Scaling Up NGO Impacts

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In 1989 there were some 4,000 development NGOs in OECD member countries, dispersing around US$6.4 billion worth of assistance every year. They work with around ten to twenty thousand 'southern' NGOs which assist up to a hundred million people. Despite the increasing scale of this sector, and the growing reputation that NGOs have won for themselves and for their work over the last ten years, their contribution to development on a global level remains limited. Many small-scale successes have been secured, but the systems and structures which determine the distribution of power and resources within and between societies remain largely unchanged. As a result, the impact of NGOs on the lives of poor people is highly localised, and often transitory. In contrast, governmental development efforts are often large in scale but limited in their impact. Effective development work on a significant scale is a goal which has largely eluded both governments and NGOs.

One of the most important factors underlying this situation is the failure of NGOs to make the right linkages between their work at micro-level, and the wider systems and structures of which they form a small part. It must be recognized that successful, small-scale NGOs may alleviate the poverty of a few, but by themselves will never secure lasting improvements for the world's one billion people.

It is inconceivable that NGOs will achieve their objectives in isolation from national and international political processes and their constituent parts. Different NGOs will play different roles in these processes, and will find their own answers to the questions we are posing, but all will need to interact with wider forces in one way or another. NGO strategies may differ, but the fundamental question we are asking - how to increase impact? - is inescapable.

It is this interaction with wider forces, this opportunity for greater impact, that we have called 'scaling-up'. Scaling-up does not refer simply to the size of NGO programmes (though, as we explore below, this may be one of the strategies adopted to increase impact). There are many strategies that NGOs may adopt, including lobbying and

advocacy (nationally and internationally), creating networks and federations, interacting with and working within the structures of government, training, legal reform, and large-scale NGO operational programmes. All these approaches are linked by a common objective - to extend beneficial impact.

Scaling-up via working with governments

Traditionally, most NGOs have been suspicious of governments, and their positions have varied from avoidance to outright hostility. Governments often share a similarly suspicious view of NGOs (national and international).

Nevertheless, there are sound reasons for NGOs to enter into a positive and creative relationship with the institutions of both state and government. Governments remain largely responsible for providing the health, education, agricultural and other services on which people rely. They control the wider frameworks within which people and their organizations have to operate, as in the case of the agricultural cooperatives, social action groups or health programmes. Thus, NGOs ignore state and government structures at their peril. Most international NGOs tend to restrict themselves to the institutions of government, working within ministries to promote changes in policy and practice. National NGOs, on the other hand, can take a more active role in the political process, the wider institutions of the state and sub-national government.

The direct approach - scaling - up by operational expansion

For many southern and northern NGOs, the obvious strategy for increasing developmental impact is to expand projects and programmes that are believed to be 'successful'. This can take a number of forms:

- Geographical expansion - replicating the project/programme in a neighbouring area, across a district, across nation or in another country.
- Horizontal expansion - adding sectoral activities to existing programmes, for example, adding a housing component to an income-generating credit programme, or a stove component to a forestry programme.
- Vertical expansion - creating 'upstream' or 'downstream' activities to existing programmes, for example, establishing a crop storage project to facilitate the marketing of products from an agricultural programme.

Those who support the direct expansion approach should recognize that difficulties will be encountered. It would require a) the creation of some form of hierarchy that separates those who manage the organization from those who manage field operations; b) increased functional specialization in parts of the organization, and c) increased capacity to raise resources, both material and human. The need to raise significant additional finance almost invariably requires 'southern' (and often 'northern') NGOs to take grants from official aid agencies. This fosters dual accountability and 'double bureaucratization' (Fowler 1991), and leads to NGOs being '...driven by the procedures'. The impact of these changes on organisational culture can be dramatic. There is a shift from task-orientation to role-orientation; control from 'higher up' the hierarchy grows in significance; and professionalism subordinates commitment and 'mission' related values.

As expansion occurs, these changes in culture, structure and accountability accumulate to change the organisation from a voluntary organisation (based upon the pursuit of a developmental mission) trying to shape events, to a public service contractor, oriented towards servicing the needs of donors and national governments.

Scaling-up via lobbying and advocacy

A less direct strategy is for NGOs to increase their impact by lobbying government and other structures from the outside. This is a time-honoured activity for NGOs around the world, particularly for northern NGOs, many of whom focus exclusively on advocacy and have no 'practice base' overseas. But some larger, southern NGOs have also amassed considerable experience in lobbying for change in government policy at national and local levels, and are now increasingly vocal advocates on the international stage.

The rationale for this approach to scaling-up is simple: many of the causes of underdevelopment lie in the political and economic structures of an unequal world - in trade, commodity prices, debt and macro-economic policy; in the distribution of land and other productive assets among different social groups; and in the misguided policies of governments and the institutions (such as the World Bank and IMF) which they control. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to address these issues in terms of the traditional NGO project, however much such operations are expanded.

At the national and international levels, success in NGO lobbying has proved similarly elusive. NGOs find themselves often dominated by large donors or governments. This

leads to a distortion and diminution of their role as catalysts and innovators, as they become swamped with funds, dominated by alien ideologies, or simply pressurized into taking on work normally performed by government departments or foreign donors.

Although NGO lobbying networks do exist (see Figure I), they have yet to make a concerted effort to work together on a common agenda. It is probably fair to say that, while NGOs have succeeded in influencing official, donor agencies on some programme themes (such as the environment), they have failed to bring about more fundamental changes in attitudes and ideology, on which all else depends.

The fundamental requirement for successful influencing is a degree of openness on the part of the organisation that is being lobbied. If this is not present, no amount of information or experience-sharing will induce changes in the system. For the majority of British development charities, however, there is no escaping the linkage between practical experiences and influencing, for it is their practice base which generates the themes and the evidence (and therefore the legitimacy) for their related, but subsidiary, information and education work. However, as the role of northern NGOs changes in response to the growing strength and range of southern development institutions, this linkage will become less directly controllable by the northern agencies themselves.

How will NGOs strengthen cooperation among themselves so that they become a more potent force at a wider level? How will northern and southern NGOs adjust their respective roles in influencing so that each plays to their 'comparative advantage'?

The main emphasis for NGOs is usually held to be the 'process' involved in social mobilization - awareness raising, conscientization, group formation, leadership, training in management skills (see Figure 2) - rather than the 'content' of what programmes and activities local organizations pursue.