

Feature

Development

FAO Looks Forward to the Growth of a Sustainable Farming in Bangladesh

by Masud Hasan Khan

FAO Resident Representative Peter Meyers is one who knows Bangladesh since before the birth of the independent nation. During Pakistan period, Meyers worked in Dhaka office of FAO and witnessed the growth of a nation and an agricultural system that was struggling hard to take off from traditional farming practices to scientific agriculture. He also saw the workings of the Green Revolution — an effort aimed at increasing food production.

The Daily Star interviewed Mr Meyers on issues relating to the changes in Bangladesh's agriculture sector, its future prospects, role of the FAO in the country's agricultural sector and the UN organisation's policy changes in the altered world economic order.

The Daily Star: What are the changes in FAO's global perspective in the altered world economic order and increasing environmental awareness?

Peter Meyers: This is an interesting and also challenging question which needs to be looked at, I think, from several perspectives. First of all, the basic objective was, and still is, to adopt the production and distribution of food to the needs of humanity and to ensure a sufficient and balanced diet for all by attacking the very root cause of hunger: poverty. The UN Conference on Food and Agriculture held in 1943 — which ultimately led to the establishment of FAO — emphasised the need for collaborative action between all nations to achieve freedom from hunger for all people in all lands. Since inception, therefore, world food security has been a fundamental and guiding principle of FAO's approach. Our ultimate objective is to ensure that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to the basic food they need. So, that has not changed and, in fact, the new Director General Mr. Jacques Diouf has already taken steps to intensify and strengthen FAO's work in that direction.

Secondly, in terms of the changed economic order there are at least two points that can be made. One is obvious, of course, and that is as in the case of other international organisations, FAO's membership has increased as the direct result of the emergence of several newly independent economies in central and eastern Europe. Thus, our pool of experience and expertise has similarly expanded as has, also, the demand for FAO's services. I think this is very positive. But the other point arising from the changed economic order and which preoccupies many of us, is the question of resources. And I mean, here, financial resources available to developing countries to support their development requirements. Many nations around the world are now being called upon to fund emergencies and peace-keeping activities in addition to development programmes and there is concern whether the flow of development funds can not only be maintained but also substantially increased. The investments necessary to effectively alleviate poverty and develop the technologies need to support a world population of nine billion will call for a truly massive commitment and funding.

Regarding environmental concerns, FAO has always stressed the importance of these in all its programmes and as popular awareness of environmental issues has increased globally in recent years FAO has taken an increasingly stronger role in promoting the conservation of resources and biodiversity. This is clear from FAO's work under the Tropical Forestry Action Programme, in the preparation of an International Code of Conduct on responsible Fishing and the FAO initiatives taken during the Earth Summit. FAO is involved in the follow-up of several of the UNCED Agenda-21 recommendations and is establishing a new department of Sustainable Development to strengthen its environmental programme and its work on sustainable agriculture and rural development.

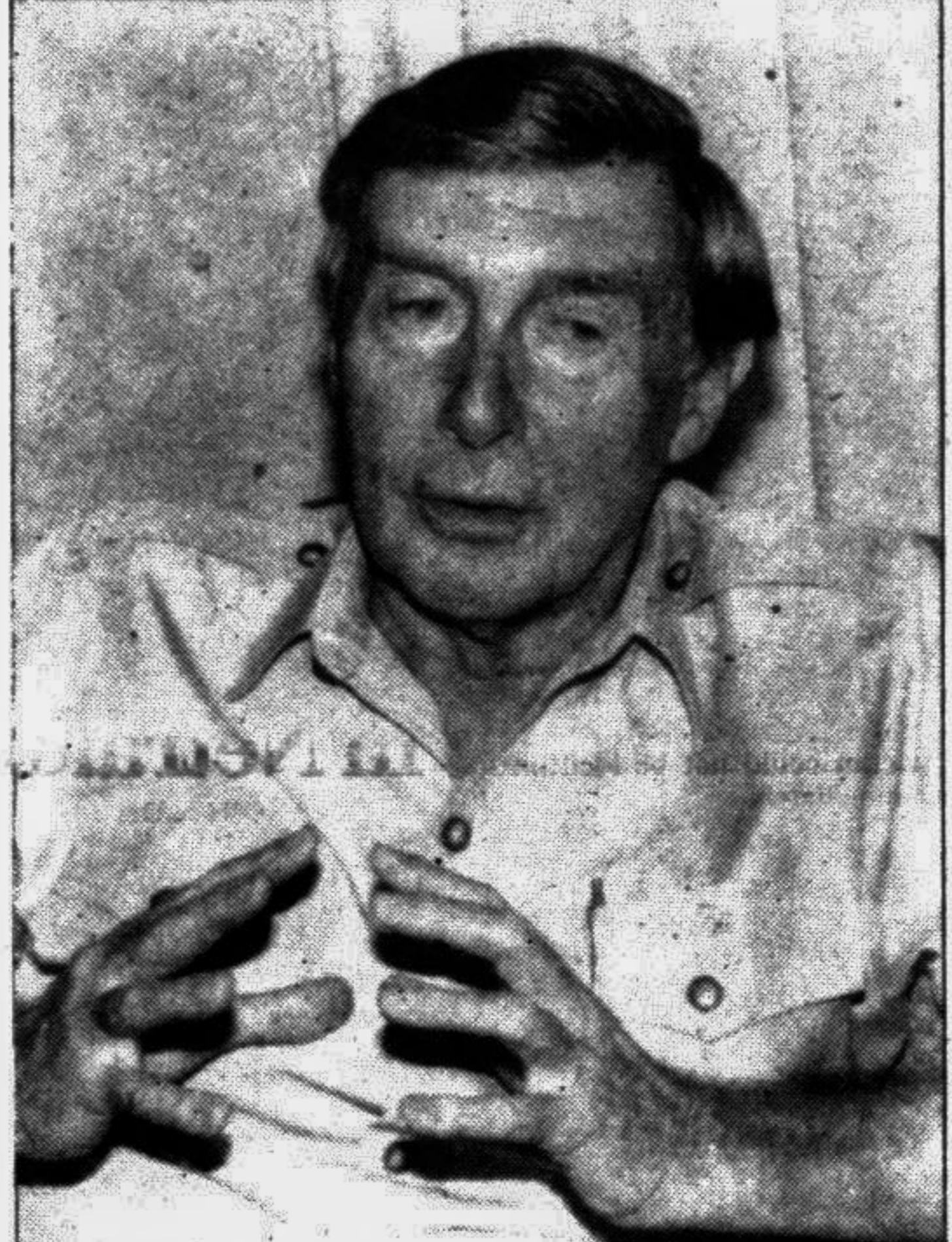
TDS: What is the significance of this year's theme, "Water for Life"?

PM: The theme for this year's World Food Day, "Water for Life" is significant in several ways. Water is, of course, a finite resource — meaning that the total amount on the planet neither decreases nor increases. As the population expands per capita supplies therefore get smaller. At present, all around the world, water is used very wastefully — especially in agriculture where excessive amounts are frequently used in irrigated farming. Also water-quality is severely threatened by pollution from agricultural chemicals and industrial and human wastes, so that even in Bangladesh, where water is relatively plentiful, lack of clean water is still one of the major factors affecting the health and development of the poorer section of the population.

In having "water for life" as this year's theme we hope that more people will come to understand the importance of saving water and making more effective use of it as well as the importance of reducing pollution and ensuring good water quality.

TDS: What is the future role of FAO, particularly in harnessing equitable water resources distribution?

PM: Water resources cover a wide field in which FAO works with many other agencies — such as WMO, WHO, UNEP, World Bank, and so on and it is not expected that FAO, by itself, would be able to organise and execute all the international actions needed. There are currently four major international programmes with secretariats in different agencies. FAP provides the secretariat for the International Action Programme on Water and Sustainable Agriculture. Development and following



UNCED programme is being broadened to take the Agenda-21 recommendations into account so that in future it will cover the total water needs of the rural communities.

Future programmes in the field will continue to focus on the full range of issues involved in irrigation development and water-use depending on member countries' requirements and funding availabilities. In many countries, more and more emphasis is being given to the management of water resources and irrigation systems by the farmers themselves or by water user's associations. New activities are proposed to be taken up by FAO on the inter-relationship between climatic change and land and water resources and on pollution of land and water resources.

TDS: What kind of changes have taken place in Bangladesh's agricultural sector? What are the future changes likely to take place?

PM: This question could be the basis of lengthy dissertation, and many colleagues more learned than I, have written on the subject. I suppose the major and most visible change in the sector has been the introduction of HYV cereal technology in the 60's and all that has followed since in terms of the increased emphasis on irrigated rice production which is still occurring. At the same time, one of the results of these changes has been the less emphasis on non-cereal crops and on rainfed agriculture to the extent that there is now need for a more balanced approach. While the HYV technology has certainly been instrumental in raising rice production, this has not been achieved without cost and, there is now need for a greater emphasis on sustainable farming systems which will maintain and enhance soil fertility.

Another very visible change over much the same period has been the development of the national agricultural research system which now possesses an impressive institutional and infrastructural base.

This will be important for stepping up the work needed on more sustainable farming systems and in generating the technology needed to support the country's growing population. Particular strengthening is needed in the fields of fisheries, livestock and livestock feed, farming systems and horticulture.

More recent changes also include the development of credit services and other important activities at the grassroots levels by the NGO community, a focusing on participatory approaches to rural development and a shift towards greater reliance on the private sector. Fertilizer distribution is perhaps the most outstanding example of the latter, where Bangladesh moved from an initially public sector operation to an almost complete privatisation within a four year period.

TDS: What areas are the FAO projects in Bangladesh



concentrated in? What are the new areas which can be considered for FAO assistance in future?

PM: FAO currently supports the government's development programme in several sub-sectors. In the crop agriculture sector, we are working with the Ministry of Agriculture in a project to strengthen national capacity for monitoring and management of the irrigation sub-sector and in collaboration with different MOA agencies. FAO is also providing the technical assistance to a GDB/UNDP Asian Development Bank project to build national research and development capacity for horticulture. Also, in the field of horticulture, we are supporting a Vegetable Seed development activity which includes and important component for private sector seed industry development. Another project, just commencing, is well related to this year's WFD theme and will support activities in cereal technology and farming systems including efficient on-farm water use.

In fisheries, FAO is supporting a UNDP programme with the Fisheries Research Institute and we are also supporting the pond aquaculture extension programme of the Fisheries Department. Two other projects of the Ministry of Fisheries and Livestock include activities for duck development and assistance to the Livestock Research Institute.

In the forestry sector, FAO is providing the TA for a long-running programme in participatory forestry and agroforestry and is supporting the preparation by the Forestry Development of an Integrated Resources Development and Management Plan for the Sundarbans Reserve Forest.

As far as future FAO support is concerned, we would be pleased to extend assistance to strengthen the planning and policy formulation capacity of the line ministries within the natural resources sector, as we see this as being of major importance in the future development of agriculture, broadly defined. Our current dialogue with the gov-

ernment regarding possible future support covers a number of different areas including forestry planning, agricultural research management, integrated pest management, GIS systems for agricultural planning and development, food monitoring and information.

Following two recent FAO/UNDP studies in the sectors of crop agriculture and fisheries we also anticipate that there may be further requests for FAO assistance in those fields.

TDS: What are the prospects of agricultural products diversification in Bangladesh?

PM: Not only are the prospects good, in my view, but in terms of sustainable production system and employment generation in rural areas, I think diversification is essential. There are, however, certain constraints and considerable work will be called for a genetic improvement of many of the potential crops for diversification as well as on the development of appropriate farming system. A sustained effort needs to be made to carry forward work already initiated in Bangladesh to develop higher yielding pulses and oilseeds for the various agro-ecological conditions and stronger support is needed to modernise the research base for horticultural crops where there are important opportunities for increasing the production of vegetable, vegetable seeds, spices and fruit crops as well as exploring the prospects for floriculture. But to support diversification, will call for a holistic approach which also ensures effective quality standards and the appropriate infrastructural and economic frameworks conducive to investment in these products.

Overall, through diversification and intensification of production systems, I think, rural Bangladesh can face the future with some confidence. The rural labour force is resourceful, resilient and hardworking and what is needed now is to maintain and increase the investment in agriculture and in rural areas so that this important resource — the farmers of Bangladesh — can achieve their full potential.

World Food Day Water: Making Every Drop Count

FRESH water is among the most precious resources on Earth. It is essential to raise food crops and livestock, to support economic development, and to sustain life itself. It is also an increasingly scarce resource.

The demand for water is quickly outgrowing the supply in dozens of countries; by the end of this decade more than 25 nations will face serious water shortages. Already, conflicts over scarce water resources are affecting regional stability in the Middle East, northern India and eastern Africa.

People in developed and developing countries, urban and rural areas, industry and agriculture all contribute to water scarcity through pollution, growth, pollution, waste and mismanagement. Many cities lose more than half their piped water through leakage or diversion while as much as 60 per cent of the water intended for irrigation is wasted.

Developing countries are hardest hit by water shortages. In the crowded slums of major cities, families without public facilities pay a big part of their incomes — as much as 20 per cent — for water deliveries. In areas of unreliable or infrequent rainfall, subsistence farmers struggle to grow food with dwindling groundwater. Millions of women and children walk up to four hours every day to collect just enough water to meet their basic needs for drinking, washing, cooking, vegetable gardening and livestock.

Nearly one out of three people in the developing world — some 1.2 billion people — do not have access to clean, drinkable water. About 25,000 individuals die everyday from water-related sicknesses and as many as four million children die each year from diarrhoea caused by water-borne infections.

Over the past decade, international organisations, governments and local communities have launched a wide range of initiatives to resolve water problems, from safe-drinking water schemes to sustainable water systems for agriculture. The most successful involve a high level of local participation, especially among women, and low-cost, simple-technology solutions.

Food aid can be a valuable resource for water-related development projects, particularly when they involve building of water structures or facilities that require a lot of labour. The participants are paid with food rations instead of, or as a supplement to, cash wages.

The United Nations World Food Programme supports many food-for-work projects that improve access to water



Increasing population needs to safe water and sanitation can prevent the deaths of millions of children from diarrhoeal and other water-related diseases. A protected water hole in Ethiopia provides these two boys with a clean, cool drink. — Photo: WFP/Paul Mitchell

among poor people and communities. WFP provides food assistance for social and economic development as well as emergency relief in more than 90 countries.

In the Philippines, Lix Seroje is the chief engineer on a network of canals that snake across the island of Bohol, twisting and turning past terraces, between hills and even up slopes, to bring scarce spring water to thousands of hectares of rice. The small concrete-lined canals were built by local farmers using local materials and with food assistance from WFP.

The old earth ditches constantly leaked, silted up or got clogged with weeds and leaves," says Lix. "Most farmers had to clean or repair them several times a week — sometimes every day." The system was also vulnerable to severe damage from typhoons, which strike the island almost every year.

Today, the farmers do maintenance on the canals several times a year, leaving more time for work in their fields. Better access to water means they can grow up to three rice crops a year as well as a variety of other food crops. New fields are under cultivation

the Sahara. Clean water is drawn from wells and pumped from bore-holes using simple handpumps. Latrines and other sanitary facilities have reduced the incidence of sickness and disease. An extensive system of hafirs, or rainwater reservoirs, provides security in rain-poor years.

Improved access to water has the greatest impact on women, the traditional carriers, caretakers and users of water. Freed from a 12-kilometre walk each day to fetch water, most women have more time to work in their fields. Mrs El Sara Yusef Eldai, who helped dig a hafir near her home, points out another advantage: "If there is water in the hafir, I'm able to save the money I was forced to spend on water each day," she says.

Linking emergency relief to development has led to better water availability in thousands of other vulnerable communities. In southern Madagascar, villages recovering from a recent drought found they had food aid left over from the emergency; they put the unused rations into food-for-work projects to dig wells and build latrines. In Cambodia, Nicaragua and Somalia, food aid that provided relief in wartime also supported the rehabilitation of irrigation canals and dams as soon as the conflicts subsided, allowing farmers to plant crops and quickly re-establish food self-sufficiency.

Over the past decade, many agricultural development projects have focused on water and soil conservation. Degradation of these vital resources is a serious threat to poor rural families, who often have very small plots of fragile land and no access to irrigation water.

In Guatemala, the expansion of large plantations in the lowlands have forced indigenous farmers to migrate to the steep, less fertile highlands.

There are development activities in the world today that don't include water — from reforestation of watersheds in Indonesia to integrated rural development in Niger to construction of mini-aqueducts in Nicaragua. Many of these are small-scale, in expensive schemes that use local labour, materials and expertise. While they may not substantially increase a country's overall supply of water, they can lead to better access and more efficient use of the limited resources available.

Without water, nothing is possible. But with just a fraction of the world's water millions of rural communities can increase their food production and security, improve health and greatly lessen the burden of work born by women.

—WFP

Keeping a Nervous Eye on the Army of NGOs

Crespo Sebunya writes from Kampala

WESTERN donors love non-government organisations (NGOs) — but the Ugandan government is not so sure.

It is worried that they are taking over from the government and might even be a threat to security.

The director of Uganda's External Security Organisation, Kahinda Otafire, has described them as agents of colonial interests.

Government relations with NGOs are handled by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which is also responsible for internal security. This creates a suspicion that the government sees them as rivals rather than partners.

Official figures show that 1,200 NGOs are registered here, and several have budgets of more than \$1 million a year — provided by foreign donors.

The World Bank estimates that NGOs have spent \$17 million in the last three years in the health sector alone.

Many of the organisations are not home-grown products responding to the needs of local people: they are in business as a result of donor pressure.

The World Bank, the Swedes and the Germans, for example, who are providing most of the money for a major programme to curb sexually transmitted diseases, have pressed for the active involvement of NGOs in the belief that they perform better than the civil service.

"Donors have been attracted to NGOs because of their perceived ability to out-perform government in certain areas," said a World Bank report on Uganda. "They have continued to operate in areas where government services have virtually broken down," the Bank added, and their average level of service was higher than anything the government could do.

The Bank estimates that

government workers — such as doctors or nurses — are half as efficient as their counterparts in NGO-run hospitals, partly because they are so badly paid that they have to spend time earning money elsewhere or through corruption.

There is certainly a role for NGOs, because Uganda's soundly-based education and health facilities and generally efficient infrastructure was blown to smithereens by years of bad government and civil war.

The country is one of the poorest in the world, with an annual per capita income of about \$170 and an average life expectancy of 42. Few people have the means to extricate themselves from poverty. The school drop-out rate is high, particularly for girls. The ravages of the disease AIDS have started to have an impact on all areas of life.

Government is doing its

best with rehabilitation and pushing what little money is available into productive areas, but it has few ways of raising money and can therefore offer few services. The budget is largely provided by donors.

So there is plenty of work for NGOs, whose presence is strengthened by the way a few of them stayed with Ugandans through the days when government virtually broke down altogether.

Despite its reservations, the government has created a hospitable and secure environment for them, and has imposed few restrictions.

The aid coordination department in the Prime Minister's Office convenes a monthly meeting of NGOs, attended by about 60 organisations, at which there is an exchange of views and information.

One of the government's concerns is that many NGOs do not involve local people, and treat people as passive beneficiaries.

Research by a group of social scientists found that the current generation responds poorly to community mobilisation efforts and that many young people look to foreign organisations for their salvation without making any effort for themselves.

President Yoweri Museveni has constantly warned about the creation of a "dependency syndrome."

There is concern that some NGO activities are ill-conceived. Instead of building on the existing ways of life of the small Batwa tribe from western Uganda, the Adventist Relief Agency tried to resettle in a "project": most of the "beneficiaries" ran away.

In addition, many NGOs do not have clear roles and there is evidence that some are abusing their position.

Dubious goods are being imported duty free, for example. Mark Elyne, head of the International Monetary Fund office in Uganda said it was "very unfortunate" that "we have had some NGOs importing cosmetics to sell on the lo-

cal market with claim that the proceeds are to be used to enhance the status of women."

He also pointed out that "if an NGO imports a Mercedes Benz to be used in its activities and another imports a Land Rover to do the same, couldn't it be in order to tax the one importing the Benz?"

Some businessmen are using NGOs as a cover for free imports, says Edward Rujojo, chairman of the National Chamber of Commerce: "They are undermining the business community through this method of cheating."

The World Bank estimates loss of government revenue through NGO imports at \$3.3 million a year.

Many NGOs are weak in management; some do not keep proper accounts.

These complaints might not have found fertile ground if the record of the NGOs had been better. A World Bank study in Luwero, one of the worst hit areas of the civil war and now awash with NGOs, found that impact of NGOs on poverty alleviation was limited and uneven.

Most activities were targeted at small numbers of people — subsidising school fees for a few hundred children, providing roofing for 35 houses, digging 10 shallow wells, distributing a few cows.

Similarly, in the northern district of West Nile, a major and systematic Lutheran World Federation programme in education, water, agriculture and community development, had been felt in only a few areas.

Post-war relief programmes by organisations such as Oxfam, Accord and the Red Cross had provided short-term benefits but had done nothing to alleviate the long-term collapse of the delivery of services.

Another government concern is that NGOs tend to concentrate on certain areas — such as AIDS — with the result that resources are diverted away from other areas that the government considers to be national priorities. — Gemini News

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