To change India, we need a State-NGO collaboration

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The governments' failure to deliver more effectively on human development indicates they need to look for new models and replicate them, taking advantage of NGO initiatives and their ability to provide services (AFP)

Election time once again raises the question of power. So many promises are being made but the winners will prove powerless to fulfil most of them. When I visited Assam recently, I saw that governments would do better if they shared power.

Tiring of successive governments' failures to fulfil promises, people living around the Manas wildlife sanctuary have founded an NGO called The Manas Ever Welfare Society (MEWS). Their activities: Cleanliness and employment creation. I stayed in Florican Cottage, the small resort they run, which is "the backbone of MEWS subsistence". It's modest,

reasonably priced and staffed by local people who could not be more helpful, and provides a local naturalist who is an outstanding birder.

After leaving Manas, I sailed to Laheswari, a village on one of the many occupied islands in the middle of the Brahmaputra, along with two doctors, two nurses, a pharmacist, a laboratory assistant and two social workers. Once our boat, the Kaliyani, had been firmly attached to the bank, tables were set up on the deck and the staff established a floating clinic.

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The Kaliyani is one of 15 boats operated by The Centre for North Eastern Studies and Research, providing clinics for the Brahmaputra islanders from Tinsukia and Demaji in the east to the Bangladesh border in the west. The islanders are isolated, poor and under threat from floods every year. There is only one lower primary school in Laheswari, with a temporary teacher who rarely shows up.

The clinic started with one of the doctors giving an awareness lecture on cooking and the diet's impact on health. Then the doctors examined the patients, a surprisingly wide variety of tests were done on the spot, and the nurses immunised babies and kept patients' records. The pharmacist provided the medicines prescribed.

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Almost all the patients in this area were young Bengali-speaking Muslim women. Two mothers I saw were painfully young. Many were unclear about their age. An older woman was clear about hers. "I am 35. I am having my fourth baby and this will be my last one," she said, leaving no room for doubt that four was more than enough. The only man I saw was elderly, and suffering from general weakness and body aches. Twice floods had swept away his land and he had bee forced to relocate. At the end of the day, 99 patients had been treated.

The boat clinics are a collaboration between an NGO and the government's money power with the National Health Mission footing the bill. There is powerful resistance among governments to this sort of partnership.

The old colonial attitude that the government should be the sole protector and provider still survives. Government servants do not like letting control slip out of their hands because that means losing power and all too often personal profit too.

When I got back to Delhi, I asked three leaders of civil society about the potential for government-NGO collaboration. Ashok Khosla, the chairman of TARA, said: "Despite hopes and expectations, the present regime is no different and NGOs continue to suffer impediments to the genuine contributions they can make to national development, which should not be the case in a clean and corruption-free environment."

Ajay Mehta, president of Udaipur-based Seva Mandir and Vidya Bhavan, pointed out to me that the government does encourage NGOs to help it deliver on some of its programmes like Swachh Bharat but warned “NGOs cannot be a substitute for government. They can’t be the only players.”

Amitabh Behar, executive director of The National Foundation for India agreed. He believed the role of NGOs in services provision should be to provide models. But at the same time he insisted that NGOs should hold government to account for its failures.

The governments’ failure to deliver more effectively on human development indicates they need to look for new models and replicate them, taking advantage of NGO initiatives and their ability to provide services as effectively as the Brahmaputra boats do.

For that to happen, governments will have to shed their mai baap tradition and allow others to share their resources more.

They will need to remove the impediments Khosla talked of.

And they must take note of legitimate criticism and listen to the message rather than shoot the messenger.

The views expressed are personal

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