

Keynote Speech

**MYTH AND REALITY:
PUBLIC SECTOR AND NGOs**

Akira IRIYAMA
President
The Sasakawa Peace Foundation
JAPAN

The last quarter of the twentieth century has witnessed a growing recognition of the role NGOs can play in various aspects of the society, both domestic and international. This recognition is embedded in the belief that NGOs can better reach grassroots level, thus better represent people's voices and are instrumental for good governance. Then, for the government to be effective and functional, it has to have a good relationship with NGOs, and, there ought to be a role NGOs can, or should, play in the field of public goods.

My presentation today intends to examine this prevailing recognition of, and belief in, NGOs. That is, (1) the recognition that NGOs can play an important role both domestically and internationally, and, (2) it is because NGOs represent people's voices more accurately than government, or public sector, has to recognize their importance and find ways to cooperate with them.

Let me start with the first one. True though, it may be that NGOs' role is all too apparent both in national and international level. But can we hastily conclude that we can treat NGOs' role in the two different levels in more or less the same manner simply because it is important in both occasions, or, organizational characteristics of NGOs are the same in both situation? The answer is NO. No because an NGO in an international context and an NGO in a domestic framework are, if I may use a crude expression, two different animals.

NGOs in a nation state is within its legal framework and fall under its sanction. In that sense, NGOs are tamed animal. They are tamed not only with legal enforcement, but also by cultural and historical infrastructure they share. The picture for international NGOs, however, is totally different. Since international society is not equipped with legal enforcement system in the sense nation states are, and there is hardly any common cultural or historical ground to be shared with. Although it is possible to regard a number of international organizations and numerous international treaties as a commonality to be shared in international society, but by far, the infrastructures of the both, namely

nation states and international society, are remote from even similarity. Which means, in turn, NGOs in an international arena can act more freely and sometimes more wildly. For one thing, they are not required to be accountable to any authorities. Also, from historical perspective, international society only started to accommodate NGOs within the framework of its governance. We cannot, therefore, discuss relationship and cooperation with NGOs domestically and internationally at the same time. If this is a distinction between domestic and international NGOs, there also exists a common denominator between the two.

NGOs, whether domestic or international, can be classified into three categories according to economist David Korten. The first is those engaged in some kinds of service provision. The second, capacity building and the third, advocacy. These three categories are said to represent three stages of evolution for NGOs. That is, in their initial stage, NGOs tend to be engaged in direct service provision in the fields. Then, the necessity to educate, train, and empower the recipients of those services starts to be felt. And those who concentrate in that function emerge. Finally, comes the vital importance to raise public awareness for the problem itself, advocacy. It is not all too difficult to recognize that the wild nature of this animal increases according to the stage of evolution.

To summarize the first point, one cannot discuss relationship between government and NGOs in general. Instead, one has to make it clear if the platform is domestic or international. Also, it has to be recognized which of the three stages is in question. Apparently, relationship and cooperation in the field of service provision and capacity building is very much different from the one in the field of advocacy.

Let me now move to the second point. The second point refers to the reason why NGOs appeared as a possible partner for cooperation with public sector. That is, they claim to be able to represent people's voice, in particular, those who are in need, or the poorest of the poor. Thus if the government really wants to function for the people, it has to work with NGOs.

It goes without much scrutiny that this is a false statement. False statement if we use the word "represent" in the sense we use the word in "representative democracy", since NGOs are not elected bodies and they can at best represent their memberships and/or supporters. Then, why this statement sounds so familiar, as well as is cited so frequently? It has much to do with their closeness to the people, namely, NGOs live with villagers, work with peasants, do settlement works with squatters and certainly do know more about their lives compared with bureaucrats in the air-conditioned buildings. Let me go back again here to the three categorical functions NGOs play; namely service provision, capacity building and advocacy. In the first two, NGOs may have rights to claim they can represent beneficiaries, even though they are not elected by them. Since NGOs and their beneficiaries share common interests, common goals, and common values. But when it comes to advocacy, this argument does not hold.

Advocacy is defined as "active support, especially of a cause". That is, advocacy NGO stands for those who support for, or favor, a certain cause. Chances are that this particular cause is shared by many, if not all. But it is more likely that there exist those who are not in support of, if not against, that particular cause. Moreover, as George Soros says, "It is always easier to mobilize the public against something than *for* something". So advocacy NGOs tend to be more often formed against something. Then, NGOs, at best, can represent only partial interests, or "essentially unrepresentative" as Marina Ottaway of Carnegie Endowment put it.

Having said that, I stop examining the two of the prevailing recognition, or myth, rather, upon which the arguments of desirable cooperation between public sector and NGOs tend to be based upon. Now is the time to come back to reality to conclude my remarks.

Reality is, NGOs have always existed in any parts of the world, in any societies, regardless of cultures, religions, and traditions. And they played

an important role to cope with the problems that society faced. The more they are integrated within societal system, the smoother and the better the society functioned. In the 21st century, in the era of globalization, NGOs are getting an unprecedented influence as an agent of advocacy over all sorts of issues both domestically and internationally. As our past history shows, a society, which better accommodated NGOs more, prospered. Our society today is no exception. Or all the more so since globalization tends to reformulate the world with single norm or single standard. So for those who treasure multiple values and pluralistic societies, NGOs are but essential. In order for our society to place and secure NGOs' position within it, however, this undertaking should not be based upon myth, or to treat them as a panacea for the problems we face. Just like parliament, bureaucrat, and government itself, NGOs are a tool for social engineering. Therefore, it has to have a well-defined and clearly stated function and has to come under the rule of law.

Just like globalization, government-NGO cooperation is full of myths and interpretations. Our first step to be prepared for a new social engineering will be to dissipate myths and identify the facts as they are. In so doing, we can expect a very promising reality ahead.