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viewpoint **Autonomy or Dependence:**

A False Dilemma or the Greatest Crisis Facing NGOs Today?

On a recent visit to the UK's National Council of Voluntary Organisations, what struck me about many of the books displayed on the shelves was their overwhelming concern with the mechanisms of contracting with UK government departments. Is this the future for NGOs around the world? Are we destined to become contractors supplying services to government in a predetermined manner? David Korten (1990) coined the phrase 'public service contractor' (PSC) as distinct from 'real' non-governmental organisations (NGOs or PVOs – private voluntary organisations – in the case of the USA). Should the majority of NGOs be re-classified as PSCs, leaving a minority to carry the flag of independence?

There is in fact more to the debate than such a simple dichotomy. Previously, I have argued that it is in some ways unfortunate if understandable that NGOs have lost the label of the 'value-driven sector' (see *ontrac* 17, 2001) to distinguish them from the state or private sector. It remains necessary for us to remember that values are – or should be – core to the very existence of NGOs. If values were given their rightful place then the debate over autonomy versus dependence would be less critical. When an organisation has a clearly expressed set of values backed by a strategy to ensure that their actions follow on from these values, then they will be less likely to lose their independence.

Independence is often in the mind! If NGOs are solely driven by responding to whatever contracts are on offer from the state, they will lack the capacity and willingness to engage in critical dialogue. However, NGOs that are proactive in terms of reviewing

the needs of the poor and taking the interests of their clients as their driving focus should be able to remain independent whilst completing contracts for donors.

For example, INTRAC (2002) has recently carried out a study on the work of urban NGOs. The research suggests that the most independent NGOs manage a delicate balancing act between maintaining a clear long-term strategy – often taken forward by the leadership – and developing a broad range of relationships with community based organisations (CBOs), other NGOs, local and national government structures. They are able to maintain technical credibility for their work at the same time as engaging in critical dialogue with local authorities where necessary. This evidence suggests that in most parts of the world it is *possible* both to work with governments and to maintain an independent and sometimes critical stance.

Of course the degree of independence of civil society varies considerably. In certain societies, there is an almost total fear of the authorities that permeates the work and relationships of NGOs, and this is hard to overcome. On the other hand, in societies where the principles of an independent civil society are protected and accepted as the norm it should be easier to maintain independence of thought and voice whilst being financially dependent on the state. However, the need for legitimacy within society still requires an NGO to have support from a membership base or other form of constituency. An NGO with such a solid constituency retains a far stronger position in its interface with the state.

Where the level of independence is outside the NGO's control, such as

continued on next page

In this issue: James Taylor of CDRA reflects on the challenges facing South African NGOs; Janice Giffen explores options for local resource mobilisation; Chris Wardle provides a critique of the concept of sustainability and Vicky Brehm outlines the elusive search for sustainability in Albania.

continued

under oppressive regimes, it is more difficult to enter into critical dialogue or even opposition to the government. These situations can give rise to remarkable and courageous NGO work in extremely difficult circumstances, such as the stance taken by Latin American NGOs during the dark days of military dictatorships in the '70s and '80s and the work of NGOs under South African Apartheid.

Returning to the UK domestic voluntary sector where NGOs have become oriented towards providing services within the privatised elements of the former welfare state, real independence has been lost over the years. Often true criticism comes not from the large brand leaders but smaller niche agencies that have rejected the 'contract culture' and are able to

comment from outside these frameworks. To adopt this role often involves saying no to growth or, in some cases, accepting a reduction in turnover and an exposure to greater financial risk.

This edition of *ontrac* explores the complex question of NGO autonomy in different contexts from Eastern Europe to South Africa. It focuses on what sustainability means in reality and options for local resource mobilisation. Both international development NGOs in the North as well as NGOs in developing and transitional countries will increasingly face the decision to curtail growth – or even shrink – as the cost of maintaining independence. The decision to 'downsize' seems to be one many NGOs still try to avoid in a sector which has accepted growth as the

norm. We will watch with interest for examples of NGOs that make the difficult decision not to grow but to go for independence of voice as their first priority.

Written by Brian Pratt

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New Publications

KNOWLEDGE, POWER AND DEVELOPMENT AGENDAS: NGOs North and South

Emma Mawdsley, Janet Townsend, Gina Porter and Peter Oakley
NGOMPS No. 14,
ISBN 1-897748-63-9, £15.95

Development NGOs in the North and the South interact in a global web of relationships. Ideas may be drawn from the South, but the way in which they are taken up, changed and then re-disseminated is dominated by Northern agendas and by global

waves of development fashion. Based on field research in Ghana, India, Mexico and Europe, this book explores how Southern NGOs can have more of a voice in determining their work and getting more of their ideas on to the international development agenda.

PEOPLE AND CHANGE: Exploring Capacity Building in NGOs

Rick James, NGOMPS No. 15, forthcoming June 2002,
ISBN 1-897748-68-X, £15.95

This book is about improving the impact of capacity building. Based

on many years of practical experience with NGOs, mainly in Africa, this book is for anyone involved in capacity building. Using a mixture of case studies, illustrations from experience and articles based on reflective practice, *People and Change* provides practitioners with ideas, suggestions and challenges to improve the effectiveness of capacity building interventions.

For further information about INTRAC's publications, please contact Lorraine Collett (l.collett@intrac.org) or visit our website <http://www.intrac.org/pubs.html>

Letters to the editor

Dear *ontrac*,

Thank you for sending us the special edition of *ontrac* (20) 'INTRAC Celebrates its 10th Anniversary'. It has helped us to reflect on the nature of civil society and how to strengthen civil society capacity to participate in local development and fight poverty amongst vulnerable groups. In its work, ASSERCO has approached the concept of civil society from a broad perspective, not focusing solely on NGOs, associations and trade unions. In order for

these types of organisations to exercise their true role as catalysts and intermediaries for development, the grassroots communities themselves – whether urban or rural – must be well organised. Once the communities are organised, they are then able to define their own needs and then see how they can be assisted in standing up for their priorities in relating to governments, national and foreign donors.

ASSERCO is confident in this approach because it has helped the people in two pilot areas of Mozambique 'to wake up, roll up

their sleeves and finally decide to develop the place where they live', using bottom-up methods of planning, discussion and decision-making.

With greetings.

ASSERCO, Mozambique

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Translated from Portuguese

ontrac readers are invited to contribute comments on the themes debated in *ontrac*. INTRAC reserves the right to edit letters for brevity. Contributions can be sent to:

The Editor *ontrac*

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Autonomy and Beyond: NGOs and the State in South Africa

The honeymoon in South Africa is over. The state is facing the daunting challenge of delivering the expectations of its people, who are still dealing with the ongoing trauma of transformation. One of the options the government is now exercising is to negotiate contracts with NGOs to assist in providing resources and services. This approach comes at a time when there is mounting pressure on international NGO donors to move on to countries more deserving or newsworthy. For many of South Africa's indigenous NGOs the options are stark. The prospect of entering into contractual relationships with the state is increasingly becoming the only real alternative to closure.

NGOs in South Africa are well versed in the art of negotiating shifts in relationships. Particularly in their relationships with the state, the changes have been fundamental and fast. The change from being part of the liberation movement seeking to overthrow the state to preparing the majority of citizens to vote for the first time was a leap few predicted would come when it did. This was shortly followed by many of the most skilled members of NGOs joining the state as politicians and civil servants. The depleted sector nevertheless rose to the challenge of helping to draft an array of new policies designed to transform the country. And now the challenge is to return to the delivery of resources and services; for many of the older NGOs it was not that long ago that this very delivery was used as a means of conscientising and mobilising people to overthrow the state.

As the new state and NGOs gather round the table to negotiate contracts, it is important to consider what type of future relationships to strive for through the process. What should the nature and quality of relationships be between NGOs and the state to best serve the interests of the poor (whom they both claim to serve)? Is there any possi-

bility of moving beyond the independence of being a political struggle organisation, and beyond the dependence of the professionalised, externally-funded NGO? Is it conceivable that some form of **meaningful inter-dependence** could be achieved: a relationship that will serve the development needs of those excluded and marginalised, as well as the development needs of the country as a whole?

NGOs will have to consider carefully what they have of real value to bring into the negotiating process if they want to influence the relationships between themselves and their future paymaster. There are those who will have little more to offer than their mediocrity in exchange for the chance possibility of their survival in the short term. Influenced by their past funders, others are already well on their way to abandoning their more developmental agendas in order to adopt the trappings of project-cycle efficiency and obtain contracts. But in South Africa there are still NGOs who can bring to negotiations a competent development practice that combines the effective delivery of resources and services with simultaneously empowering the recipients.

There are NGOs who have maintained a **critical independence** in their relationships with the state while building their capacity to deliver quality services efficiently and developmentally. The state has already signed contracts with some of them. In order to deliver on their contracts, these and other NGOs will have to meet their output commitments. But this is the lesser of their challenges. The real test will be to deliver in ways that start transforming the dominant global paradigm that excludes and impoverishes the majority in the pursuit of wealth, and the processes which shamelessly masquerade as development. If NGOs have the confidence, competence and boldness to offer transformative services and if the government is brave enough to stay true to its founding principles and engage with such NGOs, then we will be starting to explore the inter-dependence that is born out of the experience of dependence and independence: a connected world beyond autonomy.

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INTRAC has been working in collaboration with CDRA over many years as part of our Linking Programme.

capacity *building news*

Welcome to Capacity Building News No. 11. In this edition, Janice Giffen explores the dimensions of sustainability and resource mobilisation within the broader context of organisational capacity building.

Capacity Building for Local Resource Mobilisation

When NGOs approach organisations such as INTRAC for assistance in capacity building, one of their priorities is often to develop fund-raising strategies. Many Southern and Eastern NGOs have, until now, focused their attention on building their capacity to access funds from bi-lateral donors and Northern NGOs. The issue of local resource mobilisation is however becoming an area of increasing concern, especially given the continually changing patterns of funding from Northern donors. These NGOs find that building support amongst their local communities and accessing resources locally require different capacities.

Capacity building initiatives that focus specifically on local fundraising tend to stress the importance of building local support for the type of work being done:

People in voluntary agencies around the world have told me repeatedly that the biggest hurdle they faced in local fundraising was their lack of **credibility** within their own community... Having credibility means being seen as entirely trustworthy. Without credibility, fundraising is next to impossible. (Westman Wilson 2001)

The Resource Alliance's recent March Conference in India, 'Sustainable Resource Mobilisation: Developing Local Roots', also stressed the importance of building local credibility and trust. The

Conference looked at the prevailing images and perceptions of NGOs and asked: 'How can NGOs re-position themselves? What needs to be in place before an organisation can begin to mobilise local resources?' Individual sessions then examined the need to create trust in order to develop local legitimacy and generate resources. The specific challenges of increasing legitimacy in the sector through developing credible systems of **governance** and **accountability**, as well as adopting standards of practice and codes of conduct, were also explored.

Likewise, the issue of local credibility as a key element in ensuring organisational independence is emphasised by Catalyst Works, which assists organisations in developing their own strategies for marketing themselves. It has identified four elements required to ensure an **organisation's sustainability and independence** (Wells 2001):

- A programme that responds to **on-going need**, and which is seen to do so.
- **Perception** of the organisation: how well it is known, its reputation, independent brand and positioning.
- The extent to which it has built a **constituency** of popular support: the numbers of people who support the work it does in addition to its target group.
- A **mixture of revenue** that provides a degree of security through a range of income sources, avoiding over-dependence on one source of income.

The current growth in interest and opportunities for working in partnership with actors from other sectors offers further opportunities for mobilising resources locally. For example, PACT U.S.A. is developing a Corporate Community Engagement initiative within local communities where local stakeholders – including both civil society organisations (CSOs) and local businesses – work together to build a common development vision and create collaborative action plans. Similarly, Ashoka is developing tools for building 'business – social bridges' which encourage businesses and civil society to work together in identifying local needs and meeting them in new ways.

In addition, NGOs and other CSOs working in urban areas are exploring new methods of working with local authorities. A variety of 'social partnerships' are emerging, especially in Central and Eastern Europe and the countries of the Former Soviet Union. As long as they are clear about their own objectives, these opportunities can offer increased access to resources.

INTRAC itself has been involved in a wide range of capacity building initiatives related to sustainability: from examining opportunities for organisations to develop 'fees for services' (with the Centre for Civil Initiatives in Siberia) to developing linkages with other actors such as the private sector and local authorities. However, we stress the importance of approaching the question of local resource mobilisation within the wider context. It is not merely a pragmatic question of how NGOs can access funds once external donors move on. It is in fact a question of how to develop local recognition for the work of NGOs and other CSOs, and to build **legitimacy and support** for the wider role of civil society.

INTRAC therefore views the issue of organisational sustainability as a whole, by examining the organisation's **external environment** and its **internal capacities** and addressing both areas through capacity building work. With regard to an organisation's external environment, the overall profile of the civil society sector and the wider local context needs to be examined. What credibility does the sector hold within the society at large? What is the nature of relationships within the sector? What degree of collaboration (or competition) exists between CSOs? What skills and abilities do NGOs need to develop in order to engage with different sectors of society?

When assessing the internal capacities of an organisation, a clear organisational identity is paramount. Does the organisation have an agreed mission and values? Does it have the capacity to establish and develop relationships with other civil society actors? Are its programmes, internal management systems and capacity to think and act strategically adequate and able to generate outside recognition of the value and effectiveness of its work?

In conclusion, resource mobilisation is concerned with building the capacity of NGOs and other civil society organisations to develop the skills that will enable them to engage appropriately as serious players with the different sectors of society in which they operate. It is concerned with the identification and securing of resources by civil society organisations from their own societies



Photo: AUSTIN RAI, India

(INTRAC 2002). Capacity building needs to aim at achieving these ends.

Written by Janice Giffen
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Useful Websites

For information on Ashoka and their social entrepreneurship programmes see <http://www.ashoka.org>

Catalyst Works specialises in international NGO marketing: <http://www.CatalystWorks.co.uk>

For information on PACT and their Corporate Community Engagement approach see <http://www.pactworld.org>

The Resource Alliance (formerly known as The International Fund Raising Group) seeks to enable voluntary organisations worldwide to build their capacity to mobilise support for their work. See <http://www.resource-alliance.org>

end of capacity building news

Senior Appointment at INTRAC: Research Director

This post presents a unique and challenging opportunity within INTRAC. We are seeking an exceptional candidate: someone who has an established international reputation, experience in international development and applied research and who will lead our growing INTRAC Research Team. As part of the INTRAC Senior Management Team, the successful candidate will also be responsible for areas of strategic development within the organisation and with promoting our key interests in Civil Society, Organisational Capacity Building and Participatory Development.

For full details of the post and an application form please write to: Personnel, INTRAC, PO Box 563, Oxford, OX2 6RZ, UK
Email: l.collett@intrac.org Previous candidates need not re-apply.

Re-Thinking Sustainability

Through my work in evaluation, I frequently come across Southern and Eastern NGOs that are struggling to become sustainable. But what exactly do they mean by 'sustainable'? The definition that many seem to have accepted and adopted is: 'We will aim to finance ourselves from sources in our country within a certain period of time (usually three to five years)'. And where does this definition come from? It can almost always be traced back to one of their foreign donors, who at best have suggested it to them or, at worst, have imposed it on them as an aim that must be achieved during the next period of funding. The reality is that in fact three to five years on, often in spite of valiant efforts, less than 10% of their overall budget is met from local sources such as voluntary donations, sales of publications, fees for providing services and from efforts at income-generating activities.

The aim of sustainability has not been met, not through lack of effort, but simply because it is unrealistic and unachievable. The economies of many of these countries are weak and stagnant whilst the lack of tax breaks for charitable donations discourages local giving. Selling publications and asking people to pay for training – though important – can only raise limited funds. Besides, many of the people the NGOs train are themselves unable to cover the full costs.

As far as income-generating activities are concerned, it generally takes 18 to 24 months before most new enterprises start to make a profit and even then, in the early years, the profit needs to be re-invested in the business in order for it to grow. NGOs find that the skills needed to run a successful business are not necessarily the same as those for running an NGO. Furthermore, the time and energy needed to run income-generating activities is considerable, which means that the core activities of the NGO may start to suffer.

Ironically, most of the donors who have promoted this narrow definition of sustainability as 'self-financing' over the last ten years are not themselves sustainable! They depend on taking a cut of the money they have been asked to distribute – either from government sources, international agencies, businesses or the general public – in order to cover

their own costs. If they were prohibited from using a proportion of these sources of funds to finance themselves, they would no longer be viable and would quickly disappear.

As this narrow definition of sustainability is unachievable, a broader, more realistic and workable definition is needed. I would propose that:

A **sustainable NGO** is one that has a reasonable prospect of continuing to function and develop over the medium term (three to five years) and to work productively with its target group.

In order to achieve this objective, an NGO needs to be engaged in four inter-related areas:

- To carry out **meaningful work**: responding to real needs and

engaging in building the capacity of groups and communities.

- To have **contacts and good relations** with key players such as the target group, local government, other NGOs, and so forth.
- To have **diversified funding sources**: not relying on one foreign donor, but developing a mix of foreign and local sources.
- To be **organised and managed well**.

Such an NGO is likely to continue to find a role for itself and attract continued support, both moral and financial, at least over the medium term. After all, the biggest challenge facing donors is to find valid and credible organisations and programmes to support. Indeed, to say they are 'giving' money is incorrect. In fact, they are 'buying' benefits for themselves and their supporters. These include the delivery of programmes, obtaining educational material for their campaigns, and even making their supporters 'feel good'.

In this uncertain world, few commercial businesses are certain of their future beyond three years. Why should NGOs be expected to be?

**Written by Chris Wardle,
INTRAC Associate**

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INTRAC Central Asia team from Oxford, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan: Meeting in Kyrgyzstan

Photo: Anne Garbutt

countryfocus Albania: Civil Society in Transition

From the end of the Second World War until 1991, Albania experienced the most repressive, isolationist and authoritarian form of Communism within the Eastern bloc countries and virtually no form of free association was allowed. The collapse of the regime led to economic upheaval, and the country became dependent on foreign aid and remittances from some 40,000 Albanians migrants. The already volatile situation in Albania was further destabilised in 1999 when the population increased by nearly 14% with the influx of refugees from Kosovo. The number of NGOs increased dramatically with some 150 NGOs registering with the UNHCR in Tirana (RRN 1999). During the refugee crisis huge flows of aid were spent in Albania. The legacy of these crises and the huge, haphazard flood of funding into the country has been very damaging on the emerging civil society. It has resulted in a strong donor-driven orientation of many NGOs, a heavily projectised approach and an abundance of examples of bad practice, both on the part of donors and recipients.

Albania is perhaps an extreme example of a country which experienced huge short-term flows of money from all kinds of organisations and individuals in Western Europe following the collapse of Communism and the various emergencies that have occurred. For example, Western Europeans often came in with their own idea of what projects they wanted their partners to set up, rather than looking to fund appropriate local initiatives. A lot of the donor organisations were unprofessional and lacking in experience. Whilst many of the 'false' and least credible NGOs are now fading away with the transition to a more developmental phase, the donor-recipient mentality remains strong.

The development of civil society in Albania faces many challenges as it seeks to move from heavy donor dependence towards autonomy and self-reliance. The lessons from the Albanian experience highlight the damage that external donors can cause through short-term, *ad hoc* funding practices. It is important for donors at all levels to consider the long-term effects of their funding decisions and to contribute towards the sustainability of local organisations.

As a counter-reaction to the overly projectised approach, some donors have now started to adopt strategies for policy-oriented capacity building in support of local governance and decentralisation. This trend comes at a time when overall aid to Albania is declining and newly empowered local authorities are starved of resources to effect change. The danger is that planning and training will now overtake the earlier aid focus on project implementation and service delivery, with little scope to turn newly acquired skills at local levels into positive developmental achievements. There is an urgent need for donors to adopt a more balanced and co-ordinated approach rather than lurching between different extremes.

A related tendency is that few NGOs seek to strengthen civil society through institutional and organisational development means. Here the debate relates to which civic actors are 'true members' of Albanian civil society and therefore worthy of capacity building. In urban planning – a key area of intervention in response to massive rural-urban migration – there is a wide gulf between NGOs that take an exclusive and professionalised view of civil society and those that welcome broad citizen

participation. In a country where the concepts of participation and civic action are so new, it is this broader interpretation that will allow an authentic Albanian understanding of civil society to emerge.

Written by Vicky Brehm

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Acknowledgement and References

John Beauclerk, INTRAC's Programme Manager for Central and South Eastern Europe, provided extensive comments for this article.

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Website:

http://www.undp.org.al/projects/c_c_framework.htm

INTRAC People

Lorraine Collett has now joined INTRAC on a permanent basis as Office Manager and PA to the Executive Director, and sadly we have said goodbye to Carolyn Blaxall following her maternity leave. David Marsden has taken up the post of Acting Research Director on secondment from the World Bank for a year. Kirsty Andrews left in February, and we welcomed Carol Beaumont to the post of Finance Assistant in March. Laura Jarvie joined the team in January as a Research Assistant, having previously been a volunteer since September 2001. We said goodbye to Tim Ramsdale in February. Tim had been a volunteer in our Library since September 2001 and we wish him all the best.

Written by Natasha Thurlow ■

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ontrac

ISSN 1476-1327

Editor: Vicky Brehm, Researcher, INTRAC

Design: Sophie Johnson, Colophon Media

Printing: Litho and Digital Impressions Ltd., Oxford

ontrac is the newsletter of INTRAC (the International NGO Training and Research Centre). It is published three times a year. The contents of the newsletter may be freely reproduced and translated, providing the source is acknowledged. INTRAC wishes to thank the following organisations for their contributions towards the production of *ontrac*: APSO, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, Cordaid, DanChurchAid, MS Denmark, Norwegian Church Aid, Novib, Oxfam GB, South Research and the International Save the Children Alliance.

From the World Bank to the NGO World

INTRAC recently signed an agreement with the World Bank to participate in its Staff Exchange Programme. The first person to take part in the exchange is David Marsden from the Social and Environment Unit in the South Asia Region, who joins INTRAC in Oxford as Research Director for one year. However, David is not new to INTRAC. Before joining the Bank in 1995 he worked closely with Brian Pratt and the late Peter Oakley on monitoring and evaluation issues.

His move to INTRAC is an experiment for the Bank, and for INTRAC. David writes:

The exchange will provide an important opportunity to enrich the World Bank's dialogue with civil society and learn how more successful co-operation can be developed. Unless there is significant engagement with other development actors there is a danger that debates become polarised and opposing positions entrenched. It is important to work towards more sustainable and inclusive outcomes, based on the development of trust and a willingness to countenance a variety of (sometimes opposing) views with a mutual commitment to finding solutions. Facilitating processes for cross-disciplinary engagement is perhaps one of the most urgent tasks facing the development community at the moment.

This small effort to open new ways of working is part of a larger effort by the Bank to build networks and associations and reach out in new ways to civil society, and for INTRAC to work with a very different sort of development institution. The contrast between my office in Washington D.C. and INTRAC's office in the old Co-op building in Oxford could not be starker, but at the same time the effort to build common ground around agreed objectives could not be stronger.

David Marsden ■

Acting Research Director, INTRAC

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INTRAC Open Training

INTRAC has now developed a new strategy for its Open Training, starting with the following non-residential courses in London:

FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT FOR NON-FINANCIAL MANAGERS

5th to 7th June 2002

The aim of this course is to help participants understand and interpret financial information in order to improve decision-making. The course will cover the basics of financial management within an NGO and highlight the key areas to monitor. It will provide practical skills and techniques.

HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT FOR NGOS

25th to 27th June 2002

This workshop aims to provide participants with an increased understanding of organisational effectiveness and the role that good human resource development and management plays in enabling NGOs to achieve their strategic goals in a sustainable way.

For further information about these two and future courses in 2002, please contact Rebecca Blackshaw at INTRAC.

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