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When NGOs stopped asking why: The rise of technocratic development sector

Shatadru Chattopadhayay • April 6, 2026, 13:48:23 IST

As NGOs shift from rights-driven work to data-led delivery, the focus is moving from questioning power and inequality to optimising interventions, raising concerns that development is becoming more technical, transactional, and detached from the people it aims to serve.

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Have you noticed how much NGOs' focus has changed? I didn't notice the change right away. It came slowly at first, then steadily, through meetings that sounded a little different from the ones before them, through proposals that promised not solidarity but scale, not political understanding but technical delivery.

Over 25 years in leadership across the NGO world, I watched the language of rights, justice and participation give way to the language of metrics, optimisation and measurable outcomes. No one declared that a threshold had been crossed. The shift came wearing the calm face of common sense. Even the vocabulary told its own story: solidarity became scale, accompaniment became delivery, political education became capacity building, and public action was softened into stakeholder engagement.

In the earlier years of my work, non-governmental organisations or NGOs were rarely tidy institutions, but they were animated by argument. We debated land, labour, caste, gender, exclusion, power and the state. We wrestled with history. We asked why poverty persisted and who benefitted from its persistence.

Even when our methods were uneven, the moral and political impulse was clear. Development was not simply about improving systems. It was about confronting the forces that made so many lives precarious in the first place.

Science, of course, always had a place in that world. Agronomy mattered. Hydrology mattered. Biology, chemistry, public health and statistics all mattered. No serious person would wish them away.

What changed, as I experienced it, was not the arrival of science but its promotion from instrument to worldview. Technical knowledge was no longer there simply to support broader social aims. It increasingly began to define the agenda itself.

In today's development machinery, technology, data and statistics sit close to the centre of how progress is tracked and legitimacy is claimed, while major donors devote large sums to technically-framed fields such as agricultural development and digital public infrastructure.

This did not happen in a vacuum. It followed a longer arc in the history of development. In the immediate decades after World War II, the thinking, for

all its limitations, was at least explicit about national transformation, institutional building, and the public good.

Later came the critiques of dependency, underdevelopment and unequal exchange, which forced attention on power and structure. Then came the age of structural adjustment, governance reform and managerial efficiency, when the development sector learned to speak more fluently in the language of performance.

What we are living through now feels like the next turn of that screw: a period in which the technical disciplines and their commercial applications have come to dominate not only how problems are solved, but how problems are recognised.

Why technocratic NGOs are on the rise now

The scale of the system matters here. NGOs are not fringe actors watching this transition from the sidelines. According to The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), aid to and through civil society organisations amounted to USD 27 billion in 2024, or 12.9 per cent of bilateral official development assistance.

That helps explain why the pressure to become more legible, more managerial and more technically fluent is so strong. When NGOs occupy such a large place in the machinery of delivery, they also absorb the priorities of that machinery.

The change has been encouraged from above as much as from within. Today's funders often prefer interventions that can be standardised, benchmarked and narrated as innovation. That preference is likely to sharpen in a tighter aid climate.

The OECD projected a nine to 17 per cent fall in official development assistance in 2025, after a nine per cent decline in 2024. In such a climate, slow political work that cannot be counted quickly is often the first thing to

lose favour. The ideal NGO worker becomes not the organiser who asks difficult questions, but the technical manager who can deliver a solution at consulting speed and at a non-profit cost.

This is where we could begin to see the rise of what I call “technocratic NGOs”. They still retain the NGO vocabulary of development, but increasingly operate with the tempo, incentive structure and self-presentation of technical contractors.

They do utter words like justice, inclusivity, and rights in their projects. But they simply subordinate it, again and again, to delivery. Their expertise is real. Their intentions are often decent. But their institutional reflex is different. They are more comfortable asking how to optimise an intervention than why the surrounding system produces exclusion in the first place.

In that world, a good intervention is one that can be measured quickly, replicated cheaply and narrated clearly to funders. A good organisation is one that can manage data, absorb risk, satisfy compliance and deliver results at scale.

A good NGO worker is no longer the one who speaks the language of a farmer or a worker, but the technocrat who can move from pilot to platform with the discipline of a consultant and the salary of a non-profit professional.

How to build a transactional language

Of course, this transition is directly related to the change in the world of politics as well. In many settings, it is more acceptable for an NGO to distribute climate-smart seeds, deploy a mobile advisory system, or improve irrigation efficiency than to ask who controls water, who owns land, whose labour is discounted or whose knowledge is ignored. The NGO is allowed to solve problems, but is less and less welcome when they interpret where those problems come from.

Increasingly, the NGOs are becoming consultants, service firms, and intermediaries that now thrive by packaging commercial expansion in the softer language of development. Selling products to the poor in rural markets becomes “empowerment”.

Tighter control over supply chains becomes “inclusion”. Dependence on purchased inputs is renamed “resilience”. This is not to say that every partnership with a business is suspect. It is to say that the language grows warmer even as the model beneath it grows more commercial. The same direction is visible in major philanthropy.

In its 2024 annual report, the Gates Foundation listed USD 537 million for Agricultural Development and USD 31 million for Digital Public Infrastructure alone. The technocratic NGO is not simply something one feels in meetings or proposals. It is being financed into existence.

More recently, we have all witnessed the same impulse gather around carbon credits and carbon sequestration, which in many circles now appear as the newest master language of development. Put simply, a carbon credit stands for reducing one metric tonne of greenhouse gas emissions to compensate for (offset) a metric tonne of emissions made elsewhere.

Activities such as mangrove plantation, agroforestry, production and application of biochar, adoption of regenerative agricultural practices, crop residue management, methane emission reduction in rice production can help generate carbon credits, which are traded in carbon markets.

Carbon is attractive because it is measurable, tradeable and easy to narrate to funders. The World Bank notes that direct carbon pricing now covers about 28 per cent of global emissions, and that the pool of unretired carbon credits had grown to almost 1 billion tonnes in 2024.

Meanwhile, the voluntary carbon market had offset and retired 182 million tonnes of credits in 2024, with buyers paying a steep premium for removals.

What troubles me is not the climate concern itself, which is real, but the speed with which whole landscapes and livelihoods are being redescribed as carbon opportunities, and the speed with which NGOs are lining up to mediate that transaction.

I have witnessed how this affects the internal culture of NGOs. The traditional craft of field presence, political listening, and gradual institution-building is losing ground. In its stead are project management, reporting architecture, data dashboards, procurement discipline, and interventions sold as innovation.

Employees begin to resemble professionals from an engineering firm, an agribusiness organisation, or a sustainability consultant. Their calendars, incentives, and fears are comparable. Their success is dependent on delivery, not interpretation. At some point, the distinction between working for an NGO and working for an agro-chemical company or a multinational commodity trading company becomes less a matter of everyday practice and more of public perception.

It's time to bring back the human centredness

That shift has real consequences. When technical skill becomes the main thing that matters, the slower work of understanding people's lives can start to look unimportant or "unprofessional". But poor and excluded communities do not live in separate boxes.

For a small farmer, water is tied to credit, soil is tied to land rights, seed is tied to debt, and climate is tied to migration, power and survival. When NGOs look at these problems only through a technical lens, they can start to see people less as human beings with voice, memory and claims, and more as cases to manage. The farmer becomes a number on a dashboard, a beneficiary on a list,

a customer for a product, or one more link in a supply chain. What gets lost is the person behind all that.

Yet I do not think this drift is inevitable. If the NGO world is to recover some of its human centre, it will have to resist the temptation to become either a minor branch of business or a cheaper arm of the consulting industry. That does not mean rejecting science, partnerships or professional discipline. It means placing them back in their proper order.

Technical competence should remain a means, not a mission. The task is to reconnect development work with institutions and alliances that still ask larger questions of justice, labour, land, dignity and democratic accountability. Some of that renewal may come from rebuilding wider coalitions than the sector has recently allowed itself to imagine.

NGOs may need to draw closer again to trade unions, faith-based organisations, grassroots groups and those businesses that are prepared to accept social obligations rather than merely reputational rewards. They may need fewer performance slogans and a deeper moral and political anchorage, fewer transactional partnerships and more durable publics around them.

Without that, they will continue to grow more efficient and less distinct. With it, they may still find a way to use technical knowledge without surrendering the deeper purpose that once gave their work meaning.

I do not write this out of nostalgia for a purer age. NGOs were never innocent. They have always been entangled with donor priorities, elite preferences and the fashions of development thought. Nor do I write against science. Our time requires more scientific seriousness, not less.

Climate change, ecological stress, public health and agriculture all demand rigorous knowledge. My concern is narrower and, I think, more urgent. When science becomes detached from social understanding, and when technical

efficiency displaces political courage, development begins to lose its human centre.

What worries me most is not that NGOs have become more competent. Competence is welcome. It is that many are being remade in the image of the systems they once existed to question.

If that trend continues, the sector may still produce solutions, perhaps even elegant ones. But it will become less capable of asking who those solutions serve, what they silence and who is left to bear their cost. In that future, the victims will not only be smallholders, excluded communities and precarious workers. It will also be the idea of the NGO itself.

(The author is the managing director of Solidaridad Asia and works with farming communities for sustainable development in agriculture. Views expressed are author's own)