

WORKING PAPER 1 | 2010

**CIVIL SOCIETY BUILDING KNOWLEDGE
PROGRAMME**

**THE DYNAMICS OF NGO
COLLABORATION**

A study by David Sogge and Gisela Dütting

Colophon

First published in January 2010 by the Civil Society Building Knowledge Programme
Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries
P.O. Box 85565 | 2508 CG The Hague | The Netherlands
www.hivos.net

This synthesis paper was written on the basis of a study on NGO interaction in the context of social movements. The study was carried out by David Sogge and Gisela Dütting. The study was commissioned by the Humanist Institute for Co-operation with Developing Countries, as part of the Civil Society Building Knowledge Programme. More information about the programme can be found at www.hivos.net.

For more information on this study, please contact the authors David Sogge ([dsogge at antenna.nl](mailto:dsogge@antenna.nl)), Gisela Dütting ([gisela at xs4all.nl](mailto:gisela@xs4all.nl)) or the coordinator of the Hivos Civil Society Building Knowledge Programme, Remko Berkhout ([r.berkhout at hivos.nl](mailto:r.berkhout@hivos.nl))

Design: Tangarine - Design & communicatie advies, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

ISSN 1879-8632

This paper should be cited as:

Berkhout R., Dütting G., Sogge D., The Dynamics of NGO collaboration, Civil Society Building Working Paper Series 1/2010
All working papers are as full text available on the internet and on recycled paper.



This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-commercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 Netherlands License.

Hailed as magic bullet for development two decades ago, NGOs are increasingly criticized for being ineffective agents of change, out of touch with broader social currents in society and operating in a fragmented way. Under pressure to show results, civil society donors are promoting collaboration among NGOs as a response. The assumption: NGO collaboration will lead to more direct programme impact, more effective advocacy, denser civil society eco-systems and stronger social movements. What happens in practice? This study reveals that, with the right conditions in place, collaboration can indeed pay off. Outside support may help but can also harm collective action. Donors need to be realistic, thread lightly and proceed with a long term perspective in mind.

About

How does NGO¹ collaboration work? Gisela Dütting and David Sogge explore this question in a Hivos research project that was carried out in 2008 and 2009.² The study draws on field research covering 55 NGOs in 8 countries across 3 continents, backed up with desk research on NGO annual reports and academic literature, interviews with academics and a number of consultative workshops. Why and how do alliances emerge? Why do they exist, and under what conditions are they effective? How do donors influence these dynamics? This paper provides a synthesis of the findings.

Findings

How collaboration emerges and develops

The sampled NGOs primarily work together because they regard collaboration as a necessary condition for movement building and social change. Organizations feel the need to be part of the ongoing discussions and collective discourse. NGOs working on politically sensitive issues, such as pro-democracy efforts in some parts of Africa and Dalit minority rights in India, specifically mention seeking protection in numbers and alignment with broader civil society agendas in response to threats in their operating contexts.

Findings confirm that donor initiatives, in particular the prospect of funding, can serve as a trigger for collaborative efforts. Yet, the role of donors is not nearly as important as connections based on personal relationships and shared political convictions. These are the principal factors that initially draw NGOs together. When it comes to initiating interaction and collaboration beyond the direct local context, the research confirms that donors sometimes do serve as catalysts, promoting new issues and linkages with groups across sectors.

All NGOs in the sample confirm the strategic importance of collaboration. Nevertheless, few NGOs consistently keep track of their linkages, set specific goals of interaction or make conscious efforts to institutionalize connections beyond the leadership of the organization.

With a few exceptions, more importance is attached to collaboration at the national/local level, although most organizations do work together with actors in the international realm as well. Older NGOs tend to work more in sectoral alliances, whereas younger NGOs figure more prominently in territorial networks. This may reflect a process of specialization as NGOs mature.

Patterns of interaction

Emerging from the interviews is a pattern of NGO interaction that is regular and deliberate, with spikes of joint action. The context determines the rhythm. Interaction intensifies and morphs into collaboration primarily because of threats and opportunities in the external environment. Once interaction starts it tends not to end. Unsuccessful collaborative ventures rarely lead to definitive break ups.

¹ For this research, 'NGO' was used as a generic term referring to all non-state organisations. The term was adapted by local research teams to local preferences.

² Field research was carried out by Daniela Sanchez in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru; Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah in five major cities and several small towns in India; and by Venita Govender in Kenya, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

The push and pull factors differ per region. In Africa, collaboration is predominantly triggered by external factors such as perceived crises, mainly at national or local level. For Latin America and India, the picture is more diffuse. NGOs respond to both immediate developments or threats requiring action, and to opportunities that arise more gradually. This hints at differences in the strategizing capacity of civil society eco-systems on different continents.

Among the sampled organizations, there are differences in capacity, size and social standing. There are also differences in power and expectations between alliance partners. Differences in power and resources matter in interaction, but it is the normative *perception* that NGOs should perform according to expectations of their alliance partners that is most important. This finding contains an important message for donors: funding can distort balances between NGOs, with unexpected effects on interaction patterns.

What makes collaboration tick?

Context is found to be overwhelmingly important in making collaboration tick. Although all organisations note the importance of internal factors, these are predominantly capacities that work or don't work within an ever-changing context. Political momentum drives the collaboration, gives it urgency and enthusiasm. Honesty, goodwill, respect - in short, trust - are mentioned often. With minor variations across regions, a minimum package for success includes an agreed goal and division of work, complimentary approaches, acknowledgement of the contributions of all involved and transparency.

Similar ideological outlooks and a common discourse improve the chances of success. In contrast, ideological differences often lead to unsuccessful collaboration. Sampled organizations also indicate that successful collaboration rests on a balance between collective action and maintainance of one's own programmes and visibility. Where results of joint action cannot be claimed or where organizations become invisible, organizations can decide to stop collaborating. In addition, the political risk of being associated with certain organizations may also be a reason for ending collaborative efforts.

Resources (financial, time, human) matter. Resource mobilization can serve as a trigger, an outcome and a source of tension within alliances. Donors figure less prominently as dealmakers in collaboration but their dealbreaking potential is more frequently mentioned by the sampled organizations. Donor funding can distort the balance of ingredients necessary for successful collaboration. Respondents display a clear awareness that withdrawal of donor funds can lead to the end of collaborative efforts.

Does collaboration pay off?

The findings confirm that collaboration potentially leads to important gains. In general, becoming part of a larger agenda enhances overall objectives by improving the political and social position of NGOs. Interaction also enables NGOs to gain access to a wider range of organizations, constituents, media and other stakeholders with leverage. Findings from Zimbabwe show that the political crisis has served as an impulse for networking and alliance building. This confirms the NGO strategy of seeking strength in numbers in a threatening environment.

Related to this, some vulnerable NGOs in the sample suggest that collaboration provides them with a shield against attack and it enables them to link their specific issues to broader advocacy agendas. Some LGBT groups for example find space in networks pursuing a broader civil and political rights agenda, a strategy that has proven to be succesful for the international women's movement.

Findings suggest that collaboration enhances the capacity of NGOs to incorporate new issues into their own understanding of their work, to articulate the various aspects of their own issues better, or to emphasize specific aspects of their own work. Increased coherence of agendas is also mentioned as an important pay-off. In some cases it also leads to the inclusion of marginalized issues and groups. Respondents state that donors have sometimes played a constructive role in these processes.

However, collaboration also has a cost. It can be a drain on time, money and other resources. Some of the more established NGOs question whether collaboration is always worth the effort. Donors also raise doubts about the costs - and effects - of NGO leaders flying from one workshop to the other.

These concerns might underscore the importance that NGOs in the sample attach to interaction with the aim of influencing each other. Strong coalitions are perceived as dominant in shaping discourses. Interaction does not always lead to drastic shifts in strategies, but it can lead to new angles and perspectives which helps organizations to find common ground. Interaction keeps

discussions going and enables NGOs to hold multiple mental frames. Thereby, collaboration enhances the potential for mobilization and strengthens repertoires for collective action.

Interestingly, respondents seldom claimed direct results of collective actions among its chief benefits. This may be due to attribution problems, but it confirms suggestions from social movement theory that the impact of collective action should be assessed by its effect on the climate of ideas rather than on specific policy changes.

Knowledge gaps

Donors tend to regard NGOs as 'natural interfaces' and sometimes surrogates of social movements. Consequently, it is assumed that to promote NGO collaboration is to strengthen social movements.

On this matter, the jury is still out. Social movements are more than a collection of NGOs. NGO interaction is but one of many dimensions of social movement dynamics. On the one hand, this study suggests that NGO-interaction can promote emancipatory collective action. On the other hand, desk research in the context of this study highlights the depoliticizing effects of donor provoked '*NGO-ization*' of social movements. Recent studies provide a more nuanced view on the relation between NGOs and social movements, whilst highlighting the complexity of interaction patterns. More research is needed, especially from a community/target group perspective.

The notion that the external context is the most important factor for effective collective action should lead NGOs and their supporters to broaden the scope for their efforts beyond direct civil society support. In the long run, effective public sectors might well be the most powerful stimulus for effective NGOs and emancipatory social movements. States that are showing signs of responsiveness or sensitivity to the claims of citizens provide a rationale for collective action. Where this is not the case, the strengthening of preconditions for democratization, such as the strengthening of the rule of law and retaining basic services in the public sector might be a suitable strategy to strengthen civil society in the long run.

Yet, in today's rapidly globalising world the playing field for civil society is becoming increasingly complex. Decision-making authority is migrating away from local and national levels and across the boundaries of the state. This poses great challenges for emancipatory collective action. Successful social movements, such as the international women's movement, understand the interplay between global arenas and domestic politics and operate increasingly in those realms with positive results. The transnational dynamics of social movements in general and NGO interaction in particular are terrains that are not yet well researched.

Policy guidance for civil society donors

Civil society donors favour collaboration among NGOs. In recent years, the focus on lobby and advocacy has emphasized collaboration even more. In addition, efficiency considerations on the part of funders, heavily influenced by the Paris agenda, have also been a driving force. By and large, field research confirms that NGOs attach value to collaboration. But this is not necessarily a signal to donors that collaboration is always and everywhere a main priority for the NGOs they support.

In the past, donors have been instrumental in funding collaborative efforts of NGOs. Financial support may be helpful. Yet, many are the anecdotes of how funding collaborations can upset local balances and skew collaboration among organisations. Related risks include unsustainable trajectories of 'movement building from above'. NGOs are looking for more donor exposure and trust, but this can sometimes undermine collaboration and endanger relations with others. Competition for funds is a reality in alliance building. NGOs are also well aware that donors' decisions to give or withdraw funds to collaborative efforts can have significant positive or negative effects on joint efforts. Many NGOs are in weak bargaining positions and refuse to confront donors about these debilitating effects. It is paramount that donors become aware of these sensitivities, understand underlying interests and proceed with caution.

Various NGOs in the sample also mentioned that they see a role for donors to encourage joint learning on collaboration. Collaboration involves processes that need to be nurtured and this requires facilitation and negotiation skills. Donors can play a constructive role if they are aware of the sensitivities, thread lightly and stimulate reflective practice.

The added value of donor involvement in collective action becomes especially clear at the level of international arenas. Many democratic deficits downstream can be traced upstream. Supra-national power structures are increasingly complex, but well-informed NGO alliances can spot vulnerabilities in these systems and exploit them on behalf of wider social movements.

The stubborn complexity of collaboration in practice suggests that donors should be more realistic in their efforts to promote collaborative action. The findings indicate that changes cannot be engineered in short periods of time. Most value from NGO collaboration arises in the long term linking and learning processes that strengthen the social fabric of the NGO eco-system and its linkages with broader social movements.

Lastly, beyond the donor emphasis on advocacy over the last years, NGOs increasingly see the need for mobilizing and organising collective action. Yet this study suggests that these skills are rarely addressed in capacity building programmes. Civil society donors who are genuinely interested in structural social change should enable NGOs to cultivate the many sophisticated skills to mobilize and organize for emancipatory collective action.

Contact

Humanist Institute for Cooperation
with Developing Countries (Hivos)

Raamweg 16, P.O. Box 85565, NL-2508 CG

The Hague, The Netherlands

T +31-70 376 55 00 | F +31-70 362 46 00

info@hivos.net | www.hivos.net