

viewpoint

The rise of INGO families: perspectives, issues, and experiences



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To celebrate solidarity with women worldwide, Oxfam-Solidarite and numerous other organisations took the streets in Brussels on International Women's Day, 2012.

Amongst the current trends in development one stands out – the expansion of NGOs coming together to create large international organisations or ‘families’. While many regard this as positive, others see it in a more negative light. It certainly raises a number of important issues – some reconcilable, others potentially intractable. There is a wide diversity of perspectives and approaches towards the development of large INGO families, with different families adopting different structures: some have highly centralised single management models with national offices answerable to an international HQ (such as Plan International and Save the Children International); some seem to share little more than a common origin or shared values (some church groups such as the ACT Alliance); others are constructed to help members compete with other families (such as Alliance 2015); whilst others are single organisations proactively seeking to expand globally (such as World Vision).

What is behind this growth of interlinked families of international NGOs? There seems to be several levels of debate:

1. At the operational level, many INGO families argue that it is more efficient to have a single office in a developing country rather than several small offices each run by a separate national affiliate. With improved coherence and scales of operation, they can cut back on duplication and local costs. This means that they can also work in more countries by dividing up regions between the constituent members of the family. Local NGOs though don't necessarily see it that way, and often bemoan the loss of diversity between donors and a reduction in the choice of donors. They also feel that by scaling up, INGOs are in direct competition with local groups as they poach their best staff, use their funds for their own programmes rather than fund the

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In this issue:

This issue of ONTRAC looks at the expansion of NGOs coming together to create large international organisations or ‘families’ – a trend that raises important issues, and a wide diversity of perspectives and approaches.

Following an overview of the issues, Jeremy Hobbs from Oxfam International outlines their approach to responding to the complex context in which INGOs operate, and the changing nature of development.

Burkhard Gnärig from the Berlin Civil Society Center looks at the key challenges for international civil society organisations in responding to issues in an increasingly globalised world.

Francesco Obino from the London School of Economics and Political Science addresses the issue of decentralisation within INGOs, focusing on India, which has been a “testing ground of experiments in strengthening the global legitimacy of INGOs.”

Finally, Marianne Bo Paludan from Save the Children Denmark looks at the evolution of Save the Children International into “One-Save the Children” – one global structure guided by a joint global strategy. She outlines how this has altered the approaches of individual member organisations.

activities of local partners, and dominate local and national advocacy debates. Whilst proponents argue that they can have a better impact through scale and coherence, there is a debate as to whether this helps or hinders longer term partnerships with local civil society.

2. There are also gains and losses at the meso level. The gains often seem to do with marketing and an ability to use recognisable brand names for fundraising. Shared values can be reinforced by close working relationships. Another is increased organisational efficiency. The losses are around diversity; we see families where the inevitable outcome will be a compromise between the more radical and the more conservative members of the family, as for example they struggle to find a mid-way between rights-based and welfare approaches. It is also not proven that there is a financial gain in efficiency overall, as more time may be absorbed in coordination, trying to establish joint procedures, and so on. Many staff in newer families relate stories of the high proportion of their time spent in such internal business meetings rather than being engaged in their core business.
3. At the macro level, it is clear that the big families have the resources to be major actors in many international debates: the size and breadth of programming often brings with it a seat at the table of global meetings on important developmental and environmental fora. They grab the headlines, comment on world affairs, and are present in any new humanitarian emergency. Whether it is the case that size matters in international advocacy has still to be seen, especially as many are now arguing that real change must first come from the national level. Most

research on advocacy has concluded that being embedded in local societies and politics is what really assists change in local and national level government policies and programmes, not the size of the INGO.¹

One group less certain about this trend are many bilateral donors. On the one hand they like the fact that they can contract a large INGO to deliver a development or humanitarian programme for them. On the other hand they are also concerned about their own branding and public image. Thus they have often had internal debates around whether or not they should permit INGOs to access their NGO funding within developing countries, or in some cases whether to continue to fund local branches of these families. Whereas previously, bilateral donor funding of their domestic NGOs would carry a strong national image or way of working, including through the use of volunteers and other staff from the donor country, this may no longer be the case when working with increasingly homogenous INGO families. Furthermore filtering bilateral donor contributions through such families makes it more difficult to attribute impact to particular funding streams. At a time when donors are under pressure to show how their funds contribute to national development goals, any constraint on being able to attribute positive change to their funding is politically challenging.

In a recent INTRAC seminar we also discussed whether the form and functions of INGO families were always well aligned to achieve the best impact for poor people. Thus we could see that a more centralised management structure might be the best for large-scale delivery of humanitarian or basic services, whereas an alliance of local diverse groups (across class, ethnic, and other interests) is more likely to impact local government policy than a campaign led by one or two large INGOs. There is

an argument that a demand-led INGO based around shared values could bring together a global force for advocacy purposes, assuming that they are able to respond to local issues and not just espouse more general, globally agreed lobbying messages. It seems that some successful advocacy groups do not necessarily have large incomes, whereas some INGOs have tried to be both large-scale deliverers of humanitarian aid and other services, and international advocates.

Perhaps it is this uneasy balance which makes it difficult for them to be consistent in their advocacy work, unlike those who focus primarily on advocacy (such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace). Finally, we discussed whether INGO families are possibly not best set up to support the development of local civil society as they can crowd out smaller, less well-resourced groups, and can attract local talent away from supporting the sustainable growth of a local civil society.

Our work has raised a number of important questions that remain unanswered. Are these international families strengthening global civil society or are they turning civil society into a part of the competitive market? When many issues and challenges are global, does it help that we now have global NGOs who can act on behalf of civil society? Or does that size reduce the natural strength in diversity of civil society? Are the large families in competition with local groups?

There have also been families in the past which have risen and then fallen. Regardless of the forms they take, for now INGO families are major players in aided NGO development. Whether they contribute a net gain is something further research and experience will tell.

Brian Pratt
Executive Director, INTRAC
bpratt@intrac.org

¹ Crook, R. 2012. "The influence of transnational non-governmental public actors on policy processes and policy outcomes." in J. Howell (ed.) *Global Matters for Non-Governmental Public Action*, 93-115. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan; Atkinson J., and M. Scurrah. 2009. *Globalizing Social Justice: The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations in Bringing About Social Change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Responding to complexity and change: Oxfam International's approach

It is increasingly commonplace to hear generalisations about the irrelevance, ineffectiveness and inefficiencies of large international nongovernmental organisations (INGOs.) To all these charges there is some truth, and the degree to which they can be regarded as fair varies from organisation to organisation. Yet the critiques can be overdone; they fail to understand the extraordinary complexity of the context in which INGOs now operate, and acknowledge that many INGOs are not simply transferring resources from North to South.

The adoption of rights-based development has fundamentally changed the prism for our theory of change and we are running much more complex organisations these days. Development is increasingly about political alliances and action, rather than service delivery, technical projects and large grants. And crucially, for INGOs like Oxfam, the root causes of many of the problems we face – stalled global trade talks, gridlocked climate negotiations, unequal access to natural resources – lie in the North, where mainly developed countries refuse to concede ground to the majority of the world's population in the South. This means we still need large-scale concerted citizen action in developed countries, even as political and economic power slips South and East.

The changing interests and relative power of the BRICS has also increased the complexity of our operating environment; many countries happily tolerate traditional projects but look askance at advocacy support, prompting major concerns among INGOs about the shrinking democratic space for civil society. Managing the complexities and changes requires careful communication to our back donors and our supporters, the people who make regular personal donations and on whose altruism our organisations are founded. We must

respect the contract we have with supporters and ensure our policies and actions are consistent with their expectations.

These critiques also overlook the fact that the capacity of large INGOs to act and get results is because of their size, track record, international networks of influence, and brands; all of which make a huge difference to the ability to attract and retain good staff, produce good research and policy, and deliver programmes at scale with quality.

In the humanitarian sector alone, the combined footprint of the INGOs' is larger than the UN's. The successful agreement of the Arms Trade Treaty shows the power of focussed and globally coordinated INGO effort. It is extremely unlikely that this would have happened just at the initiative of member states, and very clear it would not have succeeded without the INGOs.

Much has been read into the efforts of Oxfam and other INGOs to harmonise what was previously independent programming in developing countries by northern-based members of INGOs. These initiatives are aimed at building either much more streamlined management structures at the country level with the intention of achieving greater impact and cost effectiveness, and enhance legitimacy in the South through either creating decentralised structures or new southern members.

In the case of Oxfam, this harmonisation is a natural evolution from the loose collection of secular NGOs formalised as Oxfam International in 1995. As a confederation, Oxfam has grown from the outside-in: it is more of an alliance of like-minded organisations than a branch or franchise model. The confederation is based on a one-Affiliate, one-vote principle with a focus on working by consensus. Oxfam is addressing the need to be more global in

its membership by prioritising growth in the global South, preferably by bringing in existing NGOs.

A key driver for creating Oxfam International was to address global advocacy issues – debt, landmines, trade. But it became apparent after the failure of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations in 2008, a global campaign in which Oxfam had invested heavily, that greater focus was needed at the national level. Indeed it was not possible to have effective global advocacy without leadership from the country level on content and a single country level strategy aligned with the global campaign. It was also felt that having multiple independent Oxfams programming separately was, in effect, externalising internal transaction costs, making life difficult for donors and partners alike.

The adoption of rights-based development has fundamentally changed the prism for our theory of change and we are running much more complex organisations these days.

So does this approach reflect Oxfam's theory of change? Oxfam's theory of change is emergent and based on operating in a permanently volatile context. Central to our analysis is the nexus between sustainability and inequality, which means that the issues are universal rather than Southern.

Oxfam's strategic response is to focus on the interaction between active citizens and effective states, fundamental to human development. The theory of change expects that development will be messy and complex, requiring multiple and diverse interventions rather than a simple programme response. Progressive redistribution affects deep structures - so good power analysis is crucial.

Programmes should always have a policy dimension, linked to the key Change Goals in the Strategic Plan. Solutions need to be country-context specific with the emphasis on convening and brokering roles, agile advocacy, inclusive branding, alliances, and the role of civil society.

Under Oxfam's new Single Management Structure (SMS) up to four Affiliates in a country can work in consortia under a managing Affiliate, with a single country strategy, a common voice and common brand. However, SMS still allows for Affiliate diversity; within this structure Affiliates select which of these multiple, complimentary approaches best suit the context they are working in. The second phase of the process is now focussing on streamlining areas where diversity is not helpful in achieving impact, such as finance systems, business processes and other back-office functions.

We do not have a clear end-point for this process. We have conceptualised it as a network of organisations which could include Affiliates, Country Programmes, allies, and partners. We think the demand-driven approach where form follows function has been effective for our confederation. There is now a process under way to think about the next phase of our evolution, aptly called Vision 2020.

Jeremy Hobbs
Executive Director, Oxfam International

Globalisation and international civil society

In an increasingly globalised world, many of the key issues international civil society organisations (ICSOs) focus on – such as human rights, poverty alleviation, environmental degradation and climate change – have causes and require responses which reach beyond national borders. Tackling such issues effectively requires a globally coherent strategic framework, globally consistent advocacy, and globally synchronised and mutually reinforcing projects. However, today's ICSOs rarely have the governance and management structures necessary for effective global intervention. The main reasons for this persistent challenge are set out below.

1. ICSOs were founded as *multi-national* and not as *global* organisations

The major ICSOs were founded well before the latest and most dynamic phase of globalisation: the first ones in the middle of the 19th century (YMCA in 1849, the Red Cross in 1863); and the last in the 1960s and 70s (Amnesty International in 1961, Greenpeace in 1969, Action Aid in 1972). They usually started out as small local or national initiatives which eventually expanded to or were copied in other countries; and only once a handful or more country organisations were active, did the question of a global umbrella body arise.

As a logical consequence of this, the umbrella body's task was to keep an overview of the work which was being done by different organisations using the same name and to moderate between the sometimes conflicting interests of national affiliates. With increased globalisation, brand protection became an issue, and those who worked with international bodies such as the UN, World Bank, or IMF needed a global point of contact.

This created a new challenge, which many ICSOs still grapple with: the organisations' perspectives, distribution of roles, responsibilities and power are all framed in a multi-national, rather than a global way. Decision making often

seeks the lowest common denominator between divergent national interests, rather than aiming for the most effective global solution. Examples abound of delayed statements, or statements which did not add any value, because of the difficulties among national affiliates to reach agreement.

We often – and rightly – complain that the corporate sector wields far too much power globally. But one of the reasons why this occurs is that business is much better than the UN or ICSOs at devising global policies and mobilising power globally.

2. National charity and tax laws perpetuate the dominance of national affiliates

Usually national affiliates are legally constituted in the country where they reside and thus fall under the respective national law. In most countries this means they have to constitute a national Board which is responsible for the work of the national affiliate. This is especially challenging for the governance of finances. For instance, ICSOs active in development and poverty alleviation typically raise funds in rich countries such as the UK and Germany for projects they run in developing countries. Often such projects are co-funded by several national affiliates with each national Board being responsible for their financial contribution. This can lead to a piecemeal approach, with different donors favouring different implementation strategies and reporting requirements. This makes it difficult to find one strategically determined, consistent and effective approach globally. In addition, the national Boards' ability to block funds raised in their country gives them a quasi veto power over much of the ICSOs' global activities.

As long as governments only grant tax exemptions to organisations governed by a national Board based in their own territory, efficient and effective global programming will remain difficult. Sadly, change cannot be expected in the foreseeable future, meaning both

organisations

national and global decision makers in ICSOs will continue to struggle with the contradictions between national responsibility for fundraising and the global requirements of programming.

3. Self-disempowerment is a difficult ask

Most ICSOs' highest governing body – often a General Assembly – is largely made up of representatives of national affiliates. Thus the often competing, and sometimes conflicting, interests and world views of national affiliates shape discussions and decisions. Formally or informally, affiliates with the highest income dominate, usually those from the global North. The General Assembly elects a Board which takes on governance tasks between General Assembly meetings, and often the Board is also largely comprised of representatives of national affiliates, creating a set-up that further perpetuates national dominance on global issues.

Changing this globally ineffective approach would require replacing many representatives of national affiliates, both in the General Assembly and on the Board, with independent persons who come with a global rather than a national brief. But, given the existing distribution of power, such a change would only be possible if national affiliates would be willing to forego some of their influence and power at a global level. To pass on one's own power requires farsightedness and selflessness, two prominent qualities among the sector's key values.

ICSOs frequently criticise the UN for not being able to overcome conflicting national interests for the benefit of the world at large. Most ICSOs have the same challenge in their own organisations, and whether they will be able to advance from multi-national to truly global governance will very much shape their future relevance.

Burkhard Gnärig

Executive Director, Berlin Civil Society Center
burkhard.gnaerig@berlin-civil-society-center.org

Does decentralisation make INGOs more inclusive and legitimate?

For scholars of international relations, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) have never been more important in world politics than they are today; their numbers are growing quickly, as is their access to political players and their international influence. Development experts and practitioners, however, describe INGOs' future as profoundly uncertain: INGOs' relevance is being challenged on every front and the sector's very survival is often in question.

Prompting these diverging positions are different questions. International relations scholars are interested in *what INGOs do* in international politics today, and precisely how effectively they leverage their voice as a way to bring the stances, perspectives and interests of the world's disenfranchised to the attention of the powerful. Development experts, on the other hand, question more *how INGOs do what they do*. Together, they offer a fuller picture of the INGO sector, one of an ever clearer *political* role backed by an ever more faltering *political legitimacy*.

Since the 1990s, INGOs have been widely criticised for not being inclusive enough, for being too removed from what is happening on the ground, and for holding on to their northern identity and agendas. Their relationship with southern countries has been questioned thoroughly. INGOs are prompted with questions about *whose voice they actually represent*, in a world where conventional lines between centre and periphery, North and South, rich and poor, and finally, donors and recipients, have become extremely blurred.

In response, some INGO alliances are decentralising, diversifying their membership through the creation of independent national affiliates in Southern countries. The link between decentralisation and legitimacy is the acknowledgement that claims to a *truly*

global voice depend, before anything else, on INGOs' own internal composition.

India has been a quintessential testing ground of decentralisation and experiments in strengthening the global legitimacy of INGOs through creating a fairer division of labour between northern and southern countries. As part of my doctoral research, I spent 10 months studying how the newly established Plan India and Oxfam India are helping to diversify and broaden their respective INGO's global agendas.

It is clear that the two national organisations have been adding new perspectives, both Indian and southern, to largely northern alliances. Plan India, for example, identified the need to work on the worst forms of exclusion and discrimination when Plan International's agenda had not yet. Oxfam India has worked on resilience to climate change while their northern affiliates focus on emissions, and broadened food justice debates, previously limited to nutrition and production, to include the redistributive role of the state.

Ultimately, however, the impact of decentralisation on INGOs' inclusiveness and legitimacy depends on whether it enhances the capacity of southern affiliates to successfully and systematically project locally-relevant stances onto the global level. Looking at three key dimensions of southern affiliates' work – their relationship with global counterparts, their internal workings, and their links to domestic development actors – unveils important challenges that impinge directly on how these organisations establish and articulate their own voice.

While Oxfam India's and Plan India's global contributions are undeniable, most of their resources are channelled into national activities. The lessons emerging from the grassroots are fed



Children dressed up as doctors, nurses and teachers help actor Rahul Bose sign Oxfam's giant "For All" petition calling for universal health and education.

into global decision-making only sporadically and selectively.

Decentralisation has not yet empowered them to engage critically and on an ongoing basis with their respective global agendas: disagreement emerges when there is a clear clash with national agendas but not, as happens most often, when global agendas and campaigns are simply not relevant.

Their dual position as new and southern members also justifies a strong focus on domestic institution building (primarily with respect to communications, monitoring and evaluation, and fundraising) over internal organisational development. The lack of internal debate is a particularly strong source of frustration for staff and subnational offices. This is primarily because it alienates the knowledge they build in their day-to-day work, yet it is through this ground-level and critical knowledge that global agendas are contextualised and possible alternatives articulated.

Furthermore, though most domestic development actors, from partners to grantees and even the government, agree with the decision to establish these new Indian affiliates, they often disagree with the new mandate of these organisations. The decision to be a southern 'facilitator' places Oxfam and Plan on the fringes of civil society, not closer to its core, prompting critiques

about their failure to embrace any political responsibilities, claims of usurpation of CSOs' own roles, or accusations of irrelevance. Oxfam India and Plan India are seen as competitors in national civil society, with important names but still little influence. The decision to linger between the role of a donor and of a competitor is largely misunderstood by domestic actors, and has at times isolated, rather than brought the two national organisations closer to domestic actors.

So far, while decentralisation in India has allowed stronger agendas and assertive leadership to emerge at the national level, it has happened at the expense of systematic knowledge-sharing and domestic recognition of their new identity. Strengthening the domestic acceptance of decentralised INGOs, harnessing the knowledge of national staff, and engaging more systematically and overtly with global agendas will be critical to realising the full promise of decentralisation. Most importantly, these steps will be inescapable to secure INGOs' claims to a legitimately global voice in world politics.

Francesco Obino
PhD candidate, London School of Economics
and Political Science
f.obino@lse.ac.uk

Working in partnership "One-Save the Children"

Save the Children is rapidly developing into a new organisation. Members of Save the Children International, such as Save the Children Denmark, are increasingly working as a single global organisation, operating under one management structure in countries of operation with each member taking responsibility for a different thematic area, which are organised in Global Initiatives.

Prior to this reorganisation, individual members ran their own independent offices and programmes in each country of operation. The evolution into "One-Save the Children" has occurred gradually, starting in 2004 with selected pilot countries. Today Save the Children International has one global structure guided by a joint global strategy.

Despite these changes, Save the Children International has retained a commitment to working in partnership with civil society. As part of the Save the Children International Strategy 2010-2015, a theory of change has been developed in which the importance of working in partnership with a range of actors, including civil society, remains an important focus:

*"We build partnerships: collaborate with children, civil society organisations, communities, governments and the private sector to share knowledge, influence others and build capacity to ensure children's rights are met."*¹

In August 2012, Save the Children Denmark concluded a four-month process exploring the organisation's experiences gained in regard to – and future scenarios for – working in partnership with civil society. This review had a number of internal and external

¹ MM04c-09: Save the Children International Strategy 2010-2015 – appendix 2: Theory of Change

² Save the Children Denmark (August 2012) "Working in partnership with civil society – How best can this be done in the new 'One-Save the Children'?"

Partnership with civil society – how can this best be done in the new environment?

drivers, many of which are linked to becoming “One-Save the Children”.²

First, within Save the Children International, there are two main approaches to partnership: the instrumental approach (working through partners, implementing partners); and the political approach (developing a strong civil society in its own right). Save the Children Denmark has been concerned that our approach to partnership, which is more political, would be lost during the transition to “One-Save the Children”. A working group on partnership under Save the Children International, which is comprised of small, medium and large Save the Children members, has agreed to embrace both the instrumental and political approach to partnership in the development of partnership principles and tools.

Secondly, the value-added of northern NGOs like Save the Children working in partnership with southern CSOs is increasingly being questioned. One reason for this is the distance created between partners when a national NGO such as Save the Children Denmark, or Red Barnet as it was formerly known, becomes a member of an international alliance such as Save the Children International. Another is that donors are beginning to fund southern CSOs directly, bypassing northern NGOs altogether and putting these organisations under pressure to reposition themselves accordingly, e.g. by redefining their particular contribution to the aid chain.

Finally, Danish Government support to civil society is currently undergoing an evaluation which will eventually lead to a revision of the Danish Government’s current Civil Society Strategy, which has provided the normative framework for support to Danish civil society support since 2000. It is still not clear what implications the evaluation will have for this normative framework – and for

Danish NGOs and their international alliances – in the future.

New approaches to partnership are being invented all the time and it is important that organisations like Save the Children continue to develop and embrace new ways of working.

Where does this leave Save the Children Denmark in terms of its future approach to working in partnership with civil society organisations?

The review concluded that the diversity of Save the Children Denmark’s partnerships and experience of working with partners is huge. Save the Children Denmark has worked with partner organisations in many countries under difficult conditions. It has worked with a large variety of types of civil society organisations, as well as with governments and private sector organisations, and has worked in a range of constellations from one-to-one partnerships to networks and platforms for joint interventions.

Save the Children Denmark will build on this wide and valuable experience when revisiting existing approaches to partnership during the ongoing move towards “One-Save the Children”. But the review process has also left Save the Children Denmark with many routes to pursue, influenced by both internal and external drivers and opportunities.

While Save the Children International is becoming a large player within civil society locally in the countries of operation, there is still room for the individual members to pursue cutting edge approaches to partnership and facilitate joint action on specific areas of partnership. Countries where pilot initiatives are developed and new partnership approaches and tools are tested can be selected on the basis of

both particular member interest but also, of course, local demand for such initiatives and the suitability of the local context.

Indeed, new approaches to partnership are being invented all the time and it is important that organisations like Save the Children continue to develop and embrace new ways of working. NGOs such as Save the Children that work with children and young people worldwide face particular challenges in this regard; they are increasingly challenged when it comes to supporting the creative citizenship of children and young people in a complex world. The young have a penchant for rejecting the existing forms and approaches: for them, most formal institutions, including NGOs, have become highly alienating hierarchies.

What might the alternative approaches be? And how could these be explored and developed in a new and different relationship between North and South? A key challenge – not just for Save the Children Denmark, the new “One-Save the Children” and other large NGO families, but for all civil society organisations that work with children and young people – is to continue to develop new and innovative approaches to partnership in order to stay relevant in the eyes of our core beneficiary group: children and young people.

Marianne Bo Paludan
Program Manager,
Save the Children Denmark
MBP@redbarnet.dk

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Part 3: In week 8, participants attend a three-hour webinar to share progress in implementing learning, cover outstanding learning needs, and revise action plans.

Open Training, Oxford, UK

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INTR▲C

Oxbridge Court, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0ES
T: +44 (0)1865 201851
F: +44 (0)1865 201852
E: info@intrac.org • www.intrac.org

