

NGOs and the future: taking stock, shaping debates, changing practice

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We are all products of our times. Today's world is marked by rapid and significant changes that affect us all as individuals and as societies, as working, thinking, and living beings who must continue to share our planet and its finite resources. Economic growth, which brought unprecedented levels of well-being and prosperity to many millions of people in the latter part of the twentieth century, has nevertheless left – and continues to leave – many thousands of millions of fellow human beings living in poverty, hunger, fear, and oppression. The faith that such growth would somehow trickle down to the poor and dispossessed and lift them out of their misery has proved tragically unfounded. The hope that ordinary people could, by invoking their right to a share in the full benefits of development, shake off the legacies of inequality and injustice has been a vital source of inspiration to the NGO movement worldwide. Victories have been won, oppressive régimes have been overcome, the universality of human rights is a concept that is gaining ground as never before. Yet, as the gulf between rich and poor widens year by year, it becomes harder to maintain the optimism of earlier times. Development has not delivered its promise. Perhaps it never could have done. But the very pace and scale of the changes before us now make it essential to re-orient our missions as international development NGOs.¹ The turn of the century is as good a moment as any to take stock. The turn of the millennium is an even better one.

This Reader, the tenth title in the series, is in turn based on the tenth-anniversary issue (Volume 10:3&4) of the journal, *Development in Practice*. In collaboration with Oxfam International, a number of development

practitioners and commentators from many different backgrounds were invited to contribute their individual perspectives on core issues concerning the relevance and effectiveness of international development NGOs. In a modest way, this collection is an expression of our belief that NGOs *can* and indeed *must* become learning organisations, and that the best place to start is by standing back from the daily bustle and reflecting on some of the larger questions behind our very *raison d'être* in a changing international context.

In bringing together these contributions, we did not seek to impose our own opinions or simply to reflect the views of our respective institutions. Nor was it our intention to encourage self-absorbed debates on what constitutes a development NGO, or to suggest that the issues facing Northern (international) NGOs are essentially different in kind from those faced by NGOs in the South – and much less to present Northern and Southern NGOs as homogeneous blocs. Our guiding principle was that of inviting open discussion on the following questions: what forms do social and economic injustice take in today's world? What forms will they take in the future? And how relevant are today's development NGOs to the task of tackling the root causes of injustice? To put it another way: if NGOs exist not merely to administer charity, but also to shape the ways in which the international community understands and responds to poverty and injustice, how do they (we) need to change their (our) own ways of working?

On the relevance of NGOs

Opening this *Reader*, **Alison Van Rooy** (North–South Institute, Canada) demonstrates that, as products of the latter half of the twentieth century, most contemporary development NGOs are deeply rooted in the international aid industry, as development has evolved into what she terms as 'an occupational category'. The NGO movement has achieved an enormous amount, and the increasing capacity of Southern NGOs should also be celebrated as a success. But times are changing, and international NGOs (INGOs) in particular should question whether they are still relevant in this new reality. Van Rooy concludes that many of the ways of working that have been institutionalised by INGOs are now obsolete, and that new capacities and organisational forms – North and South – are urgently needed.

The transition from the international relations of the Cold War period to today's processes of increasing globalisation and economic integration

demands different *skills* and different *roles* from NGOs, especially those working in the international arena. An ability to analyse and interpret these changes is essential. Offering two Latin American perspectives, both **Jaime Joseph** (Centro Alternativa, Peru) and **Cândido Grzybowski** (IBASE, Brazil) relate the importance of these faculties to the phenomenon of neo-liberal globalisation; and they point to risks and opportunities for civil-society organisations in general, and for NGOs in particular. Being seduced into a palliative role by wealthy international powers and the institutions that they largely control, basically in order to advance their globalisation agenda, is suggested as a serious risk for NGOs, while the main opportunity lies in the chance to shape the evolving globalisation process so that it makes a contribution to a more equitable global order. **Andy Storey** (Development Studies Centre, Ireland) highlights a specific form of this risk as the international financial institutions adopt the language of NGOs – *participation, empowerment, equity* – to serve as a rhetorical cloak for their own neo-liberal agendas.

Advancing an alternative development paradigm in the interests of the global majority has been the distinctive mission of development NGOs. **Rajesh Tandon** (PRIA, India) asks whether NGOs can offer (or have the necessary skills and are in a position to argue for) a credible alternative to the international rise of the neo-liberal doctrine, which is often equated with globalisation. Historically, NGOs have been stronger on critique and protest than on developing constructive and viable proposals that can genuinely transcend the local level. Critical to their *political* as well as their institutional sustainability is the need for NGOs to anchor themselves firmly in their own societies; for, unless they do so, their legitimacy as the champions of those who are marginalised from the decisions that affect their lives is seriously called into question.

On the mission of NGOs

If globalisation is the process of worldwide movements of goods, money, services, communications, technology, and, to a lesser extent, people, it surely presents profound risks as well as opportunities. The core question when considering the relevance of INGOs therefore concerns their understanding of the impact of all aspects of globalisation on people living in poverty, and their capacity to counter the threats to people's livelihoods and security, and to advance the opportunities to build societies based on equity and justice. Accepting a narrow monetarist

perspective of globalisation – often referred to as ‘globalisation from above’ – will not allow NGOs to pursue their distinctive mission, and it might ultimately alienate them from their roots and purpose. The opportunities must lie in developing a broader understanding of global realities, but one that is critically grounded in what these realities mean for the global majority, and one that is committed to working for a global system which is based on equal rights for all – what some activists refer to as ‘globalisation from below’.

Focusing on the mission of INGOs in the globalisation era, **José Antonio Alonso** (Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain) concentrates on the need for the greater management of international public assets and effective global governance. While economic activity is globalising rapidly, political structures and even the intellectual underpinning of government for the common international good are lagging behind. Transnational corporations (TNCs) have long developed the expertise and power to exploit the advantages of globalisation, and to work for the dismantling of national and international legal barriers to private enterprise. At the national level, democracy does well where there is a balance between the interests of business, government, and civil society. At the global level at which economic, political, and social development takes place today, that balance has yet to develop.

Jaime Joseph argues that it is time to face up to the link between democracy and development, and this is as relevant at the local and national levels as it is in terms of global processes. This makes it imperative for NGOs to bring their grassroots development work into line with their analytical and lobbying capacity. Too often, there is a split between the kind of service-delivery work that NGOs do or support on the ground and the more critical political perspective that once motivated them. Healing the rift between the two could revitalise the NGO sector. **Hugo Slim** (Oxford Brookes University, UK) reminds us of the value of the international human-rights framework for NGOs’ purpose, and implies that a comprehensive defence of all human rights – civil, political, economic, social, and cultural – as underpinning both their development and their humanitarian relief work would serve NGOs better than to continue engaging in mistaken ideological debates about the comparative importance of one set of rights over another.

Haleh Afshar (University of York, UK), discussing the position of Islamist women, makes a plea in this respect for NGOs to work from a better understanding of the different priorities emerging from diverse cultures and realities, and not to act solely within the narrow economic

interpretation of what globalisation means. The changing paradigm calls for new forms of international solidarity, says **Brian Murphy** (Inter-Pares, Canada), and is also giving rise to new forms of local struggle and identity. NGOs have too readily succumbed to the notion that globalisation in its present form is inevitable and irreversible, and so have confined their role to alleviating its most deleterious effects. At the same time, NGOs risk trading their core values for forms of technical professionalism that are disconnected from their ethical mission. To be part of a movement that seeks to transform the world, and to build social justice, NGOs need to rediscover the values of citizen participation and develop genuine respect for diversity.

On the roles and relations of NGOs

The central issue is the relevance of INGOs' methods of interaction with people (the marginalised majority) whose interests they ultimately seek to serve, and with civil-society organisations, government, and business.

Vijay Padaki (a management consultant in India) and **Abikök Riak** (World Vision-Sudan) underline the importance of NGOs as value-driven entities, and their need to act in harmony with their organisational values, and to find ways of working as well as institutional forms which are appropriate to them. **John Hailey** (Oxford Brookes University, UK) stresses that this value base is the principal distinctive characteristic of NGOs, as compared with other institutions in international (aid) relations.

However, in applying these values to their actions, **Mary B Anderson** (Collaborative for Development Action, Inc., USA) argues that INGOs need to acknowledge the inequalities in the aid relationship and relate this to their responsibility to determine their proper roles in any given context, roles that must be based on mutual respect between the various parties involved. The word 'partnership' has today become devalued through uncritical over-use, often to mask paternalistic practices on the part of NGOs. **Sylvia Borren** (Novib, The Netherlands) proposes that in order to carry out an empowerment mission, INGOs must be far clearer about their different roles, their wider impact, and their own operational standards. From the Dominican Republic, **Josefina Stubbs** (formerly Oxfam GB) reviews the overall impact of INGOs on Caribbean women's organisations and on local NGOs' work on gender, and stresses the positive as well as the negative effects of the real influence that development funding has on local civil society.

Ever since the debates of the early 1990s on ‘scaling up’, or the role of what David Korten called ‘fourth generation’ NGOs, advocacy has been viewed as the NGOs’ distinctive role in a changing world, and in changing the world. However, as thinking on the role(s) of civil society is still developing, **Alan Whaites** (World Vision International) and **Dot Keet** (University of the Western Cape, South Africa) emphasise the importance of asking questions about INGOs’ legitimacy and accountability as advocates of pro-poor policy change. INGOs should take up the gauntlet, argue both **Ian Anderson** (Oxfam International, Hong Kong) and **Paul Nelson** (University of Pittsburgh, USA), and go out and demonstrate the effectiveness of their advocacy work in furthering their wider mission. This in turn implies the need to develop more sensitive methods to monitor and evaluate their efforts. With reference to three quite different ‘successful’ public campaigns, **Gerd Leipold** (formerly Greenpeace International, UK) reflects on the growing potential, as well as the real limitations, of NGOs’ capacity to exercise influence through such means.

Business is an increasingly powerful sector in the globalising world. A comparison of direct foreign investment with international aid flows underscores its importance in driving global change. NGOs are starting to take note of this reality and direct their advocacy increasingly to the corporate as well as the government sector. However, the corporate sector – like the global government sector – should not be seen as homogeneous, argues **David Husselbee** (adidas-Salomon AG, Germany), as some corporations are now demonstrating an increasing awareness of social, environmental, and human-rights issues. **Judy Henderson** (Australian Ethical Investment Ltd., Australia) suggests that NGOs need to find ways to interact effectively with business in order to harness its potential to contribute to development, both through advocacy strategies and by collaborating with the private sector as appropriate.

On the effectiveness of NGOs

In the end, it all comes down to an assessment of how effective INGOs are in the context of advancing globalisation, and what they might need to learn how to do (or, indeed, habits that they need to ‘un-learn’) in order to optimise their impact.

Allan Kaplan (CDRA, South Africa) argues that a shift is needed in capacity-building activities from a focus simply on tangible results to an appreciation of what is often intangible; and from a static appraisal to a dynamic, developmental reading of any changes that take place as a result

of NGO action. **Chris Roche** (Oxfam GB, UK) warns of the limitations of the linear cause-and-effect type of analysis that is fostered by a traditional focus on projects, and the associated tendency of INGOs to see their Southern ‘partner’ organisations in exclusive, project-bound terms. He proposes that impact assessment should be seen as part of the very process of change, and so must take into account a far wider range of factors than has conventionally been the case. **Stan Thekaekara** (ACCORD, India) stresses that the contemporary obsession with quick returns on project funding is inappropriate as a way of understanding impact, and that this can be appreciated only over time and from a range of perspectives.

Pulling the threads together

Though focusing on different issues, and approaching them from such a breadth of experience, the contributors to this book do nevertheless coincide in a number of ways. All of them agree that the rapid and far-reaching processes of change that are taking place today leave no room for complacency among development NGOs. Ethical values are absolutely critical in shaping and guiding NGO action, and to mortgage these for short-term gain will condemn NGOs at best to irrelevance, at worst to becoming self-serving dinosaurs. However, values do not in themselves substitute for a high quality of analysis, or for the sensitivity with which NGOs must ‘read’ the world around them from the perspective of those whom they seek to serve. There is a real challenge to INGOs to ensure that they do not confuse ‘being on the side of the poor’ with partial or myopic vision, for this will not in the long term be of any real help in bringing about change. On the other hand, INGOs have a particular duty to avoid projecting their own institutional or sectoral interests as though these necessarily represent the interests of people living in poverty, and to beware of being lured into acting as stooges for powerful international interests, be these financial, governmental, or commercial. It is vital to be vigilant and receptive to new ideas, but without slavishly following the crowd, or throwing treasured beliefs away simply in order to appear modern and forward-looking. Analysis is no good without commitment, but commitment alone is not enough to ensure that NGOs act with both integrity and intelligence in an increasingly complex environment.

Our contributors also insist on the need to balance a belief in the universality of rights with respect for diversity and difference. For INGOs

especially, this means learning how best to dovetail their own values and ways of working with the often quite different perspectives of their ‘partner’ organisations, to say nothing of the ultimate (intended) beneficiaries of any action they take. What is needed is honest dialogue, based on mutual respect, and this cannot be taken for granted, or rushed. Even as the wheels of globalisation seem to be turning ever more rapidly, so NGOs need to (re-)learn the virtues of patience and gentle responsiveness, and not seek to rush people and processes faster than they are ready to go.

Finally, this collection is testimony to the belief – passionately expressed by NGO representatives from Latin America and Asia, academics from Europe and North America, and activists from Africa and Australia alike – that globalisation ‘from above’ is not the only way in which the world can be organised. Equally, it is an affirmation of the knowledge that change is possible, but that it will be brought about only by inspiring a global movement to work for the common good of humanity – that is, *globalisation for all*. Will the twenty-first century see NGOs still living complacently in the past, or will they genuinely rise to the challenges ahead?.

Note

1 As staff members of international NGOs, we have focused our discussion on their roles and responsibilities, and their enormous potential to encourage alliances across national and cultural borders. Many of the points made here would apply equally to NGOs working to change their own societies for the benefit of those who suffer material hardship or are excluded from full participation in other, less tangible, ways.