



# NGDO CHARTER

## **Basic Principles of Development and Humanitarian Aid NGOs in the European Union**

Liaison Committee of Development NGOs to the European Union, March 1997

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### **Background**

This NGDO Charter has been written in response to a growing debate in the NGDO world and with official donors on the quality and accountability of NGDO work. The deliberation on the precise nature of EU-based NGDOs and the principles that motivate their work started with a discussion between the Liaison Committee and the European Commission and grew into a Europe-wide debate involving members of all the Liaison Committee's National Platforms and the members of VOICE.

During this debate it became clear that one of the strengths of NGDOs is their diversity. It is this diversity which enables NGDOs to represent the many different voices of society. However, this diversity can also be overwhelming for officials who have had no formal introduction to NGDOs. This Charter offers an introduction to NGDOs in the European Union.

### **Use of the Charter**

This Charter is a description of what the NGDOs in the EU-NGDO Liaison Committee network aspire to and work towards. It is one way in which the values, approaches and structures of EU-based development NGOs can be outlined. Therefore, though not all NGDOs will have all these characteristics or achieve these high standards all of the time the Charter can be used as a guide to what the term "NGDO" is generally understood to mean by NGDOs themselves.

The Charter can also be used as a guide for institutional donors who want to understand better the nature of NGDOs, and their added value in development work. While the Charter is primarily oriented towards the external development work of the NGDO it may also serve as a set of principles that NGDOs would seek to apply internally in running their own organisations.

## **THE NGDO CHARTER**

### **A) Values**

#### **EU NGDOs believe in:**

1. Social justice, equity and respect for human rights.
2. The participation of the populations for whom they are working.
3. The involvement of civil society in development cooperation.
4. Service to their Southern partners - they do not aim to serve their own interests but those of their partners.

### **B) Approach**

#### **EU NGDOs believe in:**

1. Taking a professional approach to their work.
2. Building up the capacity of partners in the South.
3. Empowering particularly disadvantaged groups.
4. Working to reduce gender inequalities.
5. Using appropriate fund-raising methods.
6. Ensuring that their actions are sustainable.
7. Engaging in development education, awareness-raising and advocacy in the North.
8. Using their bridging capacity to link different sectors of society.

### **C) Structure**

#### **EU NGDOs:**

1. Are rooted in EU civil society.
2. Have a non-profit making aim.
3. Are legal entities.
4. Are based in the European Union.
5. Are groups of people.
6. Are independent to pursue their own development objectives.
7. Have a board which is representative of the NGDO's constituency and independent in its actions.
8. Seek to diversify their sources of funding.
9. Are publicly accountable and transparent.

## Elaboration of the EU NGDO Charter

### A) NGDOs believe in the following values:

**A1 Social justice, equity and respect for human rights.** NGDOs believe that all men and women have the right to a basic standard of living. They believe that this should be based on the equitable distribution of the earth's resources, the eradication of poverty, social justice and the equitable distribution of wealth. NGDOs believe that all people should be empowered to be able to determine their own values, priorities and to organise themselves to act on these.

**A2 The participation of the populations for whom they are working.** NGDOs believe in the importance of acting in solidarity with the goals of the communities they work with, or for, according to the priorities the latter identify for themselves. They believe that this should be done through popular participation in the development process. They believe that men and women of the target community should, to the greatest extent possible, be responsible for the conception, design, implementation and evaluation of projects and programmes and be involved in the formation of policy in the North. They believe in constant dialogue with local partners and local participation in decision-making on spending and policy.

**A3 The involvement of civil society in development cooperation.** NGDOs believe that the public have both a duty and a right to be involved in development cooperation and the attainment of social justice. For this reason they invite and encourage direct and indirect public support in their work. They believe that this support should be based on the understanding of the public of the motivations and aims of the NGDO. To this end they are involved in dialogue with their supporters.

**A4 Service to their Southern partners - they do not aim to serve their own interests but those of their partners.** NGDOs believe in putting the needs of their Southern partners first. They do not see NGDO work as a way to spread doctrines that do not contribute to the development process.

### B) NGDOs believe in the following approach to development cooperation and humanitarian assistance:

**B1 Taking a professional approach to their work.** NGDOs believe in having the capacity to implement what is written in their Mission Statement. NGDOs believe in

defining a general strategy based on proven methods which include monitoring, evaluation and follow-up studies in the implementation of their operations.

**B2 Building up the capacity of partners in the South.** NGOs believe in improving capacities in the South by building on existing local structures, knowledge and expertise. Where local structures do not yet exist, NGOs try to encourage their creation. NGOs believe in creating a situation which allows people to improve their own conditions. This can be done by acknowledging their own identities and resources and by transferring the necessary social, technical and management skills. It involves ensuring the availability of adequate financial and technological resources. Furthermore, they believe that this should be aided by a two-way learning process between Northern and Southern partners.

**B3 Empowering particularly disadvantaged groups.** NGOs believe in paying specific attention to, and support for disadvantaged groups within the communities they work with and in particular for the needs of children, minorities and other groups at risk. NGOs should work to ensure the full and equal involvement of people in the events and decisions that affect their lives. They should help men and women to create the conditions to increase their own capacities.

**B4 Working to reduce gender inequalities.** NGOs believe in the importance of identifying gender gaps and acknowledging the impediment they present to development, and work to reduce them. To do this they must be aware of the socially determined positions of men and women in society and the political, social and economic forces which shape them. NGOs should aim to create the conditions for women to be able to participate fully and as equal members of their communities. The participation of women in decision-making activities should be actively promoted. They should ensure that women participate fully in all programmes so that development programmes can benefit men and women equally.

**B5 Using appropriate fund-raising methods.** In their fund-raising activities EU NGOs aim to portray the realities and complexities of the situations with which they are involved, as inappropriate methods and simplistic images can undo the positive impact of their work. NGOs should control all fund-raising activities carried out on their behalf.

**B6 Ensuring that their actions are sustainable.** NGOs provide support that can be sustained over the period required and that builds on structures and practices that are locally sustainable in the long term. They also aim to ensure that the improvement of social, political and economic conditions are in harmony and will not

jeopardise opportunities for others in the community or for future generations. In short-term relief situations NGOs try to ensure that their actions do not impede local institutions or other actors from taking over when the crisis situation has ended.

**B7 Engaging in development education, awareness-raising and advocacy in the North.** NGOs believe in keeping the EU public informed, through development education and awareness-raising activities, of the reality of poverty and the structures that perpetuate it. They should make use of their experience in the South to lobby institutions, North and South and in particular at all international fora where their governments have a voice and which can influence the conditions in which the most disadvantaged populations live. Development education is based upon experiences in the South.

**B8 Using their bridging capacity to link different sectors of society.** NGOs believe in establishing partnerships with different segments of society and other kinds of organisations which can influence conditions in the South. This is done in recognition of the fact that NGOs are only one of the many actors involved in development cooperation and humanitarian assistance. Linking the work carried out by the various actors concerned with development cooperation and humanitarian assistance can lead to a more coherent and sustainable development.

### **C) Structure**

Across the European Union, despite the differences in national traditions, there are sufficient similarities for us to be able to use the term "EU NGO" to describe a common structure.

#### **EU-NGOs:**

**C1 Are rooted in EU civil society.** NGOs believe in having proven direct or indirect public support in the sector of civil society in which they are based. They believe in real participation by the supporters in the NGOs work. The participation of supporters is based on an understanding of the motivations and aims of the NGO. They believe that this should be achieved through constant dialogue with the supporters.

**C2 Have a non-profit making aim.** European Union NGO is a not-for-profit organisation and does not have as its aim to benefit from profit that results from its activities. Any income that is created through income generation programmes should benefit the target population of the programmes, or be directly reinvested in the organisation's development, humanitarian and development education work.

- C3 Are legal entities.** Each NGDO is legally recognised as an organisation according to the appropriate laws of one of the 15 Member States of the EU.
- C4 Are based in the European Union.** Development NGOs from the EU are legally based in at least one of the Member States of the EU. Furthermore, the main part of the organisation's funding comes from within the EU and control on spending and policy decisions remains there. However, NGDOs believe that it should be possible to delegate decisions on spending and policy to Southern partners where appropriate.
- C5 Are groups of people.** An NGDO is made up of a group of people and not just a single individual.
- C6 Are independent to pursue their own development objectives.** NGDOs are free of state control and steering by government and multilateral institutions or by other outside bodies with aims that are different from or contrary to NGDO philosophy. This does not exclude an NGDO from being funded by government, or other organisations, or from working in cooperation with them, but rather requires that the NGDO is free to pursue its own development aims without undue influence from an outside body.
- C7 Have a board which is representative of the NGDO's constituency and independent in its actions.** NGDOs are governed by boards that represent their constituency and supporters or members. They believe in having a system of nomination and election of board members that is open and transparent and has been constructed to ensure representation of a broad base of the NGDO's constituency. The board members are independent from any organisation that does not reflect the NGDO's base. They aim to avoid any possible conflict of interests between the work of the board member and any other activities of the member. They believe that board members should be non-partisan and not receive any gain, financial or otherwise, from being part of the board.
- C8 Seek to diversify their sources of funding.** NGDOs diversify sources of funding, wherever possible, in order to maintain financial independence from one donor.
- C9 Are publicly accountable and transparent.** NGDOs are open to public scrutiny and debate about their policies and management practices. They believe in transparency in management towards their donors, their support base and their target group.

## The variety of the NGDO approach

One of the difficulties encountered in understanding the NGDO approach is quite simply their variety. The NGDO movement is a highly heterogeneous movement born from a variety of distinct traditions and cultures, in different circumstances around the European Union.

NGDOs can be classified in many ways, for instance according to their activities (whether they are *financing, operational or advocacy* NGDOs); by their geographical scope (*local, national or international*); by their constituency (*membership organisation, non-membership organisation*); whether they are *denominational or secular organisations*; etc. Clearly some of these categories overlap. Some large NGDOs may cover several of these features while others may specialise in one field.

Other factors, such as *size* and *foundation*, will have consequences for the functioning of NGDOs. The size of NGDOs varies enormously around Europe and even within individual countries. This will influence the NGDO's ability to engage in different fields of activity at the same time. Furthermore, many NGDOs were founded by *Church organisations* or *political parties*. Such ideological background serves as inspiration to the NGDO's work and represents a further rooting in society.

Traditions of NGDOs vary from country to country. Some were formed in order *to maintain a clear separation of powers between government and interest groups* while others have *grown to fill a perceived gap in government programmes*. Another tradition is that of *NGDOs as interlocutors between their members and government*, participating actively in government decision-making and policy formation. This naturally has consequences for the identity of the NGDO.

When compiling the NGDO Charter these are the kind of factors that were taken into account. While diversity is one of the key riches of the NGDO movement that must be preserved this does not mean that the NGDO sector is without common characteristics. There are common features that all development and humanitarian NGOs share, as well as identifiable standards that all believe in which we hope have been clearly presented in this Charter.