence policy formulations.

**Concerns**

And of course true to our own culture we look at the constraints that are existing. They are not so much constraints in the environment as they are in my view concerns about our ability to seize the opportunity.

The first set of concerns relate to Conceptual Stagnation. Let me elaborate that with respect of advocacy work. First is the stagnation in our understanding about the role of the State. Despite what has happened in the rest of the world, and what is happening in our own country, many a times when we discuss strategies to change the condition of the poor we are recommending more of the same – we are recommending more of the same State, more of the same machinery, which is 45 years of its functioning has demonstrated no possibility of either being sensitive to or concerned about the needs of the poor. Therefore, more of the same – be it in the area of population as the latest issue of seminar proclaims or in the area of poverty alleviation as the report of South Asian Commission proclaims – they are all recommending ‘better’ State, more efficient State, less corrupt State, more pro-poor State, but more State. I do not think it is possible – better State, more efficient State, less corrupt State is not possible at all. We need to think about more clearly what its role is in the development arena, what its role is in causing poverty rather in alleviating it.

The second area in which I find conceptual stagnation is on the question of lobbying, advocacy, democracy, etc. The form of governance that we have inherited after the British colonial rule was not the form of governance that was gradually emerging from our own socio-political milieu. It was an ‘alien’ form which was ‘imposed’. That form of governance called representative democracy of parliamentary variety
only functions if we accept that lobbying is a legitimate activity. Many NGOs abhor those who move in the “corridors of power” – a phrase we use in great distaste; “those who dirty themselves in shaking hands with politicians/bureaucrats. In fact, a vibrant democracy is one where all interests are organised to lobby for themselves. The tragedy of our democracy is that certain interests are well organised and are lobbying, but a whole lot of other interests, particularly those of the poor, are not organised and have not done lobbying. So, if we are going to function in this form of governance which is a ‘representative democracy’, we will have to accept the necessity of lobbying, of demanding accountability from those who are ‘Public Representatives’, be they politicians or bureaucrats. It is not something which is uniformly understood or agreed upon, because there is negative connotation to ‘lobbying’. Therefore, the question of policy formulation, policy change, policy altering, influencing Public Policy, in this form of governance is essentially going to be an incremental process. We are not operating in a revolutionary context where dramatic transformations take place. If that is the thing, then advocacy should not be on our agenda. Therefore, incremental changes in public policy will require a long-term, sustained lobbying effort which carries with it the concerns and the interests of the diverse sections of the poor within the work.

And, third, of course, is the dimension of our identity. Who are we? It is a perpetual question: it is a good question to be confronted with once in a while. In the life of an adult spanning 45 – 50 years, if the question of identity plays up every morning, the adult will remain paralysed. In same way, we as a sector will remain paralysed if we do not come to terms with our identity. That identity, in my mind, must be expressed as an autonomous identity in the frame-work of Civil Society; and not an identity which is negatively defined (as ‘Neti’ Hindu tradition) - non-profit, non-governmental, everything non’ that is, a residual identity. Instead of this residual identity, we should have a positive definition of who we are. That will help us in looking at our role as legitimate actors in formulating public policy, if not something which we do because there is a global ‘fad’ about this.

The second set of concerns relate to what I have hesitatingly call ‘Hesitations in Partnership’ which includes networking, coalition-building, extending hands of solidarity with each other. I am including opportunities of building partnerships with media, academia, with other sectors (including the corporate). The experience of networking and coalition-building even within the folds of the NGOs and voluntary organisations in the post – independent India has been rather frustrating, painful and
difficult. Unless in our analysis we reach understanding that networking, coalition – building, partnership are critical elements of our strategy to influence Public Policy and cannot also develop an understanding of why it is painful and difficult? What should be done to overcome those in our own unique cultural milieu, distinctive to our country?

**Capacity**

The third set of concerns relate to ‘Limitations of Capacity’. I have increasingly found defending myself when I say there are limitations in capacity. It does not mean that we do not have capacity. We have immense capacity. But I would like to humbly share with you my concern that we do lack capacity. We lack capacity in even comprehending how Policy is formulated in this country, leave along its global dimensions. There is a limitation to our understanding how policy is formulated in our country.

The second area of capacity limitation is about the type and range of capacity that we have. While there has been a growing debate on professionalisation of NGOs (including in our country), that debate has been limited to bringing in some people who have got some ‘professional’ degrees. By bringing medical doctors, veterinary surgeons, agronomists, educationists, engineers, water engineers and soil scientists, chartered accountants, management graduates – by bringing people with ‘degrees’ alone, we do not create a professionalised competence. Unfortunately, sometimes the two get confused. Whenever an NGO is trying to professionalise, it starts recruiting people with degrees. The concern with the type and range of competence is that if our accumulated experience of working in an area has lead us to believe that policy in that area requires significant expertise then the capacity should be able to not only analyse but also record and document it, in a way so as to be understood by those who are in the ‘business’ of formulating policy. Unless we have the capacity within our folds this part of the work cannot be off-loaded to some temporary consultant. It has to be an integral part of our work, if influencing, changing, altering Public Policy is an integral part of our work.

The third set of constraints in capacity relate to our approaches – approaches in how we look at effective ways of influencing Public Policy. I think experience shows that a combination works – that it is a mix of a number of approaches (media, Legal, Research) together in a strategic way that gives results in influencing Public Policy. Therefore, the question is of building a capacity with such a combination - to be able
to use such a combination. There are many interesting ways in which capacity building has occurred. Not merely by training – it is a very limited option. By bringing people on short duration basis, by building relations with institutions that have that kind of capacity, etc. I hope that when we discuss the question of capacity building we not only discuss limitations but also the solutions to capacity building that we have found that may give us some idea. Otherwise standard prescription of training may be too general and not enough or adequate.

Finally, the work of advocacy by NGOs requires clearer perceptions. Those NGOs which have been engaged in significant grass - roots conscientisation, mobilisation and organization - building have also been engaging in Advocacy to demand better policies and better implementation. However, mobilisation per se, or in itself, is not sufficient for influencing public policy. Grass - roots mobilisation is a critical variable, but it does not automatically equate with, or result in, advocacy. It is useful to keep this distinction in mind, otherwise we will use a new label (Advocacy) to define our past work, and thereby dilute the meaning of the theory and practice of NGO Advocacy.

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