

Keynote speech

NGO/NPOs and E-Governance in Asian Countries

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1. The Background of NGO/NPOS in Asian Countries

Asian countries have a long tradition of mutual help and self-help. Self-help was considered to be an indispensable condition or mutual-help. For example, Confucius said that those who wished to manifest their clear character to the world would first bring order to the state: those who wished to bring order to the state would first regulate families: those who wished to regulate the families would first cultivate their character (Nosco, p. 338). In his theory, every thing must start from individuals who cultivate and discipline themselves and not either from the order of the state or from the regulation of family. Peter Nosco characterized Confucius' theory as a version of the organic theory of the state in which families and individuals are included in the state as its parts. Nosco is true in saying that Confucius had in mind no civil society inclusive of secular and voluntary associations of the sort suggestive of his understanding of civil society. But he is wrong as far as he misses the difference between the Western version of the organic theory of the state and that of Confucius who insisted that the order of the state or the family regulation must emanate from an individual who cultivate and disciple himself and not vices versa.

Influenced by the Confucian school of thought or not, the traditions of Asian countries were abound with voluntary associations and activities. In Japan, for example, they could be traced back to the ancient time when a Buddhist monk Gyoki (668-749) organized groups of technicians and monks to help build roads, bridges, harbors and reservoirs as well as hospitals and penitentiaries, asking the participation of peasants. At last he came to participate in the national project of building the great image of Buddha at Nara.

I believe that Japan would not be an exception in Asia. Even in the Asiatic despotism of China which Wittfogel said was based upon hydro-engineering power, there were lots of rooms for the private hands to prevail (Gates). Mutual help among villagers, exchange of help between those who committed themselves to do so and family tie continued to be strong until the dawn of the modern age all over the Asian countries.

2. Growing NGO/NPOs in Asia

After the modern age, some of them were destroyed, but some remained strong in some

countries at least. Both South Korea and North Korea are famous for their robust Confucian tradition even today. In Japan, new kinds of voluntary associations and not-for profit corporations and cooperatives burgeoned after the traditional ties were displaced by the modernization efforts of Meiji era. Some of them were mutual-help organizations, but others were dedicated for public purposes. In this sense, Asian countries are different from countries of Eastern Europe which must start to build civil society from the scratches of the traditional ties destroyed by the communist regimes all (Badescu et al). Many Asian countries have a reservoir of social capital upon which they can build civil society.

As a matter of course, most of Asian countries had a disadvantage of having being ruled by centralized bureaucratic systems. According to Anthony Cheung and Ian Scott, these systems may have their origins either in the systems of control devised by former colonial powers as in the cases of Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines or in a search for national unity and social order as in the cases of Japan, Thailand and South Korea (p. 7).

They say that Asian leaders have been suspicious of the potentially disruptive consequences of devolving power to the non-state institutions and wanted to supervise and control strictly non-governmental organizations. In spite of the intents of the leaders, however, NPOs and NGOs are gaining power in these countries, because governments of these countries have proved themselves to be incompetent to tackle with the delicate problems in the age of Permanent White Water and enhanced change caused by complexity and interdependence alone. The governmental way of dealing with problems with the principle of universalism and uniformity has left a lot of space for NPOs and NGOs to do important jobs other ways. A government needs collaboration, alliance and partnership not only with companies of the private sector but also with NPOs and NGOs. NPOs and NGOs are, however, still in a weak position against government even after the Law of NPOs was passed in 1998 as in the case of Japan.

3. NGO/NPOs and E-governance

In order to assure its role in a society and gain power necessary for them against both government and for-profit private corporations, NPOs and NGOs must form and join a social network. By forming a social network, they can bring together their resources and

can gain what Chris Huxham calls a collaborative advantage. Social capital for them is, however, so fragmented and dispersed and trust is apt to be divided according to a vertical line.

In order to overcome this crucible, E-governance offers a handsome chance to open up and widen a social network beyond a small circle and even beyond the narrow confine of the nation-state. Offering information, E-governance makes it easy to find an appropriate partner or partners and form enduring relation with each other, resulting in more trust and social capital. Especially, a social network formed beyond the national boundaries strengthens a position of a NGO or NPO to challenge a public goal by getting more funds or a say against government or a for-profit corporation. A foreign counterpart gains also by having a reach to a developmental region via native NGOs who are versed in the way of life of people in the region. Between a donor and donee, there is a transparent exchange of money and information through which a donee owes accountability to a donor made possible by means of E-governance. Alnoor Ebrahim's recent book titled NGOs and Organizational Change: Discourse, Reporting and Learning reports a successful relation between EC and Indian NGOs AKRSP and Sadguru mediated by the Aga Khan Foudation based in Geneva and the Ford Foundation. This kind of a relation is made possible only by E-governance connected with Information Technology (IT). In these ways, NGOs and NPOs can play a role larger than otherwise possible

The NPOs and NGOs' currency is trust which must be shared mutually by both parties either simultaneously or successively. Trust and social capital are an important basis for the development of a civil society. Development of it via E-governance might enhance trust and social capital in its turn. Many Asian countries have already progressed toward a civil society in spite of the occasional intervention of government. But we have to assure a more blight future for a civil society by active involvement of NPOs and NGOs in solving societal problems via E-governance. The alliances of NGOs and NPOs beyond the national borders with foreign counterparts via E-governance will enhance their power and voice by forming an international opinion which a national government could not easily ignore, thus contributing to a civil society.

4. Information Technology and NGO/NPOs

As is pointed out by Peter Drucker, a NGO or NPO is usually organized around information and communication instead of around hierarchy. This means that its structure is much flatter with less layers which might threaten to distort the flow of information. Such an organization will fail unless each person takes information responsibility to learn to ask two questions: What information do I need to do my job and from whom, when and how can I get it? And: What information do I owe others so that they can do their jobs, in what forms and when? (p. 115)

Now everyone can take this responsibility with or without the help of information technology (IT). Oral and informal communication can not be neglected to facilitate information exchange for this purpose. But the use of IT and information system (IS) enhance accuracy, speed and transparency of communication among those who must take information responsibility. At the same time, they further increase efficiency, decentralization and improve resource management and marketization (Heeks, pp. 18-9). IT and IS offer more opportunity to reach more clients, serve them better, and decrease service costs (Werther et al. , p. 132).

At the same time, many NGO/NPOs engage themselves in strategic management and planning. In the context of strategic management, decision making should be viewed as a multiple process involving the gathering, evaluating, and disseminating of information (Steiss, p. 21). By stating their visions and missions clearly, they generate information as to what are they and what role do they intend to play in a future society. This is an important information for their prospective competitors and collaborators as well as or a whole society. To make a strategic plan, however, they must collect information about external as well as internal environment and make such an analysis as TEMPLES and SWOT. If information is not enough or correct, they are destined to fail to make an analysis intelligently, and to have a strategic plan at all. CEOs or top-managers might be helped by MIS and DSS. Information or a strategic plan is not a substitute for leadership, however. A leader must have a wider view and insight beyond accumulated and processed information.

A citizen who needs a service of some NPOs might be also helped by IT by finding a helpful NPO more easily through the Internet.

IT does not come cheap (Werther et al,p. 135). It's not easy to have right access to right information. There are problems of security and privacy also. Nevertheless, it will open

a blight future for NGO/NPOs and for a civil society by giving an opportunity to strengthen and widen their activities in favor of a civil society.

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