

With
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DIPLOMATIC Bytes

Workshop Assesses Relevance of NGOs

NO matter how good a government and its programmes may be, there will always be a vacuum that can be filled by organisations, societies and grassroots movements catering for the lives and environments of the ordinary man and woman.

These were the submissions of Ms. Renate Albertsen-marton, director of the Goethe-Institut, Lagos at a one week workshop on how to run non-governmental organisations which ended yesterday in Lagos.

According to Albertsen-marton non-governmental organisations represent the rising awareness of people not only to participate in the debate about their lives, but also to engage in pragmatic initiatives of self-help and self-determination.

"From the very beginnings, NGOs have been eludes of human development in all nations of the world. It does not matter how good a government and its programmes may be, there will always be that vacuum, that void which can be filled by organisations, societies and grassroots movements catering for the lives and environments of the ordinary man and woman," she stated.

She countered complaints of an overbloated size of NGOs in Nigeria, saying this could not be true because life has many facets with attendant problems that need to be tackled. Since Nigeria is "confronted daily with new developments, new diseases and new ecological problem," Albertsen-marton noted that the Nigerian's innovative spirit to tackle them can only be channelled through the medium of the non-governmental organisations. "Infact, there are usually more NGOs in democracies than in dictatorships. India boasts of over 5 million NGOs. In the state of California, there are over 2,500 non-profit organisations. The beauty of NGO proliferation is that they lead to mergers and alliances for enhanced operational performance,"

she also noted. Commending NGOs in Nigeria for having "excelled" in the struggle for human rights in the country, Albertsen-marton also observed that NGO activities in Nigeria have not however been restricted to the area of human rights. In addition, she said, they have equally excelled "in giving people health care, in combating illiteracy and environmental degradation, in improving the role of women, in education and in the fight against corruption". Infact, because people are often their brothers' keepers in Africa, the concept of the NGO is not new in Nigeria, she stressed.

Also speaking at the workshop which was a cooperative venture between the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation, the Goethe-Institut and the German Institute for Tropical and Sub-Tropical Agriculture in Witzhausen, Germany, the workshop resource person Professor David Okali defined an NGO as any organisation in civil society which is not set up by government.

Making references to a 1995 Commonwealth Foundation report, Okali noted that though numerous organisations could claim to be non-governmental, however, the term strictly speaking applies only to civil society organisations that have four easily identifiable features. These, he said, include being formed voluntarily, being autonomous, non-profit-making and having some degree of altruism.

Tracing the rise of NGO's worldwide to the 19th century, Okali, who is also the chairman of Nigerian Environmental Study, Action Team (Nest), said the phenomenon arrived Africa during the pre-independence times. "Imported NGO activity played a crucial role in the independence struggles, particularly in Southern Africa. They were some times spearheaded by missionary organisations. After independence, much local effort, at first as local branches of international

organisations, joined the NGO sector. Service delivery was the main occupation of these local organisations, all seeking to reach where government is, for various reasons, unable to reach, or where government has simply been negligent. But the activities of NGOs in national development in countries like Nigeria became pronounced in the 80s for a number of reasons," Okali observed. Echoing Albertsen-marton before him, Okali debunked fears that there was a proliferation of NGO's in Nigeria, saying that the allegations may have arisen as a result of public servants now setting up what he described as government organised NGOs (GONGOS). Or, prompting their friends or proxies to set up what he said may best be described as 'non-governmental individuals' (NGIs).

"I think that the association of NGOs with international organisations that transact business in dollars, pound sterling or Deutschmarks, has given the wrong impression that NGO work is an avenue for making foreign exchange and getting rich quick. There is also the opportunity provided through NGOs for travel abroad, most times under sponsorship by foreign sources. This has tended to glamorize NGO work unduly...when the expansion in NGO numbers is described derogatorily as 'proliferation' or 'mushrooming', I think it is the rise in categories of opportunistic and sometimes quite unscrupulous NGO's that rouses the concern," Okali stated.

The workshop which aimed at improving on the achievements so far recorded by various NGO's in Nigeria by sharing experiences between participants had in attendance Dr. Thomas Jenisch from Germany. Representatives of NGO's from states as far as Ebonyi, Edo, Benue, Kaduna, Enugu, Rivers, and Sokoto, among others, were also in attendance.