

40 years of NGO development: Time to rediscover a purpose?

Brian Pratt, March 2014

Preface

This essay is the product of my personal review of over almost 40 years' experience engaged in development from a civil society/NGO perspective. I started my work in Peru in the mid-1970s, researching the relationship between Peru's development and the United States, which at that time had several layers of sanctions and pressure against a reformist government in Peru. From 1977-82, I worked as director of the Andean Oxfam office, covering five countries. From this period I learnt to have a healthy distrust of the state, given that most of the countries in which I worked were dominated by military dictatorships. Following this, I worked in Oxfam Oxford and amongst other things developed their evaluation office, research and communications capacity, internal learning and training programme, as well as a policy lobbying programme. Oxfam's global outreach enabled me at one time or another to work in almost all parts of the world.

Some of the lessons from those experiences helped me to join with others to set up INTRAC in 1991-92, to provide training for the growing number of NGO workers, an independent research platform to review trends in aid from a civil society perspective, and direct support to civil society organisations and NGOs to improve their own learning and operations. Now that I have handed over the directorship of INTRAC, it seems a good time to reflect on changes over the past 40 years and what these mean for civil society generally and specifically development NGOs.

Introduction

The world has changed a great deal in the last four decades and so have civil society, NGOs, and the aid industry. Our thoughts on development have moved on, many countries have grown enormously in a relatively short time, and many social indicators, such as infant mortality rate, child morbidity, and educational and health indices, have improved massively. However, some key issues have remained with us through this period, such as increasing global inequality and tension between citizens and the state.

I have been asking myself how the roles of NGOs have changed in parallel with the massive growth of NGOs and their development activities in my own working lifetime. This question is important as there is a groundswell of people who regard the present period as the beginning of the end of traditional aid. More and more countries are moving away from being aid recipients as they achieve mid-income status and international NGOs and bilateral donors are reducing the number of countries in which they work.

The first theme I will explore is whether the comparative advantages of NGOs, as seen 20-plus years ago, still hold today. Development workers and academics used to argue that NGOs were able to work at the grassroots and had closer relationships with communities. Is

this still the case today? This question seems topical at a time when many INGOs are themselves questioning and being questioned by their own donors to show what their comparative advantage is over other means of delivering development. Our Civil Society at a Crossroads study,¹ conducted in conjunction with five other organisations, as well as a study by CIVICUS,² show that many NGOs have drifted away from civil society.

The second theme in part links back to comparative advantage by looking at the issue of innovation. 'Innovation' is a much misused word, but many have argued that the role of NGOs is to develop new ideas, contest old ones, and explore new techniques and approaches to development. However, the pressure to replicate successes and bring projects to larger scales may have produced pressure on organisations to conform and weakened their ability to innovate.

The third theme explores capacity development. Many donors and international NGOs have long argued that this is one of their main roles and areas of expertise. In this essay, I ask why, if this is the case, most organisations still struggle with understanding and implementing good capacity building programmes.

The final theme revisits recent work on the functions of civil society and challenges both NGOs and official donors to rethink whether their current approaches are preparing local civil society well for the end of aid, and whether we can learn from the often messy process of aid withdrawal to date.

Comparative advantages of NGOs?

I joined the NGO road to development in 1977 when I returned to Peru for OXFAM. Our role within the Andean countries was quite clear at that time: it was to support local initiatives. We didn't use the phrase 'civil society' but our programme covered a range of different interventions including civil society work with some local research, policy and advocacy groups concerned with local issues such as indigenous rights, land issues, and poverty. This encompassed supporting solidarity groups in those countries in a region dominated by military dictatorships, working with whom we could from civil society, sometimes semi-clandestinely given the official repression of local groups and those who supported them.

We also gave direct support to social movements including indigenous groups, peasant unions, cooperative federations, and federations of the urban poor. There were always some traditional one-off small community projects and a range of community programmes supported through others, especially the Catholic Church, which was far bigger in the region than it is now. Occasionally we worked on small-scale emergencies but were aware that we might have to step up to the mark if a major earthquake should come along.

As a donor NGO, most of our funds came from the public, not government. It was a time of growth – by the late 1970s, many NGOs had come together to provide support to Cambodia, post-Khmer Rouge, despite some government and even UN opposition. This was for many people a high point for NGOs, as they were working to their own agendas, deciding what and where to fund, independent of external donors (or at least state donors). Soon after, the cross-border programmes supporting people in the Horn of Africa also geared up, where NGOs were working on both sides of the conflicted areas in Ethiopia and what is now Eritrea.

¹ *Development in Practice* special issue: *Civil societies at crossroads: Eruptions, initiatives, and evolution in citizen activism*. Vol. 23, issues 5-6, August 2013. Rajesh Tandon and L. David Brown, guest eds.

² CIVICUS, ['Bridging the gaps: Citizens, organisations and disassociation'](#), 2011.

This period did see the beginning of some government co-funding but we in the Andes made sure to ask local groups whether they minded if we put their programme on the list for co-funding with the British government and later the European Union. Frequently they said no, as they did not want to accept foreign government funding. We accepted their view, although ironically most of the budget for the post-Allende Chilean solidarity work came from the then-Labour government in the UK. I doubt very much whether today's NGO donors ever ask their partners whether they mind about the source of their funds.

When people asked where our legitimacy in the Andes came from, the answer was simple. It was through the local work we supported: the trade unions, peasant unions, indigenous groups, community enterprises, even the local churches. We imposed no single model, nor were programmes designed outside the countries we operated in. We didn't pretend to offer a universal service. We responded to local demands, assessed these programmes in their own context and within their own logic rather than trying to fit them into global goals set many miles away.

This does not mean that we didn't make mistakes. (I still shudder to think of some of them.) However, we could argue that we were just acting as a bridge between people in the UK who wanted to show support for people in the Andes (and elsewhere) as the money we spent wasn't for the most part from tax-based sources, nor from large donors, but just ordinary people giving modest amounts. This legitimacy at both ends of the aid relationship was the basis of our independence, credibility and, when it came, our successes.

Today, many donor NGOs tell me it is not possible to work with social movements, although in theory they wish to do so. The reasons they give are that the sums are too small to be worth administering, or that social movements are unreliable as partners. However, as far as I can see it is because social movements are responsive to their members – as good civil society groups should be. This tends to make it difficult to freeze objectives into an external format of objectives and log frames. However, these social movements deserve support – they are the most likely basis for change in many societies. As I discovered more recently in research back in Peru, it is the indigenous peoples and their organisations that are in the front line against commercial extraction in the Amazon but so often they struggle along on minimal support from donor NGOs while much greater sums are sucked up into international professional lobbying organisations. These do indeed have their role but only if they can relate to the organisations and people on the ground. If we as NGOs lose that link and credibility, we lose our legitimacy and our arguments become weaker and more easily ignored by companies and government alike.

In my experience, Northern-based NGOs started by working with people who were already organised, had a view of the future, and were able to mobilise local resources, often their own labour. These and other characteristics gave them their legitimacy and strength. Whether it was a group of physically less abled people digging the foundations for a small cooperative enterprise, having abandoned their wheelchairs and lowered themselves into the ditches being dug for foundations, through to urban groups organising health care, preschools, and rubbish cleaning, or indigenous peoples running and winning elections for office despite threats and even murder, participation was real and endogenous in the Andes.

Because our work was through local groups, we made lots of relatively small grants, ran a small office with not many staff, and made it a priority to visit our partners regularly. As long as basic reports and accounts were presented, we kept a light touch on procedures and paperwork. Everything from our partners was accepted in Spanish and if we needed something in English for head office, we wrote or translated it ourselves. Advocacy in country was something we supported local groups to do, as was research, community organising, capacity building, and most development work. Our transaction costs were low despite the small size of grants. I think we made about 130 grants a year of different sizes.

Some I am sure were not well used but others had an impact I can still trace today, 30 or more years later.

As a foreign NGO, our comparative advantage was access to independent sources of funding. We therefore had the ability to support local initiatives from communities, social movements and local NGOs. We didn't try to offer universal programmes in health or education – we tried to help local groups get the state to provide such services, even if sometimes that meant starting up a community service themselves by building a school or running a clinic prior to getting state approval. We were good at freeing up bottlenecks in local resources, supporting communities in their own development, and in funding causes sometimes unpopular with governments that often lacked real democratic support and legitimacy.

I now ask myself whether the moves by NGOs to scale up staffing and organisational size has helped their work or if they have lost some of their original comparative advantages, putting them in competition with commercial companies offering services almost indistinguishable from NGOs. Large international NGOs and some national NGOs are now increasingly contractors to official aid agencies and local government rather than being supporters of genuine community or civil society-based groups. Ironically their voices are now not as listened to as they were when they were smaller, more agile and genuinely and independently engaged directly with citizens, communities and civil society organisations. Participation in large international meetings may give an illusion of influence but NGOs have weakened their comparative advantage by compromising with official agencies. They are thus no longer seen as independent voices of the poor and hence risk being ignored.

If modern NGOs do not rediscover their real comparative advantages then it is clear that many will fade away, as some already are. This is as true for local as international NGOs. The Civil Society at a Crossroads studies showed how many local NGOs in post-aid countries have already closed their doors while others are often limping along in debt or using up their reserves. The Crossroads studies showed the remarkable energy in new areas of civil society often unconnected to some of the more traditional organisations. It is good to see that some NGOs have taken up the challenge of re-engaging with their own societies and this includes mobilising resources from within them.

Innovation

Innovation has always been seen as one of the key areas in which NGOs can contribute to international development – not only innovation in the practice of development but also in contesting orthodoxies. It does seem obvious to me that most of the major innovations in development have come through civil society. From micro credit to primary health care, cooperatives and the rights of the child, NGOs led and governments followed. Bebbington et al argued in their book, *Can NGOs Make a Difference*,³ that they did it through innovation, implying that if innovation was curtailed then NGOs would no longer “make a difference”. Others have argued that most positive ideas in the UN system probably came from civil society, not the member states.

When I started my career in development, Peru was a crucible of new ideas and experimentation. Civil society organisations, ranging from indigenous groups in the Amazon to a radical Catholic Church experimenting with liberation theology, were developing concepts of social transformation and what was known as conscientisation. The evolution of

³ *Can NGOs Make a Difference? The Challenge of Development Alternatives*. Anthony J. Bebbington, Samuel Hickey, Diana C. Mitlin, eds. Zed Books, 2007.

different social movements had a considerable effect on the nature of democracy. At one point the potato growers' association of Cochabamba in Bolivia had more members than all the political parties put together.

It did not seem odd that in the growing shantytowns of the region, people would come together to form block committees and federations and then seek support from NGOs, the church, or government. In some of the countries in the region, these developments were a response to the right-wing military dictatorships the people had to suffer, although in Peru the military government introduced land reform, indigenous rights, some early forms of social protection, and cooperativism. It was understood that NGOs existed to support such movements with technical and professional support, sometimes financing. The innovation came from being able to engage with people and share these ideas more widely. Ultimately our shared goal was social transformation.

Especially since the 1990s, many international NGOs have become more concerned with their own growth and in offering standardised packages of development projects run by their own staff. Fortunately others did continue to support local initiatives, taking risks on untried but innovative groups willing to challenge orthodoxies and unjust power structures. It is to the credit of organisations like the funding agencies in the Netherlands that they did not swamp local groups with their own staff and branding but continued to support local groups and their programmes. Sadly, the research I carried out with the Machigengua in southern Peru (2005-10) reinforced my concern that the large international NGOs (mainly in this case environmental) were more focused on their own profiles and programmes than on the real needs of an indigenous group under huge pressure from gas companies and the Peruvian government. Resources that should have been assisting these isolated groups in the Amazon were funnelled upwards to what became pretty ineffectual lobbying in Washington and elsewhere.⁴

There are many groups still engaging in innovations of ideas and practices but the overwhelming trend has been the growth of heavily funded universal programmes designed by official donors and sometimes now private philanthropists. In this environment, how can we ensure that innovation, new ideas, and the sharing of community experiences are still supported?

One of today's challenges is how to provide resources to civil society both where donors are withdrawing because a country has reached mid-income status, as well as where donors are fixated on their own agendas rather than local ones. There are new experiments in resource mobilisation in several countries, including new foundations, endowed funds, community-level resource mobilisation, and the rise of local philanthropy. These are all ideas that need support and monitoring to see which are successful.

There is, however, still a big question around how attitudes can be changed so as to encourage local elites and middle classes to support independent voices for human rights and improved governance, not just the more traditional charitable activities. Support from the liberal middle classes of the old developed countries evolved over hundreds of years, with protest groups dating back just as long. To change local middle classes' attitudes and gain support in the forms of time and money for challenging ideas and new innovations is

⁴ Pratt, Brian. 'The Camisea gas project: Indigenous social movements and international NGOs in the Peruvian Amazon.' *Social conflict, economic development and the extractive industry: Evidence from South America*. Anthony Bebbington, ed. Routledge, 2012. See also Lucy Earle and Brian Pratt, '[Indigenous Social Movements and International NGOs in the Peruvian Amazon](#),' Occasional Paper Series 49, INTRAC 2009.

probably the biggest single challenge to civil society in an increasing number of middle-income countries as foreign donors leave.⁵

If local middle-class groups emerge that are willing to support the valuable work of innovating, challenging, and contesting, then local democracy, local civil society and the world at large will be the winners. If such work does not get supported locally, we will all be the losers. As foreign NGOs, we take some of the blame for not seeing earlier that our own growth and coverage were never as important as support for sustainable local organisations engaged in the political, social and economic life of their own countries and communities.

I can hear people saying that I am looking too much to the past. But let us be honest: the current aid orthodoxy has, in its thinking and approaches, gone way back to the 1950s and '60s with its simplistic emphasis on economic growth and social welfare, avoidance of difficult political issues, and tacit acceptance of political and economic structures that maintain and even increase inequality and oppression. If I am going back to the past, maybe it is because I started my career in a movement that was reacting against many of the ideas of the 1950 and '60s. We now need to revisit why we rejected the current orthodox development ideas once already and how, as civil society groups, we carved out new ideas and approaches during the 1970s, '80s and '90s in support of pro-poor policies and practice.

Capacity building

In 1992, INTRAC's first ever workshop on institutional development almost descended into chaos. Our two resource people were in conflict. One felt we should focus on the internal management of an organisation – factors such as vision, mission, strategy, human and other resource management, governance, structures, etc. The other said what counted was the final product of the organisation, and so wanted to focus on the monitoring and evaluation of outputs and outcomes, looking at the efficiency, effectiveness and relevance of organisations' work. There was no simple resolution to the dilemma that a well-run organisation could achieve very little, whilst a badly run organisation could achieve a great deal, at least in the short term.

Ultimately, we decided that genuine organisational assessment required looking at both the organisation and its product, not just one or the other. But in addition to looking at the organisation itself (the "be") and what it does (the "do"), we learned that we also had to take into account an organisation's ability to relate. An organisation has to be able to relate horizontally to peer groups and similar organisations and vertically to donors, governments, and beneficiary groups. So with this approach we felt we had a model for assessing an organisation with an eye to being able to identify its own areas of weakness, which might be open to capacity development processes. At that time we held back from publishing a set of detailed indicators with a scoring system as we were concerned this might become a tool for donors to use when deciding whether to fund an organisation or project. We wished to help organisations improve their own performance through a participatory or facilitated process of organisational assessment.

It worries me that having resolved these elements of assessing organisations nearly 20 years ago, people seem still to struggle with our approaches to capacity building. In a major evaluation of NGO work I am participating in, very few of the international NGOs being reviewed have any explicit programme of capacity development. This echoes what INTRAC found in a study back in 1994.⁶ They may have policies but it is difficult to identify how they

⁵ [ONTRAC 56: Funding civil society in emerging economies](#). INTRAC, January 2014.

⁶ James, Rick. '[Strengthening the Capacity of Southern NGO Partners](#).' INTRAC Occasional Paper Series, 1994.

are putting them into operation. I fear that we only pay lip service to capacity development. Despite the rhetoric, there is a shortage of explicit programmes to help develop the capacity of Southern organisations. Sometimes capacity development becomes merely a glorified term for subcontracting, where foreign agencies devolve part of their implementation to local groups as “partners”. Such relationships allow very little real power to be exercised by the subcontractors who have limited flexibility on how they assess or prioritise needs, engage in the process of programme design, or make changes to the programme if they feel it to be appropriate. Any capacity development provided is designed to fulfil the requirements of the subcontract. International NGOs say, “well, we fund the group,” or “we visit regularly,” but fail to analyse whether they are contributing to sustainable capacity in their partner organisation.

Meanwhile, we use double standards. International NGOs commonly complain about how hard it is to find good staff, but as my friend Rajesh Tandon of PRIA India pointed out, if you add up all the staff from PRIA who have joined the UN and international NGOs over the past 30 years, PRIA as a local NGO has done a great deal more to build the capacity of these international organisations than vice versa. Or, as another colleague once calculated, in Malawi there were probably three times as many local staff employed by international NGOs than local NGOs. So who is building whose capacity?

Why it is that everyone thinks they have the ability to assist an organisation or even an individual in the capacity development field? A decade ago there was some serious investment in developing local support organisations to provide professional capacity development services. Sadly, much of the funding has been cut to them. So whilst the multi-lateral organisations suck up local talent, local capacity is actually being reduced. Investment in local organisations seems to be no longer a priority for donors or international NGOs, which are increasingly more concerned about delivering their own programmes than developing sustainable capacity of local people and organisations to solve their own problems.

My colleague Rick James has often said, including in a recent blog post,⁷ that we do know what works in capacity development but we don't put it into practice. He believes the reason is because ultimately self-interest drives many of the capacity development initiatives. In my working life time I have seen major organisations completely change direction from supporting local initiatives and groups to building the size and scope of their own agencies through increasing their own staffing and projecting their own branding. Surely if we had any real commitment to capacity development, wouldn't the trend be the other way around? I have worked with great developing country NGOs that work efficiently and effectively but can only ever raise funds for the bare bones of their programmes, never for longer-term investment in capacity or to improve their performance. The funds they receive are still so tied to the project level that there is no slack to allow them to build such capacity – to innovate, train, and retain staff, develop new approaches, and explore new work.

If everyone who claimed to be building local capacity was serious in their intent, we would not still be in a position of claiming that Northern agencies are required to fill capacity gaps or to build local capacity. As one person from the Netherlands recently admitted to me, ‘We are still supporting a capacity development programme with the same group in a central African country for the past 30 years. Either we are really bad at our capacity building or we don't really want to achieve our goal and move on!’

There are of course some notable exceptions. Some NGOs and private foundations are willing to finance core costs, support endowments, or engage in longer-term capacity development. There are some inspiring people who have managed to achieve great successes. In places, however, capacity builders have become a part of the problem, not the

⁷ James, Rick. [‘Calling our bluff on capacity building.’](#) INTRAC blog, 2014.

solution. This happens when they have an interest in not handing over power, in not reducing their own staff, and in not developing genuine partnerships with local groups. We cannot let individuals off the hook on this. We know that many people have joined NGOs as a step towards working for international NGOs with a view to getting into the UN and/or getting a visa and flight to another country. Our current system is full of perverse incentives that work against genuine capacity development.

Putting civil society first and aid second

Over several years, INTRAC and other organisations have tried to reassess the nature of civil society. This revisiting of the concept is a part of NGOs continuing to rethink their own roles and futures, especially as we approach an end to aid in many, if not most, parts of the world. Whatever the debates are about a post-2015 world and whatever finally replaces the millennium development goals, civil society will continue to develop and adapt.

As countries hit their economic growth targets, a healthy civil society (as defined by the functions listed below) will be crucial to a democratic future, improved equity, and as a counterbalance to repressive and unaccountable states. If we accept that for the majority of the world, aid will soon be a product of history, then what is done now to help prepare civil society for this change will be crucial. Indeed, there is evidence that few agencies have given this any serious thought, as shown by the lack of preparation in the countries they have already left.⁸

At a micro level, one major challenge is helping communities prepare to act on their own rather than through or with local professional NGOs. At a slightly wider level, our understanding of what constitutes civil society becomes crucial. If we continue to regard civil society as merely a mechanism for the delivery of top down 'development' (probably better termed social welfare programmes), then clearly our response will be different from regarding civil society as a crucial part of any nation state in terms of being the associations of citizens.

I was part of some relatively recent work to identify the key functions of civil society.⁹ We came up with:

1. Holding the state to account
2. Developing the social basis of democracy
3. Innovation and contesting ideas
4. Developing trust and what some call social capital
5. Supporting the concept of citizenship and citizen or civic action

That many of the above functions imply some form of organisation is undoubted. However, these functions do not imply or assume that civil society is only constituted by formal organisations led by paid staff. In fact, it is not essential for formal organisations to be part of this picture at all. Formal organisations have indeed played a key role in many forms of development, including strengthening the abilities of poor communities and excluded groups, and enabling them to seek justice, access to power and an improved contract with the state. However, the future of civil society is not only through its formal registered bodies.

If we start our reviews of civil society with the aforementioned functions in mind, it will or should influence our strategies of development into a very different set of programmatic responses and relationships. Already it is possible to see distinct differences in organisations

⁸ [ONTRAC 56: Funding civil society in emerging economies](#). INTRAC, January 2014.

⁹ Beauclerk, John, Brian Pratt, and Ruth Judge. *Civil society in action: Global case studies in a practice-based framework*. INTRAC, 2011.

and countries in their ability to cope with the withdrawal of external aid and a shrinking back of funding to NGOs.¹⁰ In some parts of the world, as illustrated by the Crossroads material, we can witness the emergence of what I have called second-generation social movements arising from popular concerns. Elsewhere, we are witnessing continuing citizen actions and protests against corrupt, undemocratic and elite-controlled governments. Citizens are reacting against governments that have, in a general sense, not honoured the contract with their citizens, and which, in a practical sense, are failing to ensure equal and fair access to state resources across the populace.

Earlier in this paper, I asked why insufficient progress has been made on capacity development. One of my answers was that it is not always in the interest of organisations to empower their clients. Another was that organisations have aimed capacity building at the wrong competencies required for self-sufficient communities, focusing too much on technical issues or on the skills required to ensure the smooth delivery of externally designed programmes. For me the reality that aid is being withdrawn from an increasing number of countries brings into focus the need to think about what skills, organisational forms and capacities are required for civil society to fulfil the core functions listed above once the resources of the aid agencies have gone.

As for countries that remain aid recipients, at least for now, it is important that programmatic approaches are restructured to ensure the mistakes of the past are not repeated. We must act now to strengthen civil society so it can emerge stronger in a post-aid world rather than weaker once external resources are withdrawn.

Towards a conclusion

It worries me that many of the international NGO alliances are currently focused on trying to ensure that they are in step with a world of development as defined by government, including the UN, rather than looking at the real challenges to civil society now and in the future. Thus, what one might call the hygiene of aid procedures – aid effectiveness, value for money – dominates much global discussion. These issues have value but at the end of the day aren't the most crucial issues facing the world. Hence, debates on the role of civil society in reducing inequality and corruption in the public and private sectors, or in determining domestic redistributive policies, are not going to be resolved through a new charter on how aid is delivered. Energies are being wasted on UN-led procedures and processes increasingly estranged from real-world issues.

Meanwhile, some government donors, both emerging donors and older ones, are trying to dump larger sums into big projects to reduce transaction costs or are reverting to prioritizing national interests around trade and security over concerns about equity and how best to assist national development. It should be incumbent on NGOs to support civil society concerns rather than those of the official aid industry. If they are unable to do this they will become increasingly irrelevant to all but the very poorest countries. Many NGOs are already only relevant in times of major humanitarian emergencies, marginal to the majority of the world's poor. They are neglecting the strengthening of civil society and the key role it should play in maintaining protection for citizens against exploitative states or other undemocratic powers, as well as enabling healthier relationships to grow between states, citizens and other actors such as the private sector.

¹⁰ See resources on INTRAC [‘Aid withdrawal and civil society sustainability’ web page](#)

I accept the need for flexibility in alliances between different civil society actors as proposed by Jeremy Hobbs¹¹ and can appreciate his argument for a transnational civil society, assuming that such transnational formations are not an excuse to dominate and swamp local and national civil society groups. Despite some concerns over the nature of the nation state, most experience shows that we neglect the nation state at our peril, as it still has the ability to support its citizens as well as repress them. Therefore, civil society collective action requires an ability to focus on national and local issues, not just the globally agreed strategies of the transnational NGOs.

Local political realities and the need for local civic action must not be ignored or downplayed. Successful civil society organisations need to strike a balance between internal and international alliance building, as well as between seeking resources for full-time staff and putting an emphasis on voluntarism. They must engage and recruit the middle classes and other supporters nationally as volunteers, political supporters, donors, and allies for common causes. Only through action at a national level by locally credible and legitimate civil society organisations are we likely to achieve change in favour of the poor and against further increases in inequality, as well as tackling other issues such as the abuse of human rights and environmental issues.

We ignore the underlying long-term functions of civil society at our peril. The way international aid has developed may be undermining rather than strengthening local civil societies through its focus on short-term gains in the delivery of services and social welfare programmes. As aid comes to an end in an increasing number of countries, the under-preparedness of many local civil society organisations is revealing the dangers of putting the support for aid programmes before the strengthening of civil society.

In the near future it is safe to predict the closing of many development NGOs in both developed and developing countries. Our research in India, Peru and elsewhere already indicates a significant reduction in local formal NGOs. In Peru, I calculated as many as 50 to 60 per cent of registered NGOs have closed over the past four years. Some niche organisations will survive because they offer specific services or have natural constituencies and links. New civil society groups are already emerging with different concerns, some based on mass protests and others with a focus on local or niche issues, just as general groups have given way to specialised ones in most developed societies. There is strong and growing popular support for many organisations and groups taking up environmental and human rights issues, such as gender and indigenous-based movements, and these groups are often dependent not on official development funding but on individual donations and volunteers.

The mega international NGOs have a few more years left until the larger bilateral donors and certain foundations and global funds come to an end of their particular trajectory. But we know that some of the bilateral agencies are already planning the next stages of their withdrawal from aid as we know it. Some international NGOs are already moving from being a part of civil society to being not-for-profit providers of social welfare services, given that many governments have continued to privatise service provision in the developed world and are encouraging developing countries to follow suit.

NGOs have accomplished a lot to be proud of over the past one or two generations but the world is moving on and demanding different responses from societies and their citizens. In some countries, civil society is an integral part of political, social and even economic life. This reinforces trust in societies that have managed to reduce corruption and enabled citizens to act.

¹¹ Hobbs, Jeremy. '[Responding to complexity and change: Oxfam International's approach](#),' ONTRAC 54, May 2013, INTRAC

We all wear multiple hats through our lives and change identities regularly – son, student, partner, parent, employee, retiree, grandparent. We are members of playgroup committees, political parties, and neighbourhood associations; volunteers in schools and sports clubs – the list is almost endless. Nor are our identities defined by one aspect of our lives such as ethnicity or marital status. Similarly, civil society across the world will continue to evolve and become more sophisticated in structure, depth and number of relationships. Some older organisations will have to ensure that they are helping the development of these processes, not standing in the way.

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