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Special 25th Edition

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Editor: Vicky Brehm, Researcher, INTRAC

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viewpoint

NGOs, Communication and Information Flows

Good communication is one of those 'motherhood and apple pie' concepts; everyone agrees it is a good thing, but we rarely achieve it or invest sufficient time in it. This is partly because no one is really sure what it means or looks like. There are a multiplicity of definitions and interpretations of good communication: it is not just about what we say, but also how we say it, our body language and the emphasis we give to different images or symbols. In other words, it is as much the **medium** as the **message**. But more importantly it is what the receiver (the reader, the listener, the watcher, or the audience) understands by what is trying to be expressed or exchanged. Good communication is therefore about the effective exchange of different messages resulting in a degree of shared meaning, shared understanding, and even shared enthusiasm.

The survival and credibility of many NGOs, working as they do at the interface between individuals and communities and across cultures, depends on their ability to communicate effectively. NGOs need to communicate with an extraordinary range of actors ranging from the poor and disadvantaged to the rich and powerful. Effective communication is crucial; it is one of the core capacities that is integral to the way they work. Effective communication systems and skills are a key **organisational asset**, one of those intangible assets that add genuine value and differentiate one organisation from another. This is something that NGOs, who operate in a crowded and increasingly competitive sector, overlook at their peril.

Yet despite this few NGOs have created communication strategies, invested in suitable communication tools or trained

their staff to be effective communicators. Across the sector there is an *ad hoc* approach to developing the way staff and volunteers communicate, whether it be their writing skills, internet and computer competencies, or their ability to facilitate team discussions and run committees in a timely and inclusive manner. Why is it that NGOs, who rely so heavily on their ability to communicate effectively, often do not invest in this most basic of capacities?

This can partly be explained by the cost of resolving many of the operational communication problems faced by many NGOs. These include the cost of the time needed for staff to engage actively in communication processes; the cost of developing appropriate software and introducing suitable computer systems; and the cost of training and translation needed to resolve the cultural and linguistic differences that beset any organisation working across different cultures. Such problems are exacerbated by the sheer quantity of information that increasingly dominates NGO life, whether it be the daily flood of emails, minutes of meetings and discussion groups, or the range of reports, accounts and audits that appear at regular intervals.

However, there are other more **systemic organisational issues** that also explain the failure to develop and implement effective communication strategies. These can include personal animosity, internal fiefdoms or departmental tensions. They may also be due to a lack of commitment by the leadership to promote a culture of open communication or shared learning for fear that access to information may jeopardise their power base. Another more contentious issue arises from the particular value-set shared by many NGO

In this issue: John Hailey assesses organisational barriers to communication in the NGO sector; Stephen Rand of Tearfund draws out the communications opportunities and challenges presented by new technology; Gulmira Jamanova of CASDIN explores information flows within Central Asia; and Vicky Brehm highlights the potential for North-South dialogue based on the perspective of Brazilian NGOs.

staff. This can breed a degree of myopia or intolerance, and limits their ability to engage in contrary or alternative perspectives that run counter to their espoused values. As NGO staff are increasingly expected to work with organisations they feel represent an alien set of values (such as the military, the police, or profit-motivated businesses and consultancies), this is becoming more of a concern. Furthermore there is the impact of the project-based, task driven, **action culture** that is common to many NGOs, a culture that places greater emphasis on doing rather than reflection, recording or sharing.

NGOs face the challenge of developing communication strategies that address not just operational and technical considerations, but also the more deeply-rooted organisational issues that hinder the free-flow of information and ideas. In particular, these include issues related to power, leadership, personal agendas,

departmental fiefdoms, and an NGO culture that commonly **confuses participation with effective communication**. Such strategies need to combine the skills of communication experts with their focus on operational processes with the insights of organisational development specialists into organisational politics and culture. Furthermore, experience also shows that the success of any communication strategy depends on the active involvement and endorsement of the leadership in order to overcome organisational intransigence and inertia.

In celebration of the 25th edition of the **ontrac** newsletter, this edition explores the theme of communications and information flows in the NGO sector, both within and between organisations. It includes a short overview of *ontrac's* role as a tool for information dissemination as part of INTRAC's wider strategy and outlines plans for future development. In a special guest contribution, Stephen Rand of

Tearfund UK draws on his experience of communicating with the public to highlight the challenges of using new technology effectively. In addition, Mia Sorgenfrei introduces INTRAC's new Praxis Programme, one of its aims being to strengthen the capacity for dissemination and learning within the NGO sector. John Beauclerk outlines the challenges and limits of government strategies for public relations in relation to Europe's Roma population. At sectoral level, Gulmira Jamanova of CASDIN examines information flows within the Central Asian context, whilst Vicky Brehm explores the potential for broader dialogue between NGOs North and South, based on research in Brazil. We look forward to taking these themes forward in future editions of *ontrac*.

Written by John Hailey

Director – Praxis Programme, INTRAC.

Email: j.hailey@intrac.org

Celebrating the 25th Edition of *ontrac*

Since the launch of the first edition of *ontrac* in May 1994, INTRAC's newsletter has aimed to provide a space for reflection on issues affecting the international development NGO sector. The newsletter has always sought to provide practitioners with short, accessible analysis of current debates and trends, together with news of INTRAC's programmes, activities and people. The format of the newsletter has evolved over the years, incorporating the popular 'Capacity Building News' since December 1998. More recently, each edition has been based on a particular theme; the lead *viewpoint* article sets out the debate whilst further articles contribute to the theme from a particular sectoral, country or regional focus. Each edition includes a contribution from Central Asia, where INTRAC has carried out substantial work in strengthening Civil Society over many years.

Considerable time and effort has been invested in improving *ontrac* in recent years, both in terms of its quality and format and in increasing its dissemination. Our current mailing list includes over 3,000 subscribers, plus an ever expanding electronic mailing list. The website version of *ontrac* (www.intrac.org) has proven to be particularly popular; each month the newsletter in English receives an average of about 300 hits, plus up to 100 further hits for each of the language versions (French, Portuguese, Russian and Spanish). Back copies of past editions are also available online. A Chinese translation has recently been launched on our website jointly with NPO, and there are plans to launch a pilot Arabic translation later this year.

In celebration of 25 editions, INTRAC would like to thank the NGOs who generously fund the publication and distribution of the newsletter as part of INTRAC's NGO Research Programme: APSO, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Concern Worldwide, Cordaid, DanChurchAid, MS Denmark, Norwegian Church Aid, Novib, Oxfam GB, the International Save the Children Alliance, Save the Children Norway, Save the Children Sweden, Save the Children UK and South Research. Representatives from this group of NGOs meet INTRAC twice a year at an *ontrac* Advisory Committee to agree themes for forthcoming issues and to provide guidance for the newsletter's development.

*We would like to hear your views on **ontrac**, both your comments on articles and suggestions for themes you would like us to address. Please contact the editor, Vicky Brehm, at INTRAC (v.brehm@intrac.org). If you would like to subscribe to this free newsletter by mail (English only) or electronically (English, Chinese, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian or – from 2004 – Arabic) please contact Natasha Thurlow at INTRAC (n.thurlow@intrac.org).*

Communication and Changing Technology: Challenges for NGOs

So much has changed – and is changing – in the way NGOs communicate with the general public. In the 1960s and '70s, Tearfund originally produced filmstrips, complete with an audio tape and a script so the operator knew when to move to the next static image. Now the same communication is done on CD-Rom, and the videos that replaced filmstrips are about to be superseded by DVD. But these changes also serve to remind us that ultimately it is the things that do not change that perhaps matter most. Whatever the technology, there still needs to be an audience, a hook to that **audience**, as well as creativity, clarity and integrity in the **message**.

Tearfund is unusual: we still produce a quarterly magazine for our supporters, which research has shown to be an effective educational and fundraising tool. Its effectiveness reflects the nature of its audience: literate, mainly over-40, medium to high income, regular charitable donors. It is produced to a rigorous policy of high design values; its **visual look** is all-important. We may have worthy, even important, messages, but if they are not made attractive enough to be read, then they are ultimately worthless.

There is real tension here. Good news stories only: does this mean glossing over reality? No digital manipulation of images is the rule, but then so is the ban on exploitative negative images of developing world reality. Are positive images and stories of the developing world a vital antidote to the media focus on disaster and corruption, or simply a feel-good fundraising function that shields supporters from the messy truth?

The **internet** brings new opportunities and challenges. For example, it is much harder to segment the audience. To what extent are visitors to the site potential donors? They may include a journalist looking for information, a politician searching for policy briefings, a student writing a school project, a teacher wanting resources for the classroom: all may be potential donors, but may be deterred if the fundraising message is too strong, or if the navigation is not designed for information extraction. Furthermore, the internet knows no

national boundaries. There are dangerous stereotypes that assume all donors are based in the North and all those interested in development policy and practice are in the South, and even that they are two distinct groups. Many donors are in fact development professionals, and many are simply interested in the depth and detail that goes beyond the glossy magazine article.

A large number of internet users are also interested in responding to information and taking action. Tearfund has just introduced political campaigning action via the website. Visitors can be alerted to an issue, and in less than a minute have a personalised letter to put in the post to their Member of Parliament. This has the modern virtue of being simple, non-time-consuming and potentially very effective, allowing people to experience meaningful political involvement that makes a real difference.

Nonetheless, there are practical challenges to the use of the internet. Its global reach means national security can instantly search for keywords and be alerted to the views and activities of NGOs operating within their borders. An insensitive wording on the website can mean staff being deported. **Security** is at a high premium. This is one reason why extranets can be so useful. For NGOs with an international and global communications network, the ability to have detailed and sensitive information available only to those issued with the password is a potential key to supporting and encouraging best practice across their staff and partner organisations, whilst maintaining corporate vision and understanding.

Digital technology also has a role in the ever-growing demand for knowledge-management. Properly tagged and stored, lessons learnt can be recorded and accessed when required, shared across the organisation and passed on to future employees. In order to be effective this requires not just efficient technology and well-prepared inputs, but also a cultural change in corporate behaviour: the best material is useless if it remains unseen.

These new developments create great pressure on staff time: writing, checking for policy coherence, maintaining topicality and ensuring accuracy against truth and company policy. All this takes resources and expertise which threaten the productivity gains made possible by new technology. It also heightens the significance of the **technology gap**. Digital technology cannot help organisations struggling to function in places where the electricity supply is erratic, telephone calls are expensive and the first language is not European. And it is all too easy to spend capacity-building budgets for partners in the South that actually build their technology **capacity** rather than their **effectiveness**.

These are the same questions raised by the ubiquitous email. How can something so basic make life simpler and yet more complicated and overloaded at one and the same time? The pace of technical change creates greater pressures for changes in working practices and culture to apply the technology effectively. The possibilities for instant and effective international communication have never been greater and never more challenging to ensure communication is a servant and not a slave-driver.

Written by Stephen Rand

Prayer and Campaigns Director,
Tearfund UK

<http://www.tearfund.org>



Welcome to Capacity Building News No. 14. Mia Sorgenfrei introduces INTRAC's new Praxis Programme, which is working simultaneously to build INTRAC's own capacity and to strengthen the capacity of its partners and other NGO support organisations.

PRAXIS: Building Capacity for Capacity Building

Praxis is INTRAC's new Organisational Capacity Building Programme financed by the Dutch Foreign Ministry. It presents an extraordinary opportunity to **build capacity for capacity building** by linking practical experience with research and reflection. A particularly innovative aspect is the combination of internal and external capacity building promoted by the Programme: Praxis will help INTRAC staff to learn from and improve their work within capacity building and organisational development. In addition, the Programme is intended to support INTRAC's partners and other NGO Support Organisations (NGOSOs) to research and reflect on their experience in this area.

The Three Praxis Themes

Under the theme of **Impact Assessment**, Praxis will review current efforts as well as innovative methodology aimed at assessing the impact of capacity building processes in NGOs. This is a relatively unexplored area touching upon vital issues related to the effectiveness and legitimacy of organisational capacity building. The theme of **Transferability** raises questions about the adaptability of capacity building approaches to different organisations and cultures, as well as appropriate ways of transferring models developed for a specific purpose and situation to a different context. Finally, the theme of **Process and Practice** provides an opportunity to study and reflect on how to improve existing practice as well as how to pursue innovation.

Information Sharing and Dissemination

Praxis will have a regular feature in *ontrac*. In addition, the Programme now has its own space on INTRAC's website and this will evolve over the coming months to include commentaries and papers related to the three Praxis themes. Research findings and practical capacity

building experiences will be shared in thematic workshops and conferences. By combining different means of information sharing, we are hoping to provide space for both face-to-face and long distance communication between NGOsOs on organisational capacity building. An essential element of the Praxis dissemination strategy is the Praxis Series which will include books and papers related to the themes described above. The first publication is a practical field guide for individuals and organisations seeking to undertake monitoring and evaluation in areas such as capacity building and advocacy (see 'INTRAC Publications' for details). Praxis will also aim to translate material for dissemination.

Initial Praxis Research: Raising Questions

Praxis is currently conducting research to uncover possible focus areas and raise questions which will guide field work and the collection of relevant practical experiences at a later stage. The first months have seen research on NGOsOs and transferability:

The NGOsO Phenomenon

NGO Support Organisations and similar providers of specialist support in the area of organisational and management development are central to the work of the Praxis Programme. Therefore, it has proved crucial to examine the current NGOsO constellation and typology. The NGOsO 'family' is gradually becoming more diverse: NGO capacity building providers include non-profit organisations and consultancies, research institutes and resource centres, NGO umbrella organisations and networks, as well as foundations, international aid agencies, and private businesses. As an integral part of the research process, Praxis is preparing a new guide to NGOsOs which explores their roles and challenges, and provides contact details of a range of NGOsOs worldwide.

Transferability: A Literature Review

Praxis is currently undertaking a literature review of approaches to and views on transferability. Transferability has been discussed implicitly, but rarely explicitly, in development and international management literature. Essentially, the literature reflects a changing emphasis: from focusing exclusively on cultural differences, to assessing the overall context and situation in which a model is applied. Furthermore, the idea of transferring practice from one culture and context to another is based on an assumption of agreement that good practice is universal, and this is a contested area. Finally, there is increased debate on whether organisations in the developing world today can be perceived as indigenous, or rather, should be considered as hybrids of the various influences from around the world to which they are exposed. This has implications for organisational capacity building which need to be explored further. The preparatory transferability research should pave the way for future field work activities to test current theories.

For further information about the Praxis Programme, contact Mia Sorgenfrei, Programme Assistant, at INTRAC.

Email: m.sorgenfrei@intrac.org



Public Relations or Participation: Addressing Poverty Amongst Europe's Roma

The stakes could scarcely be higher for Europe's six million Roma, the majority of whom are citizens of countries that – starting from 2004 – will be joining the European Union over coming years. Accession has given this marginalised population unusual prominence, as the candidate countries line up for the final hurdle in the accession process. To cross it they must furnish convincing evidence that they are taking appropriate measures for the full and equal integration of their Roma minorities. The Roma and their supporters realise all too well that enthusiasm for their cause will wane once the ink is dry on individual accession treaties. EU member states themselves are hardly shining examples of successful policy and practice.

To make sure that the Roma do not sink to the bottom of the new, expanded Union, first the Council of Europe (in Spain) and then the World Bank (in Hungary) have recently sponsored major policy-setting conferences. These brought together the main stakeholders in the debate: accession country governments, donors, Roma representatives, activists and researchers to discuss the apparent failure of a decade of intensive effort across the continent. Despite massive investments from both public and private sources, the conditions of most Roma in terms of employment, housing and access to health and education services are worse on the eve of accession than they were under the former Communist regimes. Indeed, faced with plummeting living standards, the Roma are now looking back to a golden era of

full employment and acknowledged roles in society, such as the construction industry, building and repairing roads.

The Council of Europe hopes that governments will embark on public relations exercises to soften pervasive discrimination against Roma. This discrimination is most evident in the increasing tendency to isolate their populations in ghettos and resist efforts to reform abysmal services in, for example, education. But turning ingrained racism around is unlikely to be a vote-winner, especially at local levels. Rather than integrate their Roma populations, many states prefer to keep them in a condition of abject dependence. Defended by both donor and recipient, minimal unemployment and other benefits have become a parody of the old system in which 'you pretend to pay us and we pretend to work'.

What then of monitoring and evaluation? The World Bank hopes to strengthen evaluation in order to identify and build on a decade of positive but scattered experiences to inform broader policies and programmes in a new Decade of Inclusion. In doing so it will need to beware of pressing for more 'one size fits all' measures; the particular Roma needs are diverse and context-specific. Another key learning point is the (erroneous) guiding assumption of the 1990s that drafting laws or policies alone means that they will have an effect, or that governments will or can implement national strategies in this contentious field.

For its part, the Council of Europe recognises that Roma participation and empowerment are key ingredients in any adjusted strategy. Initiatives planned, undertaken and evaluated for the Roma need to give way to a new generation of programmes in which the Romas' strategic needs are central and in which Roma themselves are key actors. Such programmes will be recognisable by a number of conditions, including obligatory consultation – at the very least – of those who stand to gain or lose by the intervention; regular monitoring focused on beneficiary perceptions and on indicators designed with them; and evaluation that involves Roma professionals and focuses on impact as well as outputs.

Communication strategies and public relations can do no harm, but ultimately it is the active participation of empowered communities that will reverse Roma exclusion in Europe. This calls for a new generation of programme approaches as well as robust measures for monitoring progress and evaluating what, if anything, changes.

Written by John Beauclerk, INTRAC

Email: j.beauclerk@intrac.org

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Roma Policies in Europe. Conference in Granada, 19th to 20th May 2003.

Roma in an Expanding Europe: Challenges for the Future. World Bank, Open Society, European Commission. Conference in Budapest, June 30th to July 1st 2003.

INTRAC Publications

Available in October:

Changing Expectations: The Concept and Practice of Civil Society in International Development

Edited by Brian Pratt
NGO Management and Policy Series 16,
ISBN 1-897748-70-1

This book is based on INTRAC's 10th Anniversary Conference, December 2001. It draws together theoretical approaches underpinning Civil Society strengthening programmes, the nature of the State and its relations with Civil Society and the role of capacity building in the context of Civil Society strengthening.

The Development of Civil Society in Central Asia: "From My Private House to the President's House"

Edited by Simon Heap
NGO Management and Policy Series 17,
ISBN 1-897748-76-0

This book analyses the emergence of Civil Society in Central Asia over time in order to better understand the dynamics of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It critically examines whether CSOs are a progressive force for change, or a safety net to resist the full force of immiseration in which citizens find themselves.

Growing Civil Society in Central Asia: INTRAC Central Asia Regional Conference, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 13-14 June 2002

INTRAC
Occasional Papers Series No. 39
ISBN 1-89-7748-72-8
No.39a, Russian language edition
ISBN 1-89-7748-73-6

INTRAC and the Institute for Development Co-operation (IDC), facilitated the First INTRAC Regional Conference on Civil Society. Ninety participants attended, representing some of the

leading Civil Society organisations in the region. The conference examined both thematic and geographical issues related to the developing Civil Society within the region.

Sharpening the Development Process: A Practical Guide to Monitoring and Evaluation

Oliver Bakewell with Jeremy Adams and Brian Pratt Praxis Series 1, ISBN 1-897748-78-7
The purpose of this 'Guide' is to provide a detailed introduction to the process of developing monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems which provide a foundation for developing personal and organisational learning. It is designed to enable people who have limited experience in M&E to gain a grasp of the core concepts and to apply them. The Guide aims to facilitate the processes of action and reflection or 'Praxis' within the development community.

For further information visit our website www.intrac.org or email s.windsor-richards@intrac.org

Information Flows in Central Asia: Relevant and Equal?

This article explores the changing information needs of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Central Asia and highlights the challenges of responding to those needs, based on the experience of the Central Asian Sustainable Development Information Network (CASDIN). Within the tide of external information flows into the region, for organisations such as CASDIN the question of **transferability** and **relevance** of external materials to the varied contexts is critical. It is also becoming crucial to ensure that CSOs in Central Asia strengthen their **own voice** in relation to regional and international debates.

The **information needs** of CSOs in Central Asia are developing and diversifying rapidly. Firstly, there is an increasing appetite for information in a fast-growing sector. Secondly, organisations are more open to sharing experience and thus to extending the impact of their work. Some needs are quite specialised, such as those of the environmental or women's NGOs which are key constituencies in the region. In CASDIN's bulletin *Sustainable Development* we try to mix material accordingly, while ensuring regular coverage of core social issues. At the request of the younger NGOs, we have also developed a column in which we highlight forthcoming events and give contact details of grant programmes and seminars. However, we are keen to develop as the sector develops and to publish more **analytical** material on topics such as participation in development and gender, as well as meeting the needs of the wider audience who receive our bulletin, such as the local government officials and universities.

The question of **language** is an important and contentious issue in the newly independent countries of Central Asia. In Southern Kazakhstan, for example, people prefer information in Kazakh. If CASDIN were to respond to this preference we would end up producing two different newsletters, a Kazakh one oriented to the South with its mainly rural population and a Russian edition to serve the urban population and the Northern parts of the country. We have chosen not to take this route, but rather to maintain a regional

approach to information and dissemination using Russian as the *lingua franca*. We try to select materials which will be of interest to the readers of the entire Central Asia region, for example major regional development projects addressing key problems such as water shortage or human rights.

Adapting information to local culture and language is another key issue. For example, the term 'sustainable development' is the title of CASDIN's bulletin, but in 1995 when we launched it this term was very unfamiliar. The term 'Civil Society' is easily understood, whereas complicated new notions such as 'empowerment' need explanation by reference to the experience of local organisations. We need to assess whether such terms or the experience which lies behind them are **applicable** and relevant in this region.

Information from international agencies continues to play an important role in Civil Society, translated into Russian in a variety of local NGO newsletters. More than once the following question has come up: 'Should we simply translate English materials into Russian, or should they be adapted first?' We can only answer this by first defining what our purpose is, for whom the information is meant, and in what format it can be best presented. Abridged texts can be useful for newly established NGOs. However, at a more advanced level reading and re-reading the originals without adaptation gives us the chance to develop our own thinking.

Central Asian NGOs are interested in information from Western and Eastern European countries as this is one access route to the international level. However, it is quite difficult to find relevant information or to pick out the main things given the huge volume of information flows. Unfortunately, the great majority of NGOs have limited or no access to the internet.

An increasingly important question concerns information flows from Central Asia. How can Central Asian CSOs provide feedback to international agencies, and in what way can they

participate in regional and global discussions? CASDIN's newsletter is posted to the USA, Eastern and Western Europe and the former Soviet Union, both to CSOs and the editorial boards of other journals. International NGOs such as INTRAC play an important role in assisting the participation of Central Asian NGOs in global and inter-governmental debates, promoting our interests and carrying our voice to the international public.

Over the last ten years, a huge number of Western organisations have carried out detailed research in the formerly 'closed' societies of Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union. Many of these reports are never properly shared with the people who gave the information. For example, CASDIN contributed interviews and information to a major study of Civil Society in Central Asia but we were never given the chance to comment on the text. Thus, we appreciated INTRAC's approach to researching Civil Society in Central Asia where the draft research outcomes were presented to NGO fora for discussion and comment. Research outcomes can be an invaluable support to capacity building. Providing accessible research results provides a big contribution to capacity building and to the sharing of analysis and knowledge.

By Gulmira Jamanova, Executive Director of CASDIN

(Central Asian Sustainable Development Information Network)

Written from an interview recorded by Natasha Laptieva (INTRAC Programme Assistant, Kazakhstan).

CASDIN is one of the original partners of INTRAC in Central Asia. CASDIN's bi-monthly newsletter 'Sustainable Development' is published in Russian and is accessible in electronic format and on the internet (www.casdin.freenet.kz). For further information, contact Gulmira Jamanova, (casdin@nursat.kz).

The Potential for Dialogue: Brazilian NGO Perspectives on North-South Partnerships

At a recent workshop in Brazil, Brazilian NGOs expressed the view that the potential for dialogue between NGOs North and South remains one of the great untapped resources within international development. A common theme emerging from the Brazilian NGO staff who took part in the workshop was that exchanging experience and in-depth dialogue with Northern NGO funders remains a missing dimension of their so-called partnerships. Even where they have good and long-term relationships with Northern NGOs, **communication** processes continue to centre on project and programme **funding** rather than on more substantial **policy dialogue**.

Given the dynamic nature and vibrancy of Brazilian Civil Society, Brazilian NGO staff feel that they have a considerable level of experience to contribute to development debates. However, their voices are not really listened to. Northern NGOs often come with an idea of what they can contribute; they do not take on board that the Brazilian NGOs have a lot of experience to offer which is relevant to addressing social development in the North itself. For example, professionals who had been invited for 'exchange' visits to Europe felt that their own experience was undervalued. With their focus on funding projects in the South, Northern NGOs can have a blind spot in terms of

knowing how to make use of their partners' experience in their home contexts and in the other countries in which they work.

The tendency for South-North information flows to get lost within the confines of donor-funding and Northern agendas has already been well documented (see for example Mawdsley *et al.* 2002). The Brazilian NGO sector has in many ways outgrown the donor-recipient model in which its relationships with Northern NGOs have been built. Many of Brazil's largest development NGOs were founded during the highly restrictive time of the military dictatorship, with strong solidarity support from European NGOs in particular. Whilst the NGOs were heavily dependent on European NGO funding in the early years, as the Brazilian economy and political context have opened up they have been well placed to diversify their funding base and to include local sources of income. Although there are clearly variations, this has effectively decreased their financial dependence on Northern NGOs.

However, relationships with their Northern counterparts have often not kept up with the growing autonomy of the NGO sector. Brazilian NGO staff see the genuine possibility for greater **equality** in these partnerships now, but this potential has yet

to be realised. Furthermore, just as the NGO sector is 'coming of age' many Northern donors are phasing out of Brazil in order to prioritise poorer regions. Some of the workshop participants felt this reflected a contradictory undermining of partnerships; just as there is more scope for greater equality in partnerships Northern NGOs are pulling out, suggesting they actually prefer 'dependent', funding-based partnerships.

There are signs of change, however, in relation to '**multi-lateral**' partnerships. The Brazilian NGOs have seen spaces for dialogue opening up at international fora, for example within the United Nations system. Similarly, there are now greater opportunities for policy dialogue in various thematic networks emerging at national and international levels, on subjects such as international debt and environmental issues. These present new opportunities for Northern and Southern development actors to work alongside one another.

Written by Vicky Brehm, INTRAC

Email: v.brehm@intrac.org

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letters to the editor

Dear **ontrac**,

Thank you for the article on 'NGO Development in Tajikistan' (**ontrac** 24 *NGOs as Part of Civil Society in Central Asia*, May 2003). I like your remarks on 'the cynicism that often surrounds relationships between NGOs and such donors seems to be lacking in Tajikistan'. Compared with other Central Asian Republics, Tajikistan has unique possibilities for developing different approaches. The important factors are our historical and cultural differences on the one hand – being surrounded by people who speak different languages – and on

the other hand having the same historical unity with the peoples of our regions.

Nargis Nurullokhoja
Programme Officer,
Oxfam GB in Tajikistan

Dear **ontrac**,

I found the latest issue of **ontrac** (No. 24 *NGOs as Part of Civil Society in Central Asia*, May 2003) engaging, informative and interesting. Reading it leaves a realistic, feel-good, positive outlook about the daunting task of building Civil Society under difficult odds, to put it mildly. The

contents are well represented in their geographical and thematic treatment and provide a forum for field staff to be known and heard.

Dr. Najam Abbas
Central Asian Studies Unit, The Institute
of Ismaili Studies, London

ontrac readers are welcome to contribute comments on the themes debated in **ontrac**. INTRAC reserves the right to edit letters. Contributions can be sent to:
The Editor, **ontrac**, INTRAC, P.O.Box 563,
Oxford OX2 6RZ, UK
Email: v.brehm@intrac.org

INTRAC People

INTRAC's new Praxis Programme is now fully staffed. John Hailey is leading the team and Mia Sorgenfrei has been appointed as Programme Assistant. The third member of the team, Charlotte Hursey, joined INTRAC in June as Senior Researcher.

A number of INTRAC staff are undertaking new challenges. Simon Heap, Senior Researcher with INTRAC since 1997, left in July. Simon has contributed very valuable work to INTRAC over the last six years and we wish him all the best in his new post at Plan International.

After two years as Conference Organiser, Ceri Angood has been accepted to spend a year in Malawi with VSO, working for the Umoyo Network. Laura Jarvie also left her post as Information Officer at the end of August to study for a Masters in Social Anthropology of Development at SOAS in London. We wish them both the very best.

INTRAC volunteer Tabitha Ross has left to pursue work in Sri Lanka, and we would like to welcome Erika Tomlins and Tom Ashton as our newest volunteers. Finally, congratulations to Emma Harris-Curtis on her marriage in July.

In Central Asia we have two new members of staff. Baktygul Sandybaeva joined the team as accountant in April and is based in Bishkek. Anvar Umurzakova is the new Programme Assistant in Tashkent. Anvar has replaced Guljahon Malvani who left the Programme during the summer after eighteen months, initially assisting with ETSP and then as Programme Assistant. We wish Gulya all the best in her future career.

Written by Natasha Thurlow • Email: n.thurlow@intrac.org

INTRAC Training

1. Update: New Dates, New Courses!

We are still taking bookings for the two courses running in September 2003:

- Effective Management for Development (15th to 19th September)
- Capacity Building: An Organisational Approach (22nd to 26th September)

We are pleased to announce two additional courses:

- Civil Society Strengthening (24th to 28th November 2003)
- Managing Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (2nd to 6th February 2004)

Please note that the Human Resource Management for NGOs course was postponed and will now run 10th to 12th November 2003.

2. Courses from October 2003 to January 2004

Strategic Thinking (6th to 8th October 2003)

NGOs are constantly having to make difficult choices with limited resources, requiring strategic thinking and action. Strategic thinking is a dynamic process, which should be responsive to changing circumstances.

Advocacy and Policy Influencing (13th to 17th October 2003)

This course aims to give participants a thorough understanding of the policy formulation process and how they can influence it. Participants will be exposed to skills required to formulate, implement and evaluate effective advocacy strategies.

Building Relationships for Change (5th to 7th November 2003)

Relationships between NGOs based in different parts of the world have become a key part of international development processes. This course examines the nature and quality of relationships and how they impact development.

Human Resource Management for NGOs (10th to 12th November 2003)

This course 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.

Civil Society Strengthening (24th to 28th November 2003)

The aim of this course is to explore the practice and theory behind programmes designed to strengthen Civil Society. It looks at how different approaches and theories of Civil Society can determine the nature of programmes and their outcomes.

Impact Assessment: How do we Know we are Making a Difference? (26th to 28th January 2004)

As the profile of NGOs has increased, so too has the need for them to assess the long-term impact of their work. This course will explore the current state of the debate about impact assessment and review current practice and methodologies.

For further information please contact Rebecca Blackshaw at r.blackshaw@intrac.org, or visit our website www.intrac.org.