Dóchas Strategy on Maximising NGO impact.

What Dóchas Does to Implement Priority 3 in the Strategic Plan

October 2006

1. Dóchas and NGO Impact

Maximising NGO impact is at the heart of Dóchas' work

The Dóchas Strategic Plan 2005-2008 marks a significant shift in emphasis in Dóchas' work. The Plan recognises the inherent linkages between greater NGO quality, greater public commitment and better government policies. In the Strategic Plan member organisations commit themselves to a coherent agenda aimed at optimising Ireland's contribution to the international community's efforts to eradicate global poverty.

Policies To End Poverty	Strengthening Ireland's Commitment to Development	Maximising the Impact of Development NGOs	Building a More Effective, Independent Network
Recognising that an enabling policy framework is essential for the successful efforts of the network and of individual member organisations to assist poor people, Dóchas believes that there is value in working for consistent policy formulation at national and EU levels.	The Irish public are well disposed to development, and given that Ireland's ODA is planned to increase to 0.7% ODA/GNP, it is essential that the public understands and supports government and NGO policies. The focus will be on engaging with change agents such as media, politicians and other opinion leaders.	Dóchas members exist to contribute to the elimination of poverty. Dóchas' essential belief is that sharing learning and best practice and adopting a reflective and learning based approach enables organisations efforts to be more effective	This policy area under pins the achievement of the first three. Dóchas sees a more effective network (greater than the sum of its parts) as essential in terms of facilitating learning and setting standards.

In promoting greater impact, Dóchas must focus on supporting NGO learning.

Key to achieving our objectives will be Dóchas' role in promoting reflection and adaptation in its member organisations. Development NGOs that seek to systematically reflect on their own weaknesses and the changes in their environment will be effective organisations. Organisations that set explicit standards and strive to continuously improve their performance in all areas of work will have impact, and will be in a strong position to advocate for policy change in government.

In the words of the Dóchas Strategic Plan, our objective is *"to foster a vibrant and effective Development NGO sector in Ireland, characterised by a commitment to learn, the capacity to meet quality standards and high quality relationships with all relevant stakeholders."*

"In furtherance of this objective, Dóchas will:
- *Act as a focal point for information sharing and dialogue on policy and standards of practice in the Irish development NGO sector.*
- *Ensure continued emphasis on improving NGO work, by stimulating debate and active cooperation among members on best practice on policy, advocacy, and campaigning issues and activities;*
- *Foster an enabling environment, in which members can further develop their organisational and institutional capacities."*

In short: by working together through Dóchas, member organisations can improve their own work, and strengthen government policy, if they are willing and able to learn from their experiences.

As an NGO network, Dóchas is very well placed to promote sector-wide learning.

The value of networks has long been recognised within the Development Cooperation field. NGOs value networks for a great variety of reasons, ranging from the utilitarian (access to information on funding; status; services provided), through the ideological (solidarity with smaller NGOs; formulation of quality standards; unified voice for civil society organisations) to the pragmatic (visibility of issues; sharing experiences; common lobby platform; risk mitigation).

Institutional donors have likewise recognised the important role NGO networks can play. Donors now often perceive networks as vehicles to achieve greater efficiency and as a way to cut back on cumbersome correspondence with a large number of individual organisations. Donors also realise that networks provide leadership by increasing transparency and equity.

Thirdly, scholars of organisational learning emphasise the importance of networks in learning processes. NGO networks such as Dóchas can provide the motive, the means and the opportunity for member organisations to learn and grow. Dóchas can do so, by providing space for members to meet; by organising seminars and trainings; by encouraging the documentation of standards and guidelines; by providing supportive leadership; or by stimulating a culture of learning; etc. The key is that learning is an interactive process, which networks are uniquely placed to promote.

Learning is something Dóchas members do for themselves.
- Dóchas cannot deliver it for them.

Despite the explicit expectations of both Dóchas members and Irish Aid, Dóchas is not ever going to be able to impose learning on its membership. It is up to each individual member organisation - and the staff within it - to want to learn and grow. Without members' commitment to change and learning, no amount of Dóchas activity is going to contribute to meaningful capacity building.

Learning is about change. And Dóchas *does* have a role in helping members prepare for and manage that change.

"NGOs are facing increased demands, more complex problems and they now have to operate in more dynamic and complicated environments requiring effective relationships with a myriad of institutions."[1]

In considering their capacity to cope with these changes and challenges, NGOs should not focus solely on their technical and managerial capacities. Rather, they should prioritise their capacity to analyse and adapt; to engage with the bigger picture, not just the details.
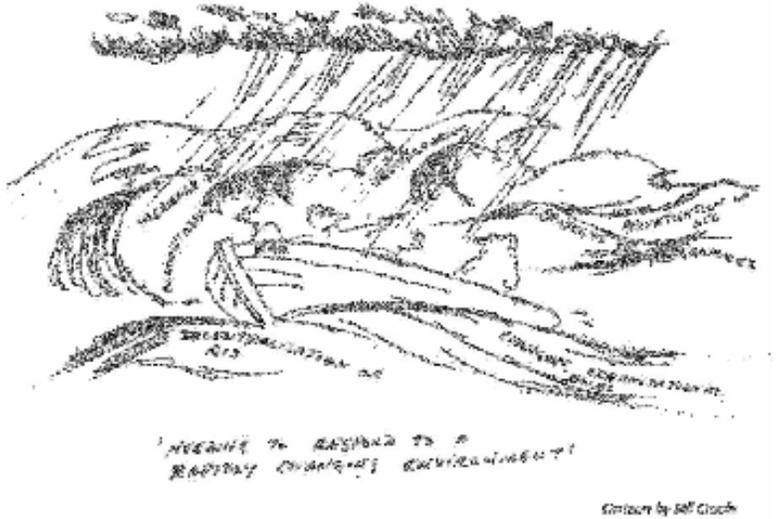
"As organisations struggle to become more effective, to grow and to establish a niche for themselves, they must let go of old habits, perceptions, assumptions, and ways of doing things." [2]

2. Maximising Impact: Doing, Learning and Involving Others

NGOs wishing to maximise their impact, need to know what impact they are seeking.

Impact is more than measuring results. When reflecting on impact, the focus should be on the outcomes of an organisation's actions, not simply on the evaluation of their programmes and projects.

It is crucial that NGOs go back to their original vision and mandate, and consider what – fundamentally – it is they want to do, and contrast this with what they are achieving.

NGO impact is measured in terms of change. NGOs therefore need to define their mission in terms that relate to the change they are seeking to achieve.

In order to assess their impact, it is necessary for NGOs to stipulate their theory of change. NGOs should look beyond their immediate activities, use of resources and programme outcomes, and formulate their own theory of change: what (social) change is the organisation looking to achieve, and what are the key ingredients needed to make that change come to pass?

Such a focus on the 'bigger picture' will help put the organisation's programmes, projects and methodologies in perspective, and allow staff to interpret the bewildering complexity of their work environment.

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[1] Romo Rodríguez, Gabriela. "Information and Communication Technologies and Non-Governmental Organisations: Lessons Learnt from Networking in Mexico." Dissertation, University of London, 2004.
[2] NGO Networks: Building Capacity in a Changing World. Liebler & Ferri, 2004.

Making the organisation's vision of change explicit is a crucial element for it to be able to assess its impact, and to learn and account for itself.

Improving NGO impact relates to ensuring all the organisation's stakeholders – foremost among these being the "beneficiaries" – are satisfied with its work.

For this to happen, the organisation needs to be clear about what its work is, and what stakeholders can reasonably expect of it. Beneficiaries, donors, staff, volunteers, colleagues and the general public need to know what the organisation does, and why it does it.

In other words, the organisation needs to be accountable to its stakeholders.

Accountability is about 'being held responsible' but also about 'taking responsibility'.

In March 2006, Dóchas published a paper on NGO accountability, setting out the major dimensions of accountability and NGO learning. The paper can be summarised by stating that, if NGOs want to become better at what they do, they need to take responsibility for their action (internal dimension) and allow the people affected by their activities to hold them responsible for those actions (external dimension).

Being accountable is thus at the heart of learning and improving. Internal accountability requires an organisation to reflect on its processes and methods, and external accountability means it has to assess whether it is being true to its stated mission, and making an impact.

But accountability is primarily a process – it requires practical mechanisms to make it a reality.

NGOs wishing to improve their accountability need to do three things: report, involve and respond. Report to their stakeholders on what the organisation believes and does/doesn't do; Involve all those affected by the organisation's actions in the decisions that will affect them; Respond to what the organisation learns.
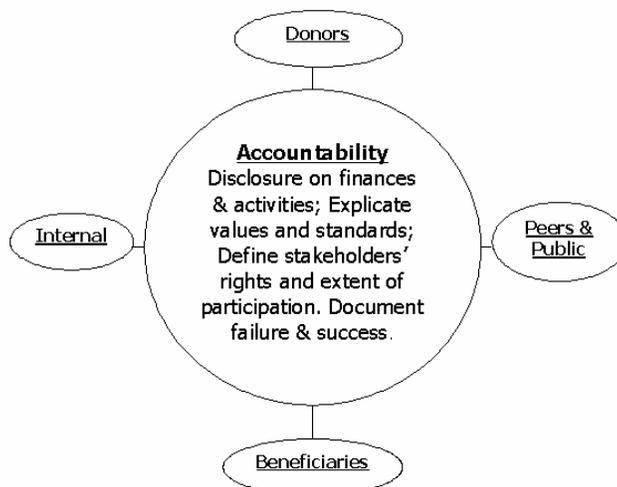
3. Dóchas' Role in Promoting NGO Impact

In practice, this means that Dóchas will support members' learning by setting standards, supporting members and building relationships.

1. **Set Standards**
   Dóchas sees its role as ensuring continued emphasis on improving NGO work, by stimulating debate and active cooperation among members on best practice on policy, advocacy, and campaigning issues and activities;

   Key mechanisms in this regard include:
   - Shared learning and knowledge transfer in the member organisations through the Dóchas **Working Groups and Learning Groups**;
   - Formulating **briefings and policy papers** based on joint analysis by Dóchas members;
   - Promoting and applying **Codes of Good Practice** on key areas of NGO activity;
   - Stimulating debate on the reasons, and mechanisms, for enhancing **NGO accountability**.

2. **Support**
   Dóchas sees its role as providing a focal point for information sharing and dialogue on policy and standards of practice.

   Key mechanisms in this regard include:
   - Provision of quality **information services** to member organisations, and to other stakeholders such as government bodies and the general public;
   - **Analysis of members**' strategies, activities and capacities, with a view to tailoring services to address gaps and weaknesses, or suggesting alternatives;
   - Commissioning **research** on issues of importance to our members and their work;
   - Ensuring quality training is available to members, and that this training is based on members' needs.

3. **Build Relationships**
   Dóchas sees its role as fostering an enabling environment, in which members can further develop their organisational and institutional capacities.

   Key mechanisms in this regard include:
   - **Networking with other civil society actors** in Ireland;
   - **Representing the Development NGO sector** in debates on policy areas of relevance to the Dóchas membership;
   - Actively **promoting quality input** from actors outside the Development NGO sector, with a view to stimulating reflection and scrutiny of our members' work.

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