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**IT IS NOT UNCOMMON TO HEAR COMMENTS LIKE** “NGOs and politics should never mix.” The suggestion being made is, NGOs should confine themselves to development and must leave the business of politics to politicians.

This is not unlike what Jesus said to Simon the zealot and the other apostles that they stick to fishing from then on. Jesus rejected Simon's proposal for him take on the role of King as a political ruler. Jesus' vision was not of this world, and certainly not the world of politics.

Where is the prevailing notion about NGOs and politics coming from? Is this just a reflection of a common aversion of ordinary citizens towards politicians? Or does it go much deeper? If so, what is it in the NGO vision of society that gives rise to this notion? And what of this vision informs their strategies and day-to-day existence? Or, are NGOs failing to appreciate political realities and therefore are guilty of posing false contradictions?



These are the questions that this presentation hopes to address. Hopefully, the answers to these questions can shed insights into some of the dilemmas confronting NGOs.

## Defining NGO Character

**B**y nature NGOs are voluntary formations. In the broadest sense, NGOs constitute the self-organized portion of any modern society. In other words, the civil society within the larger national society that lies somewhere in between government and every individual citizen.

In this sense, NGO is a theoretical construct that may apply to nearly any self-organized group with a social purpose, whether transformative or not. This contrasts widely with the limited definition the UN gave it in 1953 when NGO first entered the official language.

Up until very recently, NGO has retained its limited official meaning. In the Agenda 21 of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in June 1992 in Rio, NGOs are but one of the nine so-called independent sectors which include women, youth, indigenous people, workers, farmers, among others.

Using civil society framework, all organizations within these UN-recognized sectors may be called NGOs. They are a product of citizens' initiative to organize themselves to meet certain social needs.

In contrast, government as a system of structures and processes of ruling is an imposition upon society and the citizen. Its business is to govern, to command resources and loyalties, to rule the entire society.

**T**he inherent differences between government, as a centralizing mechanism, and NGO, as voluntary or self-organizing entity, are what make for a polar divergence of their concept of politics, defined simply as power playing field. Government politics is integrative, concentrating power to the highest desired level and as far as sustainable from the perspective of national consensus.

On the other hand, NGO politics tends to do exactly the reverse. Its basic trajectory is redistributive. This is the fundamental anti-power monopoly bias of NGO. The intention is to redistribute power around as many circles as possible in an almost endless horizontal.



## Conflict of Values

**S**mall is beautiful. Big may be beautiful too if it is a mere aggregation, not concentration, of myriads of small. This is probably one of the most cherished values of the NGO. And it is this value that has the strongest influence on the NGO concept of a future society, strategy of change and politics.

Spontaneity and initiative are also held dear by NGOs. For them, command, imposition, big structures, huge bureaucracies are a basic no-no and have no place in their system. These “evils” belong only to the politicians and bureaucrats, to the politics of the big whose bent is control and manipulation of otherwise self-willing multitudes.

Sharing is also highly valued. This has been nurtured in the NGOs by a tradition of charity. But beyond that, NGOs are well aware of the reality of inequalities in the distribution of resources and decisionmaking power. Their proximity to the poor and powerless gives them a much deeper sense of the need to share with others.

In terms of processes, NGOs put a high premium on a bottom-up track. Top-down approach which is characteristic of government and conventional development is most detestable, although the more realistic among NGOs could settle for an appropriate mix of the two processes.

## Vision and Reality

From a strictly philosophical viewpoint, the future society for NGO is an anarchist one. No government to lord it over the citizen, only an endless array of voluntary societies transacting spontaneously among themselves. It is a society where there are no politicians or bureaucrats, but probably only citizen diplomats.

**I**f this is the vision underpinning the political behavior of NGOs then it stands to reason that their daily grind is understandably being aimed at disempowering government in a step by step process leading to its final disappearance from the social landscape. At the level of vision, this should pose no trouble. For who would be averse to a social setup where no mediation is necessary to get what one needs?

But it is precisely the transformative nature of the vision that drives committed NGOs into trouble with government and among themselves.



NGOs as social change agents are an angry lot, and for good reasons. And hopeless visionaries as they are, not too rarely do they find themselves caught in a curious mix-up about politics. They see inequalities and oppression all around. They realize how the rich and powerful plunder society's life support system. And government and politicians, in their view, are a main party to all these.

And yet NGO by themselves, because of their smallness and limited mandate, cannot do much to change the situation. They hate what they call dirty politics but at the same time realize that they cannot just wish it away. They know only too well that at the end of the day, when the shouting dies down, it is the politician who decides the big questions.

## NGOs and Social Politics

Generally, NGOs would consider themselves apolitical. In other words, they describe their activities as non-profit, non-sectarian and non-partisan. But the reality is, and especially as this applies to those committed to changing society, they are not as immune as they say. They are political and partisan in a different sense.

The farthest that progressive and militant NGOs can admit to being political is to say that their politics is development politics. But what about this development? Even if confined only to alleviation of the lot of a section of society, the marginalized who are the NGOs' avowed partners, such development cannot deny the fact that big decisions are being made by politicians and their corporate allies and that there's no escaping the impact of such decisions.

Translated in other terms the development politics of NGOs means social mobilization of the underclasses in order to create an effective leverage on politicians. Theirs is non-party politics. And as a rule, NGOs think that this is their proper domain. To engage in party politics is to cross the limits of the political terrain that they have defined for themselves.

Social politics, as NGOs would probably call their politics, has its obvious limits. Its logical end suggests that people take matters into their own hand in spite of government. But unless this sort of politics is stretched beyond legal boundaries and goes overboard into the terrain of radical revolution, the farthest it can go is to create political pressure with an eye to policy reform and improvement of governance.



## NGOs and Partisan Electoral Politics

There is a halfway arena of course. And that is partisan electoral politics. But this is precisely what the NGOs have all this time been trying to avoid. And they are caught in a bind.

**B**etween their social politics and their revolutionary vision lies the world of politicians. NGOs don't belong there by choice or have taken all the pains to avoid it. It's never been an easy choice.

Not till recently, NGOs in the Philippines have always shied away from elections or conventional partisan contests. In the past, they would confine themselves to supporting what they thought to be progressive candidates. Or if they would allow someone from their own to run, the poor fellow would be advised to officially cut his NGO umbilical cord, at least temporarily.

Now it is beginning to dawn on the NGOs that for as long as elections continue to be the main legitimizing mechanism for official governance they will have to be prepared to jump into the fray and hope to be able to replace traditional politicians with their own. And yet they are not prepared for this kind of contest.

Electoral politics is a very unfamiliar terrain for NGOs. It has its own dynamics and nuances. The demands and requirements in terms of readiness are beyond what NGOs have been used to facing. It is an entirely different ballgame. But it must be played.

The electoral record of Philippine NGOs are at best minimal. Their few attempts at partisan contests have in fact been a disaster. Because of this some even doubt if involvement makes any sense at all, suggesting that NGOs better go back to where they belong, organizing people for self empowerment. So back to social politics.

**O**n the other hand the more determined among the NGOs believe they should carry on. The point is to master the terrain. To acquire such mastery requires first a recognition of the limits of social politics. For example, a manifestation of a hundred thousand peasants and workers does not automatically convert into a similar number of votes. Or one may have a nicely crafted and sound agenda for change, which is where NGOs are good at, but the voters look for appealing names.



Learning and mastering the technology of elections is crucial. Such realization impels NGOs to study harder. They try to dig deeper into the voters' psyche, so to speak. They try to analyze what makes politicians tick. They search for effective techniques appropriate to every phase of an electoral exercise. It is not easy but they think they have to do all these to be up to the challenge.

## Overcoming Ambivalence

Given their nature, NGOs will continue to have a mixed, and perhaps confused, attitude towards politics. There is no easy way of overcoming this kind of ambivalence as this is probably the way things are and will be for NGOs.

The point, perhaps, is for the NGOs to build an arsenal of strategies and include the electoral in it. This particular terrain cannot be surrendered to the politicians.

**D**evelopment is, at the root, a political question. True enough, the kind of development we are getting so far and which NGOs want to change has been largely determined by the big politicians. This cannot go on.

But if the world, now headed toward the edge, is to be saved and changed for the better, the NGOs being a critical element in the process must have to find a way of reconciling their development vision and practice with the realities of politics.





## About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

