

Fears of government control over NGOs' purse strings won't go away.

SHIREEN BADAT spoke to alarmed members of the sector

RDP vs NGO?

that played a key role in apartheid's defeat.

The battle of acronyms

TENSIONS seem set to linger between non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the state over the control of foreign funding. Fears of government control over NGOs are mounting after the recent release of the White Paper of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) which refers to some form of accreditation for NGOs in order to monitor their accountability and efficacy.

The contents of the White Paper, and earlier government statements about the NGO sector, have sparked serious dissatisfaction within the ranks of NGOs. Among their concerns is that accreditation will result in only the larger organisations receiving contracts from the government while smaller NGOs and community-based organisations (CBOs), which are often grassroots initiatives, will be the losers.

Another is a lack of clarity about an "audit" of NGOs which the RDP office has embarked on. Although organisations agree that there is some duplication and competition within the sector, questions arise over what criteria will be used to determine which NGOs remain viable.

Although the White Paper suggests that there is scope for groups that monitor and lobby government, there is concern that those who are critical of the government may be blacklisted.

A major complaint is that the White Paper is vague about just how government will engage with NGOs.

Because of apartheid policies, the world's biggest NGO sector has been spawned in South Africa, with an estimated 54 000 organisations active in development. With a democratic government now in power, foreign funding is likely to be channelled in the usual bilateral government-to-government manner.

In order to fund its R2,5 billion budget for the RDP, the government faces stiff competition from NGOs, which received R2,3 billion from foreign funders last year.

The RDP office has called for the restructuring of the NGO community. Although Minister without Portfolio Jay Naidoo has said he believes that NGOs have a critical role to play in the RDP, he has also indicated that he will only deal with a representative NGO body.

At a recent summit of NGOs, attempts were made to form a national council of NGOs. An interim committee was established to work towards setting up a national structure within the next six months and to engage with the RDP.

A spokesperson for the Western Cape NGO coalition, Michelle Booth, said organisations were "not very happy with this top-down approach by the RDP office". The lack of consultation and the apparent attempt to impose a national structure on NGOs were problematic, she said.

A series of meetings and workshops have been held by Western Cape NGOs over the past year. In February a steering committee was formed.

"We are unclear about the relationship between the national summit and the process we have been engaged in," said Booth.

Jacqui Boule of the Development Action Group feels that although there is a need for some form of regulation or "quality control", the government is placing itself in a very powerful position by claiming the right to decide on accreditation.

She commented: "This could lead to favouritism and patronage and it potentially opens doors for quite repressive measures to be introduced." She added that the critical issues were how funding was used, how NGOs and the RDP complemented each other and how broadly the money could be spread.

Idasa programme director Paul Graham said accreditation was not necessarily the best way for the government to enter into contractual and tendering relationships with NGOs that did work which justified government funding.

"It could become a control mechanism which reduces government efficiency and leaves them at the mercy of NGOs who become merely dependent branches of government policy rather than the independent and effective organisations which make them valuable to the RDP in the first place, said Graham.

In this way, he said, accreditation could backfire on the government. "But it will also be resisted by many NGOs who have suspicions that it will be used to control their activities as

well as access to funds and information.

"The RDP principles of self-regulation, democratisation and a vibrant and independent civil society should be the watchwords for the relationship between government and NGOs," said Graham.

Sharon Follentyn of the Urban Foundation said a process of natural attrition in the NGO sector would be preferable to legislation to rationalise it.

She feels that the White Paper is somewhat short-sighted. "Instead of trying to take over the tasks of NGOs, the government should rather be looking at how NGOs and CBOs can interact with the RDP," she said.

Funders, it seems, are also not too clear about the implications of the White Paper.

Lars Faaborg Anderson of the Danish Embassy said it was important to continue funding NGOs but suggested that a gradual transference of knowledge and expertise should take place from the NGO sector to the government.

He said the Danish government saw great potential for three-way co-operation between itself, NGOs and the RDP which would entail the Danes funding work sub-contracted by the government to NGOs. This, he said, would ensure that NGO programmes were in line with government policy.

Such an approach would mean that the big challenge facing NGOs is how they reposition themselves in terms of bilateral funding. ■

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