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Building the Internal Strength of Urban NGOs? *The Right Way Round or From the Inside Out:*

How do we judge our capacity as NGOs in a realistic way? How do we know if a partner is able to take on a new piece of work or adopt a new role? How do we know what forms of support to give to partners at a certain stage of their development? These are questions many northern NGOs face every day. There is a temptation to ask for simple rules of thumb or neat models to adopt.

INTRAC's recent in-depth research to determine the factors affecting the strength of urban NGOs has examined over 140 organisations in urban areas in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It has drawn on a model which stresses the relationships between an NGO's internal organisation, its relations and its programme performance. This model highlights the need to understand the context in which organisations are operating and recognises that the often dynamic, complex and paradoxical nature of organisations cannot be represented properly by a static model. The research findings reinforce the emphasis placed in the model on the importance of understanding an organisation in terms of what it does and who it relates to, rather than simply in terms of its internal life. Yet it challenges the emphasis placed by some on the centrality of the mission and vision in an organisation's internal life.

From Purpose to Strategies? It is often said that an NGO should first be clear about its mission in order to determine appropriate strategies. But is this how it works in practice? Our research shows that for urban NGOs external circumstances and NGOs' actions are often more powerful and necessary forces in shaping NGOs' strategies than a mission statement. What is of importance to NGOs is reflecting on and relating their learning back to their strategy and then to their mission and role in development. Contrary to the rationale that strategy must flow from the NGO's mission, in fact it is often action that produces strategy. Initial strategy formulation occurs infrequently; instead strategy is inferred from successful action that develops through NGOs' experimentation. As Weick has argued:

Managers keep forgetting that it is what they do, not what they plan, that explains their success. They keep on giving credit to the wrong thing - namely, the plan - and having made this error, they then spend more time planning and less time acting and then are surprised when more planning improves nothing.

So better performing organisations may, in fact, exhibit a continuum of *action-strategy-mission*. But how many donors are prepared to support action and learning-oriented NGOs as opposed to NGOs with nice clean vision, mission and strategy statements?

Funding Diversity to Organisational Stability? It is assumed that if an NGO has multiple sources of funding it is more likely to be sustainable than those relying on one donor. It has more confidence in negotiating with an individual donor and is prepared to follow its proven experience in the face of possible opposition because it has other allies. It may be, however, that organisational stability precedes funding diversity. Our research in the urban context shows that it is the confidence and skill of leaders which determines the stability of the NGO in its relationships. This was true to such an extent that NGOs with a so-called over-reliance on one donor were more than able to criticise and negotiate win-lose situations to their advantage against the all-powerful donor. Furthermore, it was this organisational stability springing from the experience of the NGO and the leaders' skills that led to funding diversity. They could sell their approach critically. For us in the North, the question is do we still oblige 'partners' to have other funders on board or rather

do we encourage NGOs to develop their confidence and if we do, how do we listen to and constructively critique our partner's knowledge?

From Present Organisations to Future Leaders? It is easy to speak of good organisations and their associated structures, strategies and systems. It is within such organisations that the NGO leaders of the future are nurtured. We have confidence in leaders who were shaped in reputable NGOs. It could be argued *that present leadership enhances future organisations*. NGO leaders (not trustees or Boards) are the main shapers of most facets of the NGO's existence and approach. They have a great deal of actual and symbolic power over stakeholders and strategies. Our research highlights that it is skilled and astute NGO leaders, over and above missions, plans, strategies or resources, that cause NGOs to be successful. And those NGOs that are smart enough to develop a tier of second-level leaders do even better. The question which we have to face is how can we promote and support the development of effective and accountable NGO leadership? Is it possible and would it be an appropriate intervention? It would have to be long-term and would involve more than offering 'training inputs' to southern partners.

Conclusion: The challenge for northern NGOs is to uncover and review their own conceptions of what makes an NGO effective. What are the models we are using to assess the strength and needs of our partners and are these models really valid? This research reminds us that we must regularly reassess and if necessary redesign our models in the light of our experience.

If you have any strong views or would like to comment on the issues raised by this, or any other article, please address them to the ONTRAC editor. Thank you.

Understanding Change in Social Development: Outcomes and Impact

There is a huge gap between the rhetoric about evaluating impact and the reality in the field. Many critics of development feel that after many years of talking about improving the evaluation of impact there has been little real progress in practice. The Third International Workshop on evaluating social development, held in the Netherlands in November 1996, set out to test this and other propositions. The workshop was hosted by INTRAC with support from a group of other European NGOs (ActionAid, Bilance, Novib, Oxfam and Save the Children Fund - UK). It brought together around 80 participants from 24 countries.

The workshop found that there have indeed been very few solid evaluations of impact and that the impact assessments that have been attempted have often lacked appropriate data or are based on retrospective studies. Such findings were perhaps to be expected but others were more surprising in their implications. One conclusion in particular which we did not expect to emerge from the workshop is based on evidence which showed that many of the methods which have been introduced as aids to programme planning, design, management and monitoring and evaluation are probably not useful for evaluating impact. These methods (such as logical frameworks) may well provide an improvement to monitoring systems and may enable us to evaluate outputs and activities to the degree that they have been delivered to whom and at what cost. But these same methods fall short of being then able to tell us what impact a particular project or programme has had on the client population.

The cases reviewed in the workshop illustrate some of the problems of trying to make use of results based methods and logical frameworks for providing a composite picture of impact. Others have retrospectively tried to reconstruct history through a menu of methods in part because the existing methods of monitoring and evaluation were not providing information on impact. What seemed to emerge from these examples is that if we are serious about measuring impact the best way forward may not be to get rid of the existing objectives and output-focused methods but to design a parallel system for assessing impact which runs independent of but linked to the existing monitoring and evaluation systems. Although this is where the evidence points it will undoubtedly be difficult for agencies, especially donors - official and NGO - who have committed themselves to methods such as logical frameworks, to accept that what they are doing does not provide

information on impact and that further and different methods need to be introduced or accepted into their horizons.

The conclusion we have reached is that the solution is to design a system specifically to assess impact, and that this should be done at the beginning of a project life so as to make the most of efforts around creating a base line, establishing needs and initial perceptions, as well as possible indicators for change. Then as more traditional monitoring and evaluation systems are operationalised to ensure accountability and efficiency of use of resources, a separate set of exercises can obtain qualitative and other data on impact. Although we speak of this being in parallel evidently the two exercises will cross over as they use each others data to avoid duplication. Nevertheless they do constitute separate exercises to the extent that their focus is different; one has more to do with the way an agency uses resources while the other has more to do with the ultimate benefits gained by the clients. Even if resources are well used and the plan is followed as predicted it cannot be assumed that the clients will automatically benefit.

Looking to the future some of the more productive attempts to assess impact have recognised that to do so will require a real commitment from the sponsoring agency to a set of methods which are likely to be participatory in essence, with the client's needs and perceptions as their basis. Whilst initially impact assessments may have to rely on retrospective means new programmes will ideally have systems to measure impact put in place from the start. Either way we expect to see some challenging findings starting to emerge from several agencies.

INTRAC intends to follow up this work and we are considering a programme of assistance to agencies wishing to improve their impact evaluation through practical means. A new research programme to support this programme is now being designed. In addition we will explore the suggestion from some of the Southern and Eastern participants that we consider regional workshops covering some of these topics. Finally we will start to plan for a Fourth International Workshop to bring all of this together and build upon the interest and networking which has resulted from the earlier workshops, INTRAC's training programme and our publications.

A book detailing the findings from the workshop is now available from INTRAC. If you would like a copy please ask Dani Pitts for: *Outcomes and Impact: Understanding Change in Social Development* by Peter Oakley, Brian Pratt and Andrew Clayton, March 1998. Price: £14.95.

NGOS AND PEACE BUILDING IN CONFLICT; Moving beyond the mango tree

Do NGOs have a peace building role in areas of protracted conflict? If we are to believe the rhetoric of the NGOs themselves, then clearly they do. In recent years we have seen the emergence of a new orthodoxy on NGO peace building and conflict resolution and it has become a truism that aid instruments can and should be used to promote peace building.

However few can point to concrete examples of how peace building programmes have had a demonstrably positive impact on the dynamics of conflict. On the other hand, examples abound of how NGO interventions have fuelled war economies and sustained conflict. As Kapila (cited in Stubbs, 1997) notes, the peace building debate may have moved beyond notions of "encouraging people to sit under the mango tree together to talk to each other", but the track record of NGOs in this area is at best mixed.

To an extent an assessment of NGO achievements and potential in the area of peace building depends on whether one takes a benign or a critical view of NGOs and their motives. Champions of NGOs who see them as the builders of civil society, use the language of comparative advantage to justify a heightened role for NGOs in preventing, managing or resolving conflict. NGO critics on the other hand interpret this new trend as an opportunistic response by an unaccountable, unregulated aid industry. Peace building may have entered the lexicon of development speak, but

NGO projects on the ground have not moved beyond the “mango tree model”. Such a model is based on unrealistic assessments of civil society in fractured and conflict-ridden societies.

Clearly the reality is not as black and white as the two positions above imply. What has become evident at this early stage in our research is that NGOs and donors, though they often use peace building terminology, have very different understandings and operational definitions of what it means. Our research aims to respond to a need for more fine-grained empirical analysis. Evidently “smarter” forms of intervention are called for which move beyond the mango tree model and are based on a more nuanced understanding of civil society and the historical and socio-political context on conflict.

For further information on this Manchester University/INTRAC joint research project please contact Jonathan Goodhand at INTRAC.

THE NGO SECTOR IN CENTRAL ASIA: Moving Forward Together?

- Does the NGO sector have a role to play in building civil society? NGOs in Central Asia think they do but feel that donors often see them simply as a means of service delivery to help beleaguered governments. This difference in understanding over the role of NGOs predictably creates conflicts between the donor community and the NGO sector.
- What is an NGO support organisation (NGOSO)? The term NGOSO can be used as broadly as one wishes and often the NGOSOs themselves are not able to define their role within the sector. There is a huge range of intermediaries who support NGOs in Central Asia including international and local support organisations and donors. The roles of all these players need to be more specifically defined if they are to improve their complementarity and effectiveness.
- Do donors fund NGO projects on an *ad hoc* basis? NGOSOs think so. Donors have their own agendas laid down by their political masters who do not always take account of the priorities of those communities the NGOs are serving or the best way forward for developing the NGO sector as a whole.
- How can the relationship between NGOs and government be improved? Donors and NGOs have a role to play in keeping the government informed of what they are doing, including their successes. This requires greater exchange of information between sectors so that government can view NGO activities as positively benefitting society and not as competition.

These were some of the issues that emerged from four recent seminars held by INTRAC in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Two seminars were held in each country: one for donors, the other for NGOSOs. The same kinds of issues and problems were raised both by the NGOSOs and the donors all of whom have decided to begin a series of quarterly roundtable meetings to explore these issues further. This is the first step to get all the key players of the embryonic NGO sector in Central Asia sitting down together and trying to co-operate and co-ordinate their work to ensure the most effective development of the sector as a whole.

INTRAC has a programme of institutional development of NGOs in Central Asia of which these seminars were a part. If you would like to know more about the overall programme please contact Anne Garbutt the Central Asia Training and Consultancy Manager at INTRAC.

NGO Support Organisation Workshop

Planning for the next INTRAC international workshop is almost complete. It will be held in Oxford from 30th March - 3rd April and will be facilitated by a team of senior staff members from NGO Support Organisations. This team met in Oxford in early February to finalise the workshop outline.

Reflecting the complexity and speed of change occurring in the NGO sector as a whole the workshop will track, in a participative manner, the particular dilemmas and challenges to NGOs. Starting with an exploration of some of the images and models of Support Organisations we will then move to examine the opportunities and constraints they face, finishing the week by focusing on ways in which we might increase our own capacity as support organisations. A publication reflecting the debates, presentations, analyses and stories from the workshop will be available late in 1998.

As there are still some places for late enrolments please fax INTRAC if you wish to attend.

DIVERSITY: Why the need to talk about it?

An increasing number of international NGOs are undergoing a critical review of their organisation's structural and cultural make-up. In that process, organisational management teams are recognising the importance of commissioning gender audits and training on issues of intercultural sensitivity. To a lesser and greater extent, organisations are recognising diversity as an important issue to address.

Historically, however, diversity has been understood by organisations as a shorthand term for gender and race. Given the vast array of physical and cultural differences that constitute the spectrum of human diversity, any discussion of diversity must take into consideration other dimensions of diversity that create issues of difference: age, ethnicity, gender, physical abilities, race and sexual orientation. As immutable human differences, they have the most significant impacts on individuals and groups in society and in organisations. There are other mutable dimensions of diversity such as educational background, income, parental status and religious beliefs which also shape the unique perspective and past experiences which contribute towards the complexity of values, roles, experiences and perceptions from which individuals and the organisations they work in draw meaning.

Given the complexity and uncertainty of the dimensions of diversity, it is not surprising that organisations have not looked at the entire spectrum of issues of difference. It is, however, very timely that such a discussion is taking place and that it looks at international NGOs as organisations made up of diverse individuals as well as pointing to issues of policy and practice for the sector as a whole to address.

A Forum on Diversity:

Until now there has been no forum within the NGO sector where ideas can be explored and exchanged. As a result **INTRAC and Change International Consultants Ltd (CIC) plan to hold a one-day seminar on diversity on 21st May 1998** to establish a forum where UK-based NGOs can discuss and explore issues of difference (age, ethnicity, gender, disability race, sexual orientation) with a view to highlighting areas for future development. A number of key note speakers will be invited to set the scene and the issues will then be discussed and debated in working groups.

The purpose of the proposed forum is to enable NGOs to address diversity issues within their own organisations in both an organisational and programmatic context, ensuring the issues discussed remain within the field of the NGO sector as a whole.

A publication relating to the issues and debates which emerge from the forum will be produced. For more information please contact Martina Hunt at INTRAC.