

INGOs at a crossroads

The road not taken

INGOs are at a crossroads. Caught up in a tide of technocracy, they have become increasingly managerialist – ‘outsider’ experts disconnected from the real struggle. But which road should they take? Can they transform societies, or should they opt for a more realistic role, as catalysts for change?

The crisis is real. For over 60 years, Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international NGOs were clear and confident about their purpose. More than any other player in the sector, they were close enough to the poor to be their trusted spokespersons and help improve their plight. They enjoyed public and political support for their work, partly fed by collective guilt about colonialism and its lingering legacy, and a broad-based notion of solidarity. But now INGOs are in the uncomfortable position of being in a midlife crisis.

Not that INGOs failed to contribute to development. Their focus may have covered a variety of problems over time – HIV/Aids, gender issues, microfinance or farming, to name a few – but they all had one thing in common: they were service-oriented. They served the poor to help them escape poverty.

A small minority of Western NGOs and INGOs, however, had a different take on what development means and needs. They considered themselves watchdogs of the state, whistle-blowers exposing corruption or even promoters of democracy. Some were actively involved in political struggles, against apartheid in South Africa, for example, or dictatorships in Latin America.

Today, however, INGOs that engage with the ‘politics of the oppressed’ are far and few between. Instead, they – and the partner NGOs they chose to work with in the South – have not been able, as Michael Edwards from Demos in New York puts it, ‘to stem the tide of technocracy that is sweeping across the world of international development’.

Professionalization has meant a relentless move towards specialisation and managerialism. This has, it is only fair to add, not necessarily happened of the INGOs’ own volition.

Crossroads

INGOs are at a crossroads as a result of these developments. Edwards even suggests that it may be time for their retirement

in his article on development INGOs that kicked off the ‘Future Calling’ debate on *The Broker* website. So what is happening? First, there is criticism coming from close to home. As Duncan Green, head of research at Oxfam Great Britain, puts it: ‘NGOs feel under political and economic siege ... from government, right-wingers and the media, attacking everything from senior salaries to aid effectiveness.’

Willemijn Verkoren, head of the Centre for International Conflict Analysis and Management at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, calls it the legitimacy question, which among other things entails the ‘growing doubt about the extent to which aid really contributes to development’. She agrees with Edwards that, to make things worse, the Western development model ‘is losing its appeal – not only because of the problems the West itself is facing, but also due to the rise of alternative models like the Chinese’.

The NGO sector has not risen above the criticism by parrying with clear or solid responses – rather, it has mainly taken on a defensive role. However, the continued value of INGOs in the 21st century needs to be more forcefully argued – not only in response to the often cynical criticism at home, but also because the world in which they operate is changing, and changing fast.

Change

Different developments of the past decade illustrate the fundamental changes that are taking place across the world. Contributors to the ‘Future Calling’ blog emphasize that these changes are also impacting foreign aid – including the role of INGOs – which is becoming a whole new ball game.

First, the emergence of a multi-polar world is heralding the end of Western dominance – not only its dominance of the global economy but also its political influence and the values underpinning it. The new powers (China, India, Turkey, South Africa, South Korea, Indonesia and Brazil) have their own ideas of how foreign aid should be structured, often based on strong convictions about non-interference in sovereign affairs.

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The Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, South Korea in late 2011 illustrated that these countries' priorities and methods are not always easily reconciled with those of the traditional aid giants (also see the [Busan blog](#) on *The Broker* website and the country articles on [China](#), [Brazil](#) and [Turkey](#)). In his blogpost, 'INGOs in a changed world order', Peter Konijn, director of Knowing Emerging Powers, argues that a multipolar world will make it more difficult for INGOs to maintain their legitimacy since new powers will consider them to be a 'Western invention' – and not its best one.

Second, the global distribution of poverty has shifted. Two-thirds of the poor today live in middle-income countries (MICs). But for INGOs to continue their work in these countries they need to attract official development assistance funds from Western donors. This may not prove to be easy, and attracting funds from the general public is likely to be even more difficult.

It is a tricky story to market, because in the current cynical climate who is willing to support the poor in an economic powerhouse like China, or a nuclear power like India? These countries, as Konijn writes, 'are seen as major economic competitors and people fear that their jobs will move east. In this context aiding the poor in India is seen as aiding the competitor'.

On the other hand, if NGOs were to withdraw from MICs, this would immediately raise the moral question of why the poor who happen to live there are less deserving of support

than the poor in low-income countries like Malawi or South Sudan. This is the message INGOs need to send in no unclear terms: they are supporting the poor, not their governments. And at the same time they should consider establishing and working together with national offices or branches, as Oxfam International is doing with Oxfam India. There is no doubt that it will be easier for INGOs to keep supporting the poor in MICs than it will be for bilateral aid agencies – so this is the responsibility they have to take.

'Thick' problems

Third, another change affecting the work of INGOs is that they are facing an increasing number of what Edwards calls 'thick' problems. Thick problems are complex and unpredictable because they are interdependent. Examples abound: climate change, increasing scarcity of land, water and resources, stark inequality between countries and within them, food crises, chronic conflict, and, of course, continuing poverty.

In other words, thick problems threaten people's access to global public goods. One vital characteristic of these problems is that no government, no country and certainly no INGO can solve them on its own. The main challenge for the 21st century, therefore, is to bring together different economic, social and political players, locally and globally, to collectively safeguard the world's global goods.

More than anything else, this is a political challenge. Thick problems require global governance (see 'Shedding the



charity cloak' in this issue), which is complicated by the free-rider problem (people using public goods but not paying for them). But new global politics is not the only thing at stake. Business interests, which are inevitably tied to political interests, are too.

The global food crisis, for instance, cannot be solved without tackling food prices. This means addressing the question of who owns and controls production and processing, and challenging the financial market regulations that condone food speculation. At the end of the day, today's complex problems, says Edwards, 'are rooted in political choices about the "good society"' – so why, one may ask, aren't INGOs making it their mission to challenge these choices?

It is no surprise then, given the current global turmoil, that INGOs are suffering an identity crisis. What is their role; who are their partners; and what can they reasonably contribute or achieve? Edwards asks whether it isn't time for INGOs to retire. Or if it is too early for that, then certainly they must rejuvenate themselves – or be replaced. The contributors to *The Broker* debate seem uneasy with all three options. Some think there is still a place for old-style INGOs, while others are suggesting a fourth possibility: radical transformation.

Replenishing lives

What roles can INGOs fulfil in this changing world? There are basically two choices: palliative care or working towards a comprehensive, non-cosmetic makeover. The vast majority of INGOs subscribed to the former in recent decades. And there is no reason to be dismissive of this vocation.

INGOs have done very important work in complementing and supplementing, as Chiku Malunga, a Malawian author and organizational development consultant, terms it in his contribution to the debate, the failing or insufficient basic services and protection delivered by the state in many developing countries. NGOs and INGOs have been on hand to 'replenish depleted lives,' as Shirin Rai, professor of politics and international studies at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom, says, when governments have been unable or unwilling to help carve out a better life for their rural poor and urban dwellers.

This work is still fundamentally important for millions of poor people with acute health or livelihood problems. In fact, Martine Billanou, senior programme officer at Alliance 2015, fears that 'the economic and societal changes coming will have such drastic implications for larger proportions of poor and vulnerable people that it will be essential to maintain the significant "protection" and "support" role that many NGOs provide and this, increasingly, in developed countries as well as in developing ones.'

Even though the palliative role of INGOs serves a clear purpose, critics are increasingly questioning it. These efforts 'become relief work,' writes Malunga, who argues that they are 'not sustainable'. This is in line with Edwards' contention that 'thin' solutions are not irrelevant, but 'they are not going to get us anywhere near a sustainable human future.'

Rai raises an additional important argument that is also supported by Farah Karimi, general director of Oxfam Novib, and Rosalba Icaza, senior lecturer at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), the Netherlands: palliative care will never solve what is really at stake, namely the 'justice deficit' in many of today's local societies and certainly the global one. On the contrary, she writes, the replenishing role is 'self-supporting – the INGOs reproduce themselves through "philanthrocapitalism" just as capitalism [remains] less challenged because of this ameliorative work'.

Paul Currión, an information management consultant for humanitarian operations, calls this 'the worst case scenario' for INGOs. 'They find themselves filling in where government has failed ... or find themselves filling gaps where corporations have proved unable or unwilling to extend their reach, creating pseudo-markets which are largely unsustainable. Where these scenarios come to pass, INGOs will twist themselves into new shapes not in order to challenge the systems that lead to these governance and market failures, but to prop them up instead.'

Transformers

For the critics of 'palliative care' there is only one alternative: work towards structural change, or redistribute the powers that be in order to achieve a more just, fair and equal world. In Rai's terminology this means that INGOs should move from replenishing lives to transforming lives. 'In a world where millions are being forced to take risks to survive in the everyday,' she writes, 'and where risks taken by others are affecting the lives of millions, the mobilization of peoples without addressing how social relations under contemporary global capitalism might be transformed often leads to disappointment and worse.'

An 'increasingly grim' fight is taking place between and within countries for access to vital resources, according to Karimi. It 'is more than ever a political battle – not one in terms of party politics, but one in terms of power relations. It is about changing the division of power, of access to and control of knowledge and resources'.

Joanna Maycock, head of Europe for ActionAid International, is more positive. 'The social, political and economic turmoil in the world,' she says, 'seems to present an opportunity to make fundamental positive changes to the way we organize our societies.' In short, many contributors to the debate agree that 'transformation' is at stake – more importantly, 'fundamental' and 'structural' transformation. But how can this be achieved?

Solutions and methods will not be found along the trodden path. We cannot end poverty or even inequality, says Edwards, by doing more of the same in a more efficient or cost-effective way. Technocracy, quantiphilia (more is better) and managerialism are not going to do the job. Instead, Edwards argues, 'it is time to "retire" the foreign aid frame.'

Foreign aid, he seems to be suggesting, has neglected to focus on 'deep change' and has been far too apolitical in its view of the world and why inequalities persist. The future work of INGOs will be about altering the balance of power in



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supply chains rather than paying farmers a ‘fair’ price for their coffee. This, says Edwards, requires a ‘shift from a focus on the fairer distribution of abundance to the much harder task of managing scarcity and its personal and political implications’.

It must be said, however, that for all the commentators who believe structural change is the future for INGOs, there have been conspicuously few practical suggestions about how to tackle this. One suggestion has been to move closer, and link up with, social movements in order to create a global network of countervailing power (see ‘Shedding the charity cloak’ in this issue). INGOs are probably aware that there are obstacles to overcome before they can become structural game-changers.

Grand stories

Are today’s INGOs equipped for the task of becoming transformers – and if not, why not? Some contributors do not beat around the bush. Ria Brouwers of ISS writes that Edwards ‘feeds the megalomania’ of INGOs by suggesting that they can be ‘transformers of societies, politics and cultures’. Simply look at the past, warns Malunga, and you will soon realize that NGOs, for all the good work they have done, ‘have always been weak at influencing structural or power shifts between the “rulers” and the “ruled”’.

In Malawi in 2011, it was not the INGOs that orchestrated, or even played a visible role in the nationwide

demonstrations against the bad governance and economic mismanagement of the ruling party. The same has been said about the Arab Spring and the new form of social mobilization – the work of ‘neo-citizens’, writes Ahmed Zidan, editor in chief of the Mideast Youth network – that this unprecedented uprising used.

INGOs are not transformers, but they should concentrate on being ‘catalysts for change’, says Maycock. Konijn agrees: ‘Any pretension of INGOs to be a transformative agent capable of changing locally embedded power structures is false. They can play a modest role in supporting local civil society that seeks to transform exploitative structures of power.’

In a changing world, where, as Zidan writes, ‘everyone [is] reluctant about their previous comfort-zone-understanding of the composing factors of social mobility; individual, government, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs),’ this is in itself a big enough challenge for INGOs. So let us be wary of sweeping pronouncements and grand new schemes. ‘Millennium Transformation Goals with a starring role for NGOs?’ ask Josine Stremmelaar and Remko Berkhout of Hivos. Their answer is no.

Outsider experts

Another obstacle to becoming catalysts of fundamental change is that INGOs have become excessively bureaucratic. Jennifer Lentfer, founder of www.how-matters.org, sees ‘smart, driven and committed people’ who spend most of





their days ‘controlling finances and demonstrating results based on donors’ needs’.

INGOs, in other words, are immersed in a culture of managerialism. The worst thing about this, argues Willem Elbers, lecturer in cultural anthropology and development studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, is that this ‘clashes with the principles of INGOs at the level of values and assumptions regarding the nature of reality’.

For one thing, ‘the managerial emphasis on distrust and direct utility as the starting point of inter-organizational relations conflicts with the importance that most INGOs attach to partnership[s]’ with organizations in the South. More important in the light of this discussion is that managerialism – which assumes that ‘development can be planned, is controllable and measureable’ – implicitly ‘reduces development to a technical and apolitical process and diverts attention away from questions of politics, power and distribution.’

This explains why quite a few INGOs, by professionalizing, have become disconnected from the real struggle – or the people that this struggle is about. Icaza writes that NGOs have lost their emancipatory role and instead have become ‘outsider experts’. It is a cultural change, and like all cultural habits, not easy to reverse. INGOs need to re-politicize themselves, Icaza writes, and that means minimally that ‘they need to be attentive to the cracks and fissures in the system of multiple and interrelated oppressions in which they operate.’

Lack of self-reflection

Perhaps the most tenacious problem that prevents INGOs from becoming agents of structural change is their lack of self-reflection. ‘Most NGOs,’ writes Edwards, ‘have continued to strengthen their “leverage” ... without changing their structure, role or position in society in any fundamental way ... today [they] would be instantly recognizable to their founders – they are still raising money in the rich world and spending it on projects in poorer countries...’

This ‘organizational inertia’ of INGOs, Maycock says, ‘is caused by internal power dynamics; income and financial realities; a lack of clarity of purpose; and a disconnect between our values and analysis of the outside world and our internal structures’. She observes that INGOs have ‘great tools for power analysis and challenging what is wrong with the outside world, and yet we fail to turn these analytic tools on ourselves’. The consequence is that organizations ‘have failed to shift power internally or ensure that they are answerable to communities they work for’.

In fact, after a process of self-reflection, ActionAid was the first INGO to move its headquarters to Africa. Currian supports Maycock’s plea, arguing that ‘we need to acknowledge not just that the world has changed, but to reflect that change, rather than attempt to manage it.’ Perhaps unconsciously paraphrasing Gandhi, he concludes that ‘We cannot pretend to be agents of change if we are not prepared to change ourselves.’ ■