The Unit of Development is the Organization, Not the Project
Strategies and Structures for Sustaining the Work of Southern NGOs

By Richard Holloway
Foreword

In view of the fact that many nations have received large amounts of development aid have failed to realize the hopes and expectations which that assistance carried with it, it is not surprising that foreign aid agencies have had their budgets cut throughout the 1990s. So have government programs within our own and other societies. This prompts us to find new, alternative strategies, structures and tools for real development.

In early 1996, The Program on Social Change and Development, of the Johns Hopkins University’s School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), set out to address these basic questions about the landscape once foreign aid or central government assistance has declined: Who or what will replace external assistance? To what extent will new “Southerners” become more active players instead of passive recipients? Can they develop profit-making enterprises to generate needed funds? What are the prospects for the expansion of domestic philanthropy in other countries? How and how much can the for-profit sector increase its role? And finally, with Northern agencies having less control over development programs, will the indigenous cultures of local peoples find greater expression?

To address these basic questions and provide the starting points for discussion, our planning committee spent one year canvassing hundreds of practitioners and other experts in virtually every sector of the development “industry.” In viewing their reports, we held what they proposed as “new” to a high standard: for example, we did not deem the interest in “civil society” to be new; nor integrated pest management; nor the Public Health field’s concern over the changing patterns of disease; nor even urban water and sanitation engineers’ discovery that participatory approaches work best. At the same time, we came to recognize that there is little or no thinking in the field that can be characterized as entirely new—rather, certain ideas are now receiving a new respect or emphasis. Also, of course, they may be new to some parts of the developing world while well recognized in others.

After inviting proposals for papers, we ultimately commissioned three that were presented to an international workshop in the spring of 1997 and that comprise this publication series. They are: “The Unit of Development is the Organization, Not the Project—Strategies and Structures for Sustaining the Work of Southern NGOs” by Richard Holloway; “The NGO-Business Hybrid: Is the Private Sector the Answer?” by Lee Davis; and, “Setting the Development Agenda: Development vs. Democracy?” by Ann Hudock. These papers are all available upon request.
Special thanks go to Margaret Frondorf, Christine Jasper, Makanda Kioko, Jose Ravano and Phil Robertson for conceptualizing the workshop, developing its potentials, bringing together participants for the workshop, and for editing and producing this volume.

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About the Author

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I. Setting the Scene

This paper will deal with the limitations under which development in the South is implemented. I take the particular case of Southern NGOs (SNGOs) and describe the present situation of decision-making and funding which, I argue, limits their ability to realize their full potential (which is to become effective, rooted and sustainable organizations of civil society in the South). This is then contrasted with three new directions for the SNGO sector which, if applied, would do much to increase their independent decision-making, their relevance to the problems of their society, and their self-reliance.

The premise of this paper is the belief that the best and most sustainable development comes from effective and sustainable organizations. Attention to developing such organizations, however, at least in the SNGO sector, is everywhere subsumed to implementing projects and these projects, more often than not, are devised, designed, and funded in the North. Two graphs will illustrate the present and typical situation of SNGOs and their limitations.

Figure 1 shows the limitations of the project approach, and its effect on SNGOs.¹

![Figure 1: The Limitations of the Project Approach](image-url)
This diagram illustrates the following points:

- The organization is heavily reliant on external funding.
- Funding is limited to a particular project, and ends when the project ends.
- The organization has to find its own resources between projects.
- At the end of each project the organization has no more resources for its own sustainability than it had at the start of the project.

A further point that this diagram can illustrate is:

- Any capacity building that the organization may have received will have been capacity building for the sake of the project, not for the purposes of the organization's sustainability.

This is the situation for the vast majority of NGOs - they are heavily dependent on external funding and sustainability translates into managing serial project funding. The external funder is not usually involved in the organization's existence, except as a project-implementing organization. Since no project can be implemented without an organization to do it, it would seem logical that external funders would be interested in building and sustaining NGOs as a complementary activity to funding projects through them.

Figure 2 on the next page shows the origin and source of funding decisions in NGOs.
This diagram illustrates the following points about the source of funds:

- The main sources of assistance to SNGOs are Northern NGOs and Northern governments, the latter's aid often channeled through Northern NGOs.
- Operational Northern NGOs are an important presence in the South, particularly when we include disaster work.
- The market is relatively unimportant as a source of assistance either to the Northern NGO or the SNGO.
- Personal giving as a source of funding for the SNGO is important in the North but insignificant in the South.

The following information then derives from this diagram:

- The decisions about what assistance shall be given to the SNGOs are mostly made in the North.
• SNGOs are largely contractors helping Northern organizations implement their agendas through Northern-funded projects. SNGOs are seen by the peoples and governments of the South as organizations that operate at the behest and license of the North - and as such do not need their support.

This is the typical situation: SNGOs are dependant on Northern funding and Northern support, and are accountable to Northern organizations. The Southern societies in which they operate do not consider that they have any obligation to support them since they have not been asked, the SNGOs have managed without them in the past, and they are not accountable to the Southern societies.

Where lies sustainability and self-reliance - two important concepts for Northern development agencies? The gap between rhetoric and reality is astonishingly wide. Northern donors say on the one hand that SNGOs are important agents in development because of their unique characteristics and because their existence is important as representatives of civil society, but the Northerners do little to help the organizations do anything more than implement Northern-designed projects with Northern money. Northern donors also argue that SNGOs should be sustainable agents of effective development into the future, but they assist them in ways that fail to build organizational continuity, and isolate them from their own people. Northern donors do not, moreover, help them to build financial self-reliance.

This paper deals with three aspects of a braver new world - three possibilities which will provide structures and strategies for sustaining the effective work of SNGOs. They are:

1. **The Exit Strategy Approach**, which involves passing over a large part of the work presently done by Northern NGOs working in the South to SNGOs. This means building the organizational capacity of SNGOs so that they are capable of taking over that work, of having a sustained impact on developmental problems, and of sustaining themselves. A major way of doing this is the phased devolution to them of the resources presently managed by Northern NGOs in the South. This generally means localizing the Northern NGO working in the South: a phased shift of the governance, the staffing, the programming, and the funding from the North to the South.

2. **The Foundation-Building Approach**, which involves setting up sustainable autonomous grantmaking institutions in the South, controlled in the South and intended to support the kind of work that can be designed and implemented by SNGOs with some hope of sustaining themselves (rather than time-limited projects which originate with Northern agencies). As Leslie Fox has put it in his paper for CIVICUS: “the principle is a simple one: that locally controlled organizations in the South, with their own stable source of funding and managed by indigenous staff, are far more likely to respond to the needs of local people than are foreign donors.”

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3. *The Southern Resource Mobilization Approach*, which involves ensuring sustainable flows of funds from the South for Southern organizations so that they can undertake long-term, flexible programs of their own. These funds must come from a variety of fundraising and fund-generating mechanisms which are based in the South and which will have the effect of binding the people of the South to the organizations that they support, rather than thinking of them as Northern donors' possessions.

I will take these three different approaches and try to understand how they have been used and how they can be used: to see where they have been used and whether there are regional variations in their use, and to see if they are more appropriate for one sector over another. None of these ideas are brand new, and some of them have been practiced for some time in the North. Some have been the subject of papers and articles in the North amongst development theorists — but I suggest that there has not been much serious application of these ideas in the South: thus to many practitioners in the South, these are new ideas.¹

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**Notes**

¹The diagram is derived from the pioneering work of IRED in their book *Towards Financial Autonomy*, 1989, Geneva.


³In a few cases with some of the giant SNOs, like BRAC of Bangladesh or PDA of Thailand, the SNGO calls the tune to the donors, but this is relatively rare.

⁴I was a trainer at a fundraising workshop for Central and Eastern European NGOs in Budapest in 1996. Funding for these NGOs only started five years ago and they were seen as the new and important voice in civil society. The donors dealt with them in the traditional project-funding mode. The five-year project funding was coming to an end and hardly anyone had thought through what was to happen next.

⁵CIVICUS has set up three task forces: Leslie Fox is the consultant on the Task Force for Enhancing the Resource Base of CSOs.

⁶My work often involves training SNGOs in various aspects of fundraising and fund-generating, often in collaboration with the International Fundraising Group (IFRG) the only organization I know which systematically addresses domestic resource mobilization for SNGOs. Ideas which are not new in the North, like investments or endowments, strike many SNGO leaders as fresh approaches.
II. Exit Strategies

Northern NGOs (NNGOs) make much of the rhetoric of self-reliance and sustainability: they encourage it amongst the village level beneficiaries of their services, they encourage it in the SNGOs with which they work, and they encourage it for the countries in which they are working. They are much less clear, however, about what those terms mean (or what they should mean), and what self-reliance plus sustainability could mean, for the local NGOs that they fund.

Self-reliance and sustainability should be interpreted not just in terms of the clients (the final beneficiaries), but also in terms of the organizations which will themselves carry on, govern, and manage the kind of work that the NNGOs had previously been managing. To devolve an NNGO’s work to a local organization is the logical conclusion of self-reliance. This is a big step: many NNGOs prefer, in the last analysis, to provide various forms of help in the South, but keep control of the ways their help is given. To go the extra mile, and devolve their work to a local organization which they can no longer control, is not something which is common — but it is something worth considering, and it is something which is being tried out in a few places. There is, however, little public literature on this process, and few guidelines on how it can be carried out.

Some Northern NGOs see themselves as being implementers of development programs and projects now and into the foreseeable future; they feel that their mission and their fundraising depend on their active ownership of the various activities. The child-sponsorship organizations fall into this category. Others feel that the future lies in providing increasing capacity for self-reliance to the local people, and that they should, at some point, hand over the governance and the management of these organizations. This seems to be the position that CARE is slowly backing into. Others again see their work as a limited input in the form of a time-limited project, which does not need to continue after the project finishes. Few have thought through the philosophy of what they are doing and have devised an exit strategy that fits this philosophy. The differences are often sharply highlighted for NNGOs that have started in a relief mode, but get involved in a shift from that towards development.

In other instances NNGOs do not start with a long term-perspective, and find that they cannot, for various reasons, continue the work they have started. Such NNGOs may well feel that they cannot, in all honesty, and in keeping with their professional and ethical standards, walk away from something that they have started, and which still needs to be continued (in the same or different ways). They then have three options:
1. To consider continuing to address the deficits (of knowledge, money, skills, and so forth) via their own management.

2. To try and find some other NGO or aid agency to do their work for them.

3. To set up a new indigenous mechanism to take on the work and either fund the new organization themselves or get others to do so.

A successful and sustainable indigenization process is, in many ways, the logical outcome of what the Northern NGO has been striving toward. It is often, also, the vindication of years of work, can bring great satisfaction to all concerned, and can set up the means to do valuable poverty alleviation work for the poor and disadvantaged of the world for many years to come.

On the other hand, an attempt at localizing the work of the NNGO which fails, or which cannot be sustained, is frustrating, depressing, and wastes time and money. It can also raise disturbing questions about local competence on the one hand, and Northern autocracy on the other, which run the risk of prejudicing relations between Northern and SNGOs for many years to come.

For these reasons, all organizations considering the indigenization of their work should be very clear where the impetus for localization comes from, whose suggestion it is, and who is going to benefit from it. In the stresses and tensions which are inevitable, it is critical to have a well-formulated exit strategy.

The Origins of Indigenization

The origins of indigenization may be complex, but they can be simplified so the people from both the North and the South involved in a project or a program come to the same conclusions:

- The work needs to continue.
- The work cannot continue to be funded or managed much longer by the Northern agency.
- Both Northern and Southern partners would prefer to set up a local organization to continue the work (rather than persuading another Northern agency to take over).

In theory, an exit strategy should be conceptualized from the very beginning — from the time that a NNGO decides to work in the South — but it has been my experience that this is rare. It is much more common for Northern NGOs to have one of two unsatisfactory positions:

a. They will come in for a limited period of time and will leave when the funding is exhausted.
b. They will come in without a very clear idea of how they will ever get out, and
will stay as long as they can find funding.

It is very important to be clear where the impetus for indigenization comes from. The possible actors are Northern agency head offices, Northern agency expatriate representatives in the South, Northern agency local representative project staff, and, possibly, project beneficiaries. It is also possible that the impetus for indigenization is not based on principles or a commitment to continue worthwhile work, but rather on a purely pragmatic desire of local staff to keep their jobs.

It is necessary for the various actors to have the opportunity to think through and talk through their hopes, their expectations, and their concerns about indigenizing, to come to agreement about the localizing process to which they will adhere, and become committed to playing their part in it. Given the complexities of the process of indigenization, it will only work if there is consensus about the value of doing it. (If it fails, there will inevitably be accusations and counter-accusations about who was pressured to do what by whom.)

Many initiatives aimed at greater local control have been part of Northern NGO activities in the South for the last decade. For example:

- Increasing management training of local staff.
- Setting up of local advisory committees.
- Increased phasing out of expatriate managers.

Organizations that are considering full indigenization need to go beyond this. However, they need to be convinced that:

- A national indigenous NGO will offer a more sustainable, long-term base for working with the poor.
- A locally rooted NGO becomes more responsive to local needs and addresses a development agenda set by the grassroots.
- A national indigenous NGO will have the scope to raise its voice more strongly on behalf of the poor than an expatriate NGO.

Indigenization in the full sense would therefore encompass local people taking over the governance, management, and funding of local activities.

Who will “own” the indigenized project?

In the past, the Northern NGO has “owned” the project and the Northern NGO, in turn, has been “owned” by its own Board of Directors (or Board of Governors, or Trustees, depending on the legal form the NNGO has chosen). In the Western tradition, this Board is an association of eminent citizens who voluntarily give their time and their advice and sit in ultimate authority over non-profit organizations. They also have “fiduciary” responsibility for the funds that the organization has collected from others. They are usually responsible for setting the broad policy guidelines,
for choosing the chief executive, for agreeing to annual budgets and possibly strategies and work plans, for being the last resort in the case of problems and, ultimately, responsible for the organization in a court of law.

This is the idea in principle. It is open to abuses (such as governing bodies being formed from cronies of the executive director, Boards which only operate as a rubber stamp of the executive director, or trustees who are using the organization for their own ends), and such abuses are possible both in the North and the South. This is the principle: to start with a governing body that is separate from the staff of the organization, and that is prepared to offer itself voluntarily to advance the mission of the organization and operate as a check-and-balance on its operations.

In principle this idea is similar to a “Council of Elders” which is a concept common to many cultures, but the actual legal forms of governing bodies are based on Western law. We can take a “transfer of technology” approach to this subject and assume that the legal and cultural framework that exists in the North can be transplanted to the South where it will work in the same way that it works in the North. Our job in that case would be to introduce the concepts and the models of regulations and train people how to use them. Since the idea of a disinterested Governing Body is the model in the North, the transfer-of-technology approach assumes it can and will work in the South.

We know enough, however, about transferring technology (particularly “software”) that it is not enough to just transfer the technology (in this case - the laws). We need to process these legal concepts through cultural filters and ascertain what fits a particular local situation. Assuming that the separation of powers between the Governing Body and the Executive Director are important (and we are likely to find some version of this in most metropolitan countries which have influenced the legal framework of the countries of the South), then we need to think through the likely motivations for a person to be a Board Member (or Trustee, or Director) and ascertain whether such people will likely be motivated to carry out the disinterested role that the legal framework suggests.

Who will be in charge?

In the NGO world, it is common for the organization to have a single leader (usually called an executive director). One of the major problems facing NGOs is the “aging leadership syndrome,” whereby the original founder carries on long after he/she should have devolved responsibility to a successor. NNGOs which are devolving functions to indigenous organizations should be wary of encouraging this.

One of the main purposes of indigenizing the work of a Northern organization is to make sure that Southern concerns are addressed by Southern people through an organization that they control. Experience suggests, however, that a lot of attention needs to be paid to the organizational structure and systems to make sure that the organization is managerially sustainable. The
leader, therefore, needs not only a vision of where he/she would like to take the organization, but also a solid managerial and organizational background.

It will be useful to assess which qualities of the past organization should be retained, and which should be changed, and to assess the qualities of the past Executive Director, and what activities he did best.

It may be that the person identified to be the new executive director will need some additional skills, which can be acquired through training, technical assistance, experience, or mentoring. The question then becomes where these can be acquired, and the most appropriate time to undertake them. If training, for instance, requires time away from the organization, then this is not a good idea at the time of transition. One possibility to consider is for a consultant to come into the organization to be a mentor to the new executive director as he goes about his business, with perhaps a day release per week for special training.

If the new executive director is taking over from an expatriate director, some strange racial prejudices may surface. As much as it might be expected that a national be preferred to an expatriate by other locals, in some countries there is a depressing attitude that a local is second best, and that the organization is no longer a leading organization if it does not have a foreign director. The departing expatriate director must work hard to dispel such attitudes and strongly endorse the local candidate chosen to replace him/her. This person will be aware of these undercurrents and will have to swim amongst them, but the departing expatriate needs to use every opportunity to boost the idea of a local director with all stakeholders. It is, however, also very important to make sure that the leader who is selected understands that his/her performance will be judged by the Board of Governors, who have the sole responsibility for continuing or discontinuing his/her tenure.

What kind of organization should it be?

The details of the governance of an NGO are largely determined by the kind of legal identity the new organization assumes, and by the terms of the documents drawn up within that legal identity (which might be known as a Memorandum of Association, Deed of Trust, Constitution, Articles of Incorporation, or Charter).

NGOs are working in countries with a variety of different legal systems, which in turn derive from a variety of colonial relations. Given the wide variety of legal forms, it is impossible to prescribe the best form of legal identity for an indigenized NGO. Some general rules, however, can be suggested:

- The statutes under which NGOs are recognized in nearly every country in the world are very out of date. They nearly always derive from a legal recognition of organizations for charitable behavior on the one hand, or political behavior on the other. Most of the statutes were drawn up at a time when "development" as a concept — and certainly development as a fit activity for a voluntary association — was unknown. It therefore becomes very important to make sure that
the internal documents which are required to set up the organization clearly spell
out what the organization is going to do. It may make more sense to consider
registering the NGO under the statutes which refer to commercial companies,
but clarify that it is a non-profit commercial company.

- The requirements for legal incorporation of an entity so that it has a legal
  persona are usually different from the legal requirements for the organization to
  be registered with the government - but this important fact is often unknown or
  ignored by the government. The requirements of registration with the state are
  usually in recognition of certain concerns that the state has about voluntary
  organizations - usually security on the one hand, and use of foreign funds on the
  other. It is usually true that the state tries to impose increasing legislative condi-
  tions on the work of NGOs, and these are sometimes unnecessary and based
  upon a desire of the state to control all development work in the country. It is
  important to identify what the indigenous organization needs to do to become a
  legal body without binding the organization beyond the minimum regulatory
  requirements imposed by the state.

Once the new organization is set up, it is very probable that the old foreign organization will
transfer all its assets to the new organization. This will make it relatively rich and well-endowed as a
local organization within the country (with such goods as cars, computers, and overseas tele-
phones). While it is likely that the new organization will be operating under some of the same
regulatory requirements as in the past, what will be new, in practice, in the case of an indigenized
organization is that:

- Local citizens will serve on the Board of Governors, and will only have the same
  recourse as any other citizen if there is some malafide attack on the NGO. Such
  attacks were in the past more easily warded off. While an inconvenience, such
  attacks need not finally be a problem if the legal system is just and independent.
  But it certainly can be a problem if the legal system in the country is politicized
  and susceptible to interference from vested interests.
- The local staff may be under pressure from government personnel for extra-
  legal favors.
- The government may try to exert more control over the activities of a local
  organization.

A new NGO has a tremendous opportunity to try to break new ground if the enabling legal
environment for NGOs in the country concerned is using best practices from other countries. It
is also possible, however, that it may be more strategic to localize in a way that will draw the least
possible attention to the new NGO. A useful tactic is to collect legal documents from a variety of
indigenous NGOs which have similar features to the one you are intending to incorporate, and
identify the elements from them that seem pertinent, and then collating these into a rough draft for
the lawyer to work on.
The Value of Capacity Assessment Guides

In the last three years, a number of NGO practitioners faced with trying to work on institutional development of NGOs but having no template to work from, have come up with a variety of useful organizational assessment (or capacity assessment) guides. Pact has pioneered this work in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Peru, and Ethiopia, and other organizations have also developed their own guides (e.g. SCF (USA) in the West Bank/Palestine, the Red Cross, NOVIB and INTRAC). One organization has developed a capacity assessment guide for community based organizations (CBOs) — the NGO Resource Center in Pakistan — a project of the Aga Khan Foundation.

These guides allow practitioners to work with organizations to help them identify their strengths and assess the areas they need to work on. Such tools are very valuable in the process of indigenization, as they will help departing NGOs and the evolving NGOs have a common frame of reference from which to build. See Figure 3.

| Figure 3: The Elements of Capacity in an NGO  
according to Pact's Organization Capacity Assessment (OCA) |
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