



viewpoint

What next for INGO structures?

Do INGOs compete more than we collaborate? Are our structures moving towards greater international cohesion, or fragmentation into autonomous local parts, or both at the same time? Should we be looking to expand and consolidate our global outreach, or shrink back in recognition that the structure of the large INGO has outlived its historical function? Do INGOs still have a social basis in civil society for what they do, or are they merely becoming conduits of funding? How does who we are impact how we structure our work?

These are a few of the searching questions that came out of productive debates at the INTRAC workshop – ‘Future Directions in International NGO structures: Decentralised Management, Alliances and the Recession’ – held in November 2009, with over 50 senior colleagues from INGOs attending, presenting and discussing.

We set out to revisit debates about the optimum structures for INGOs; debates

that have taken on a renewed significance in what seems like a period of upheaval in the sector. We could see how the debates had changed in the past 10 years since INTRAC reviewed the then concern to ‘decentralise’ INGO management to developing countries through field offices. Some of the participants had gone a long way towards trying to move away from the classic model of a northern-based donor channelling funding through its field offices. Others had doubts whether we should have been encouraging INGOs to ‘pretend to be local’ rather than supporting local civil society groups through a more direct and possibly honest funding relationship. Many have been forming alliances and networks, such as the large scale INGO ‘families’ of Oxfam International or Save the Children Alliance.

The structural and management debates will continue to run as there seemed to be no single correct answer to the questions we discussed. However, our

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In this issue:

We look at future directions in the structures of international NGOs, building on debates at a recent INTRAC workshop on this topic. Looking beyond questions of simply INGO structures we initiate a questioning of INGO roles, their position in developing countries, and their interrelationship with civil societies in both developing and developed countries.

Following an overview of the issues and trends by Brian Pratt, John Hailey puts forward an argument that there are simultaneous trends of cohesion and fragmentation in the sector. He outlines some key lessons from organisational and management research for those dealing with restructuring, whilst noting that change is the norm for organisations, and urging INGOs to embrace change and look for new opportunities and roles.

The following two articles present some specific experiences of restructuring, and the lessons learnt from them. Beverley Jones discusses implementing joint office working between three Catholic INGOs in Ethiopia – addressing the fact that working in conjunction with other development actors brings up tricky issues around identity. Sue Cavanna looks at the experience of a smaller INGO de-merging and helping to set up locally based NGOs whilst maintaining the integrity of the programme.

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Volunteers at an education-for-all event near Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India



debates took us beyond questions of simply INGO structures to a questioning of INGO roles, their position in developing countries, and their interrelationship with civil societies in both developing and developed countries. There was a recognition that there was a need to revert to clearer overall goals for our institutions. Are we there to provide state (tax based) funded services on contract, or to support strengthening local civil society in the widest sense? Is there a value in a larger scale organisation because it gives weight to campaigning and advocacy, or should we be more critical of the present INGO stress on the idea of convergence and growth for efficiency, and remember the strength in the diversity of local organisations and their constituencies? What happens as INGOs leave middle income countries, often doing so without clear visions of both their exit strategies or considering how best to leave behind a healthy civil society?

Our debates took us beyond questions of simply INGO structures to a questioning of INGO roles, their position in developing countries, and their interrelationship with civil societies in both developing and developed countries.

Cutting across our discussions was the issue of recession. Falling incomes, due to changes in donor policies as well as recession, has led to some questioning of structures and management cultures born out of years of growth. A key issue was around the best use of 'free' or unrestricted funds: subsidise external service contracts, stay in countries no longer on donor lists, dedicate space for international advocacy, or fund those who find it harder to gain external support? These are decisions which cannot be ignored. The recession has accelerated thinking on issues such as whether unaided civil society is becoming more important, and what the transition strategies from INGOs to local civil society should be.

We now know that restructuring and decentralisation are not as cheap as had been mythically presented in the past, and we have created structures with heavy

overheads which will now become more obvious as growth falters. Twenty years ago the sector saw itself as flexible, responsive and innovative. Now it is much slower, less flexible and talk is more about structures that are unchangeable in themselves rather than innovative ideas. We need to consider our restructuring options in the light of an honest assessment of whether our organisations are fit for their purpose to reduce poverty and inequality whilst supporting a local vibrant civil society based on citizens' rights and interests.

The articles in this ONTRAC emerged from some of the debates at the workshop. The first is based on the background paper commissioned by INTRAC from John Hailey, one of INTRAC's founding Associates, who argues that there are simultaneous trends of cohesion and fragmentation in the sector. He outlines some key lessons from organisational and management research for those dealing with restructuring, whilst noting that change is the norm for organisations, and urging INGOs to embrace change and look for new opportunities and roles.

The next two articles look at some specific experiences of restructuring, and the lessons learnt from them. Beverley Jones discusses implementing joint office working between three Catholic INGOs in Ethiopia. She particularly addresses the fact that working in conjunction with other development actors brings up tricky issues around identity. Sue Cavanna looks at the experience of a smaller INGO demerging and helping to set up locally based NGOs whilst maintaining the integrity of the programme.

We are sure that some of these debates will continue to develop, as will the experiences of those agencies who shared with us their experiments to meet some of the challenges listed here. We will be interested to hear from readers of their experiences and to monitor some of these trends for the future.

Brian Pratt
Executive Director, INTRAC
bpratt@intrac.org

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INGOs of the future: cohesion and fragmentation

Nothing is static, and constant evolution and change is a fact. We often forget this in our sector. Many of our organisational models have developed over the last 10-15 years of rapid expansion and growth. Now we are seeing a great deal of restructuring, and accompanying talk and anxiety with it. What are the drivers behind international NGO (INGO) restructuring, what are the patterns in INGO restructuring, and what are some key things to bear in mind as we look towards the future?

Drivers for changes in INGO structures

There is an eclectic array of organisational models given the size of the INGO sector. There are unitary models, federations and confederations, and hybrids of these such as loose alliances or joint office working. What has been shaping the existence of these different ways of working for INGOs? There various different drivers for change.

Contextual factors have included growing demand, changes in the aid architecture, and now recession. I would argue that recession has acted as an accelerator to pre-existing areas of change, rather than introducing wholly new dynamics.

Strategic drivers include the shift to an emphasis on local ownership, and an accompanying change from INGO roles. The sector should think honestly about the consequences of moving from an operational role in development, towards becoming conduits of others' funding. Are development agencies now merely development assistance agencies? Or are there new roles for us?

Institutional and managerial drivers, aside from leveraging economies of scale, include the move towards the emphasis on building common cultures, values and standards within INGOs and their alliances. The power of **technology**, particularly ICT and web-based technologies, should also not be underestimated as a driver for change. Finally there is also an undercurrent of

criticism and **concern** as to the impact effectiveness and accountability of development aid that has provoked a revisiting of the roles of INGOs.

Patterns in INGO restructuring

There is a striking conundrum or paradox which is evident when looking at the various ways in which INGOs have changed their structures; the simultaneous move towards both convergence and fragmentation. These two trends co-exist rather than conflict.

To explain this idea further, we can see increasing convergence that is evident in the move towards common cultures, systems, processes, and shared in-country programming by many INGOs. At the same time a move to fragmentation is exemplified in the fact that many INGOs are made up of a variety of autonomous entities. This may have occurred through establishing national offices, working with local partners, or through 'demerging' and giving national offices sovereignty.

One key lesson for INGOs is the need to move beyond an obsession with 'hard' structures, organisational planning and control, and move towards a focus on process, culture and acknowledging permeability in the way organisations interface.

These two trends seem to work concurrently. On the one hand there is a strong logic for convergence around common values and shared learning. Equally, there is also a strong logic for fragmentation, in terms of building the capacity and allowing autonomy to southern organisations.

The two are linked in that once there is a 'safety net' of cohesion in strategies and processes in INGOs, this allows for fragmentation. From a managerial point of view, common values and shared systems give greater mechanisms for quality control, the 'safety net', that may allow the various limbs of an organisation some independence whilst avoiding the potential risks of this.

Learning from organisational and management research

As we consider these trends in our own organisations, and plan our organisational restructuring, we need to take on board the learning from mainstream organisational and management research. One key lesson for INGOs to take on board is the need to move beyond an obsession with 'hard' structures, organisational planning and control, and to move towards a focus on process, culture and acknowledging permeability in the way organisations interface.

INGOs can also learn from the debates around how other types of international organisations are structured. These debates include insight into: the importance of being responsive and adaptive, the role and power of subsidiaries, and the fact that over-complex structures can be detrimental to cohesion and alienate staff. There is also evidence that overemphasis on strategy may be counterproductive. The research also explores the role for expatriates in INGOs, how cross-cultural factors impact management, and a heightened concern for ethics and integrity post credit crunch.

Looking towards the future

What might the future hold? Whilst attempting to predict is always a tricky business, I would argue that we may see more hybrid models such as joint office working and franchising agreements. There should also be a continuing shift of power to the South.

One important critique is that the debates on restructuring are dominated by a Northern perspective, and we must continue to seek a Southern perspective in this area as much as others. INGOs may need to think differently about how they work through individuals and communities. One new possibility is a growth in INGOs as facilitators for community to community and individual to individual work, playing an accrediting role as a 'broker' or hub for these relationships, for example as in Tearfund's 'Connected Churches' initiative.

It is also likely that INGOs will increasingly work in networks, alliances

and consortia with a range of partners, including the private sector. There are projections that there will also be a number of mergers across the sector. Given the increasingly important role of social entrepreneurs, 'philanthrocapitalists', and technologies that facilitate resource transfer, INGOs need to see these as opportunities. INGOs should embrace new roles, such as accrediting twinning arrangements, and look for common ground when considering the private sector. INGOs should also be seeking to share learning with other non-profit sectors and between North and South.

One thing that we can be sure of is that the sector is evolving, and INGOs, like any other organisations, do change. INGO models are not only responding to the present context but also based on messy organisational histories. Change is the norm, and it has been long argued that organisations go through different periods in their life cycles. Those working in INGOs need to embrace change and understand that present structures not set in concrete, but instead are permeable. INGO structures will continue to evolve, as our organisations must be adaptable to meet the strategic demands of a rapidly changing world.

Dr John Hailey

Cass Business School, City University
London and INTRAC Founding
Associate
john.hailey1@btinternet.com

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The experience of an organisational demerger: some lessons

The current global economic climate has made fundraising and survival hard for all NGOs. The hardest hit have been smaller NGOs, with both local and international NGOs affected alike. Their costs and operations are usually already so stripped down that any further cuts would make it impossible for them to run their programmes. Shortage of funding triggers NGO structures to change. This structural change is frequently called organisational transition. A demerger is one of the possible options.

Over the last 15 years I have myself gone through several international NGO transitions, most of them involving the formation of African local NGOs out of the country programmes of international

NGOs. Here I focus on a more recent and more complex experience, the demerger of an international NGO that involved a triple path to secure the work in Africa. This approach necessitated:

- (i) downsizing the UK operations and costs
- (ii) moving capacity support directly into the African programme component capable of nationalising to an local NGO in the medium-term, and
- (iii) finding a sister international NGO with a programmatic 'fit' that was able and willing to 'adopt' a particular policy influencing programme as its own.



Consulting nomads on national policy – Turkana, Kenya

© 2007 Sue Cavanna

Safeguard the organisation's work on the ground

Above all else, when considering organisational transition it is essential to find the solution that best safeguards the organisation's work on the ground and holds this concern centre-stage. This is not as easy as it sounds. Change is not a comfortable process as it challenges the value systems of all those who are involved. Some of these value systems may be in direct competition with each other. For example trustees may be primarily concerned with liabilities, and field staff with their jobs. Keeping to the fore what is in the best interests of the communities and how best to protect the work in all key deliberations is a responsibility that often falls to the senior programme team or the director – who must be robust in defending this concern at all times. This is a difficult task.

Any transition will be much easier if the organisation itself has foreseen a possible need to radically change the way it operates. The factors that force organisational change are frequently a reduction in funding, or a change in the operating environment such as a war or conflict. A careful organisation will have assessed these and other risks. Any organisation that is 'surprised' by the need of such a decision will not have been assessing its operating liabilities regularly. In the case described here these risks were assessed on a monthly basis over the two years preceding the demerger, and the trustees had previously decided what levels of operating reserves would trigger the decision to change the organisational set-up. Once the decision point was agreed, there were no surprises when a trustee meeting put this plan into action. Careful and regular risk

management contributed greatly to the eventual success of the transition.

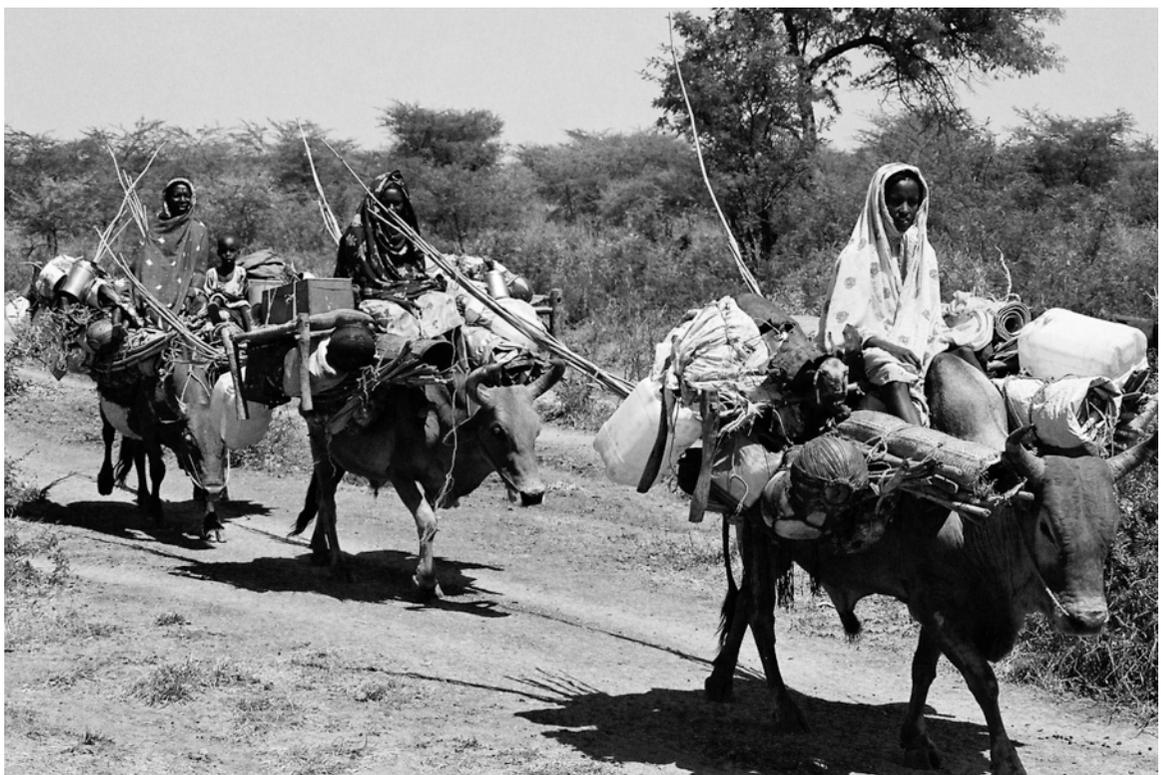
Once the decision was taken to seek a way to safeguard the work while reducing the risk of running an organisation with falling reserves, discussions were begun with various organisations. In this case three months were allowed to achieve this. The triple path of demerger described above was successfully agreed upon with the various parties within this three month period. Once the deals were done the information could be made public and the legalities completed. The overall process from the trustee decision to a fully completed transition took six months. Speed, confidentiality, honesty and thoroughness are of the essence in such a demerger situation – many transitions are derailed by not adhering to all of these together.

Minimal loss of employment is an important factor. In the case described here this was achieved with only one redundancy – that of the director. The employment of all staff in the programmes in Africa was safeguarded, as were the programmes themselves.

People are one of an NGOs' key assets

A decision such as a demerger is likely to be the most important decision that the international NGO will face in its lifetime. Everyone must be properly consulted at the various decision points. One of any NGOs' key assets are the people associated with the work, among them trustees, senior employees both in Africa and at HQ, or collaborating partners such as senior government officials. But full consultation with a broad range of individuals can be at variance with maintaining confidentiality and securing a rapid demerger. From my experience this is perhaps one of the most delicate parts of the demerger negotiations. Whoever is managing the merger process needs to balance speed and confidentiality with assuring that proper consultation has taken place. In my opinion the director has a primary responsibility to make sure that the opinions from the field are represented at board room meetings. Unless it works in the field from a programme perspective, no demerger will be a success.

Sue Cavanna
suecavanna@sahelconsulting.org.uk



Nomads on the move – women on bulls, Kordofan, Sudan

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The Lion and the Dragon

When we change our structures and the way that we work, the process stirs up profound questions about our organisational identity. Who are we? What do we stand for? To whom do we really belong? How does an acknowledgement of our identity facilitate the building of bridges between us and our local partners – whose own identities are often very explicit?

The experience of establishing the first joint country office between three Catholic NGOs in Ethiopia has provoked many reflections about these issues. Even the origins of the idea itself, hatched in 2000 when Ethiopia faced a renewed emergency, are rooted in the specific histories of the countries to which CAFOD (England & Wales), Trócaire (Ireland) and SCIAF (Scotland) belong. Although all three are Catholic, it was the existence of the April 1998 Belfast Agreement¹ which made possible visible collaboration between, in particular, Irish and English agencies.

The most important investment from the outset was to seek blessing from the Ethiopian Catholic Church – not just the scattering of incense, but a genuine consultation leading to a memorandum of understanding formally blessed at the altar of the Nativity Cathedral in Addis Ababa. This is because this initiative was developed at a time when the southern church was feeling most bruised by the trend towards opening overseas offices by northern church aid agencies.

Blessings matter. Achieving a blessing does not have to be rooted in a particular faith, but it does need to be rooted in identity. The sense of ownership which the Ethiopian Catholic Church felt over the joint initiative stood us in good stead, and was renewed periodically by independent reviews which gave the Church and other

partners the chance to say how they felt about the joint office living up to the memorandum of understanding.

Top level vision and governance

The process of restructuring requires top level vision and governance. In this case, it is important for promoting cohesion in the country team which may be employed by one agency, but represents all three.

We didn't get the model right at the beginning. We made the mistake of trying to move incrementally to one structure, attempting to 'wed' different teams in-country with one different representative for each agency. Such a model is so dependent on individual personalities that it was doomed to fail! So instead we moved more quickly to a 'one leader, one programme, one team' model. This proved to be much more successful and much less stressful.

'Building one identity with many' proved both challenging and worthwhile. It was a constant balancing act to uphold the similar values of each agency while also promoting the distinctiveness of each agency's identity when it mattered most – in relation to the British or Irish Government, in relation to Irish missionaries considered key stakeholders

in Trócaire, and in support of the particular priorities in each agency's strategy.

Attention to identity was needed at all levels of the joining up process, from high principles down to the details of letterheads and domain names. We chose to keep the identity of each agency visible rather than subsumed. We found that local actors willingly tied their tongues around all three names.

In Ethiopia, nationalities matter also. The alternative would have been to submerge individual identities into one. But experience elsewhere suggests that this quickly leads to an erosion of commitment and identification among key stakeholders. It can also lead to mistrust and confusion among local actors.

Relationships with partners kept strong

Once the technical aspects are dealt with, the consequences of retaining the three individual identities of the agencies are overwhelmingly positive. Relationships with Ethiopian partners were kept strong as partners knew where each INGO was coming from and what values formed their work, rather than only coming into contact with one dominating



Children at a small rural school in Bahar Dar, Ethiopia

¹ An agreement made between the British and Irish governments, as part of the Northern Ireland peace process, which created the opportunity to restore a devolved, power-sharing government to Northern Ireland for the first time since 1973.

organisation. It was also important to consider how the different positions of the various INGOs in their own home contexts shaped their strategies in Ethiopia. Retaining the identity of each component agency took this into account and allowed a clearer sense of accountability back to home country constituencies.

Preservation of individual agency identities

The preservation of the agencies' individual Welsh, Scottish, English and Irish identities and cultural traditions provided specific points of connection with local partners. For instance, the initiative which brought together the resurrection of a Welsh traditional quilting with the skills of Ethiopian women has generated an empathy between communities of women in Wales and Ethiopia based on the histories of marginalised women in both places who produced high quality crafts as an alternative to sex work.

Irish supporters shared experiences of conflict and peace-building with Ethiopians affected by the fall-out of the 2005 General Election. More broadly, faith identity provided a base for shared experience and a common ownership of

the work in Ethiopia. This culminated in a co-celebration of priests from the UK and Ireland with Ethiopian Catholic and Orthodox communities at the Ethiopian Millennium in 2007.

Overall, this experience led to the conclusion that joint working can work very well where organisations share a similar vision and a relatively similar approach to development. Perhaps one irony has been that the relative strength of the joint office meant that the governance structure no longer needed to remain so hands-on. In the long term, this, along with other factors, may have weakened individual organisational commitment to joint working. The Ethiopia experiment has not yet been repeated elsewhere.

Convergence with the vision

One lesson which emerged regarding restructuring was that there was high convergence at senior management level with the vision, and also at team implementation level as staff were recruited into joint working and focussed on outward looking activities. However, there remained low convergence at the middle management level where it was hard for posts with specific responsibilities to work collaboratively across organisational divides.

When INGOs join up, an inevitable consequence is that they appear bigger and more dominating. The creation of a 'single front' can certainly strengthen INGOs in the face of competition, but usually leads to a concealment and even loss of component identities.

These are important consequences in contexts like Ethiopia where governments are reasserting their sovereignty in challenging ways – such as the recent legislation to prevent Ethiopian civil society from undertaking advocacy and rights-based work when over 10% of their annual turnover is received from foreign sources. Size, especially too much of it, really does matter.

This experience from Ethiopia speaks to both the trend of federalisation and localisation which we see in the wider context. While often regarded as divergent and even contradictory, we feel the joint working initiative and its attention to matters of identity demonstrates how it can be possible to encourage these trends to converge in more constructive, more equalising relationships between parts of the north and parts of the south.

Beverley Jones
Independent consultant and INTRAC
Associate
jan.bev@gmail.com



People in Lalibela, Ethiopia, dress in white for a celebration of the day that the Virgin Mary returned to Ethiopia

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INTRAC

Oxbridge Court, Osney Mead, Oxford OX2 0ES

T: +44 (0)1865 201851

F: +44 (0)1865 201852

E: info@intrac.org • www.intrac.org

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