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International NGOs: *Networking, Information Flows and Learning*

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Abstract

International non-government organisations (INGOs) are increasingly regarded as important in their capacity to influence global policy on development issues such as poverty alleviation, sustainable development, and human rights. This has been possible through their simultaneous attachment to local places and cultures on the one hand, and their critical engagement with global institutions on the other. With recent advances in information and communication technologies, an increasingly connected INGO community is finding considerable scope for networking and information sharing at multiple levels.

However, despite the strategic advantage of INGOs in terms of their multi-level reach, their contribution to date remains limited more to small-scale success stories than to affecting development directions more broadly. In this paper, we emphasise the need for INGOs to learn from the field in their quest to influence wider policy-making and to improve local accountability. It is argued that, as their role changes from operational work to international advocacy, INGOs will have to strengthen institutional structures and learning skills to achieve a greater developmental impact.

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A. INGO Development and Context

A key feature of the accelerated phase of globalisation since about 1960 has been the rapid growth of INGOs (Waters, 1995; Spybey, 1996). The international system was until the First World War numerically dominated by states and their mainly bilateral relations. From the second half of the 20th century, while the world continued to be dominated by individual states, there was an increasing presence of international government organisations in which many states surrendered a measure of their sovereignty. Since the late 1980s, there has been a remarkable change in the scale and significance of INGOs as they move to centre-stage in international development work in areas such as poverty alleviation, sustainable development, human rights and women's emancipation (Wils, 1995; Meyer, 1997). These INGOs are large, multi-layered, complex systems, such as Oxfam, Action Aid and Save the Children who are based in and receive funds from high-income countries but who work for the benefit of the poor in low-income countries.

A mix of forces has fuelled this rapid rise to prominence of INGOs. The perceived poor performance of the public sector in developing countries has led to a search for more effective organisational forms for the delivery of goods and services, especially amongst international government agencies and aid donors (Sandbrook, 1993; McMichael, 1996). The ideological ascendancy of neo-liberalism and globalisation in the late 20th century has prompted a massive emergence of new social movements as local communities and marginalised groups around the world strive to create their own self-identity (Giddens, 1990; Robertson, 1992; Lash, 1993). Contemporary social theorists have referred to this eruption of new social movements as 'globalisation from below', claiming that these movements operate by networking with each other at grassroots level rather than by creating or maintaining existing authority structures (Ekins, 1992; Dirlik, 1998). Many of these global social movements look to INGOs to represent them and to meet their needs (Spybey, 1996).

Until the 1970s, there was little appreciation of the potential role of INGOs in influencing global policy. The first generation of INGOs from the 1950s was

represented by many larger organisations such as Oxfam and the Red Cross. These INGOs began as charity relief organisations delivering welfare services to the poor and dispossessed throughout the world in the event of natural disasters. The focus was on meeting immediate needs through direct action (Korten, 1987; Hulme and Turner, 1990). The second generation of INGOs from the 1960s geared themselves towards promoting local self-reliance by increasing the involvement of intermediate NGOs, which were rapidly proliferating so that benefits would be sustained beyond the period of assistance (Korten, 1987).

Since the 1980s, INGOs have become synonymous with a particular style of political action. This relies on making political statements on behalf of local communities outside the established channels of the nation state by mobilising opinion on a global basis on issues that nation states have treated as marginal to their own agendas. The strategy of these third-generation NGOs is directed towards facilitating sustainable changes through international advocacy. This means less direct involvement at grassroots level but a greater need for maintaining strong institutional links with partners at local level. These agencies are based and receive funds from high-income countries but work for the poor in developing countries, particularly through the action of the rapidly growing numbers of grassroots organisations (GROs). INGOs have been able to perform this advocacy role because of their simultaneous attachment to local places and cultures on the one hand and their critical engagement with global institutions on the other.

There have been numerous examples of success with this third-generation approach with individual projects such as with the international baby milk campaign that culminated in an international code of conduct governing the marketing activities of baby milk companies (Clark, 1992). Another example is the Agency for Co-operation and Research in Development (ACORD); a broad-based international consortium of European and Canadian NGOs working together for long-term development in Africa. The emphasis of ACORD has been to support local community initiative and to establish an international platform to discuss development issues (Roche, 1992).

The now widespread use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has facilitated the organisation of these networks of groups, which derive their strength from the commitment and energy of activists world-wide (Mansell and Wehn, 1998). Annis (1992) was among the first to identify this 'informational empowerment' due to increased connectedness of geographically-dispersed GROs and INGOs.

These newly empowered and connected INGOs are taking a larger role in world politics (Edwards, 1994; Matthews, 1997). For example, the World Bank has reported increased project involvement of INGOs from participation in only 6% of projects during 1973-88 to nearly one-third in 1993 (World Bank, 1994). An increasingly globally networked INGO community interacting across the world is finding considerable common ground and scope for the sharing of information to increase the impact of development programmes. Indeed, many writers link ICTs to successful democratic uprisings (Clark, 1995; Spybey, 1996; Meyer, 1997). For example, the organisation that has really helped to mark the entry of INGOs in global network diffusion is the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) which co-ordinates existing NGO networks electronically. At present, the APC provides access to 20,000 activists in 133 countries around the world in order to debate issues such as war prevention, protection of the environment, human rights and democracy (APC, 1997).

Yet despite their strategic multi-level reach, fuelled by the potential of ICT-based networking capability, the contribution of INGOs remains limited more to small-scale successes of implementing development projects rather than to achieving maximum impact in influencing global policy (Salmen and Eaves, 1989; Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Edwards, 1997). Thus of central concern in this paper are the processes whereby INGOs learn from the field, as this learning is the foundation for global advocacy. At the heart of these processes are activities concerned with information access and exchange. The next section describes recent strategies pursued by INGOs to improve 'learning from the field' by strengthening linkages and information flows with national and local development agencies.

B. Advocacy, Accountability and Learning: Networking and Information Strategies

One of the main defining characteristics of INGOs is that they operate simultaneously at different levels of the global system. In principle, therefore, INGOs are able to link micro-level experience with macro-level policy. This linking potential justifies the current preoccupation amongst INGOs with international advocacy. They have a significant potential advantage over official aid agencies whose presence at the grassroots is usually weak and transient, and over grassroots organisations which have limited impact on decision-makers at national and international levels.

Crucial for the achievement of advocacy at higher levels is the ability of the INGO to learn about the situation at grassroots level. Indeed, some have argued that it is this synthesis of action and understanding that is the key to effective advocacy since it gives these organisations the confidence that they can relate theory with real-life experiences (Edwards, 1994; Meyer, 1997). Yet, the overall impact of INGO advocacy at the global level has been limited. While most INGOs see their relationship with bilateral and multilateral agencies as a dialogue on policy, donors themselves continue to view INGOs as mere implementers of projects. For example, Salmen and Eaves (1989) report that only 11% of INGOs with whom the World Bank co-operated between the period 1988 to 1989 were consulted in the design phase of projects.

Learning from the field is also a foundation for improved accountability amongst INGOs to their intended beneficiaries. In general, INGOs have been notoriously bad at evaluating the impact of their work and at accounting for their performance in a systematic way to their various stakeholders (Brett, 1993). Much of the dilemma lies in the fact that INGOs have multiple accountabilities that are difficult to satisfy simultaneously and that necessitate different flows of performance-related information to be disseminated to different stakeholders.

Avina (1993) distinguishes between:

- short-term or functional accountability which requires information about resources and immediate impact to be passed to donors and trustees, and

- strategic or long-term accountability which requires information about the developmental impact of an INGO's actions to be passed on to intended beneficiaries, other organisations in the wider environment.

Managing short-term accountability in terms of multiple funding sources is already normal practice in many NGOs (Desai and Howes, 1995). But achieving strategic accountability among INGOs has proved a difficult task, particularly in relation to empowerment and other qualitative changes. There is certainly evidence that official aid to INGOs and the roles adopted by these organisations under neo-liberal forces can distort accountability upwards with an overemphasis on functional/financial accountability. This has had damaging effects on the ability of INGOs to be effective catalysts for social change at the grassroots level (Desai and Howes, 1995; Hashemi, 1995).

For many INGOs, the obvious strategy in the 1980s for increasing global influence and developmental impact was to dramatically expand their operational budgets and staffing levels (Edwards and Hulme, 1992). However, experience has revealed that the these changes can have a dramatic impact in moving the INGO away from its original goal of pursuing a developmental mission to becoming a public service contractor oriented towards servicing needs defined by donors and national governments (Kiriwandeniya, 1992; Hodson, 1992). For example, Kiriwandeniya (1992) reports that many INGOs that have gone for organisational growth have been co-opted and controlled by politically or bureaucratically appointed boards of directors, reducing the quality of developmental impact. Similarly, Hodson's (1992) study found that the stress of rapid growth in the INGO led to a radical change in the culture of the organisation and a dampening of staff morale.

A more recent approach adopted by INGOs to increase the impact of development projects has been to improve learning from the field by establishing closer linkages with partner organisations. One approach has been specifically devoted to improving

institutional linkages with the government. This is done because successful development projects often cannot be replicated when government structures lack the ability or willingness to adopt new ideas. The aim of this approach is therefore to ensure that governments adopt policies that are genuinely developmental at national level.

Many examples have been cited demonstrating progress with strengthening institutional linkage and improving information flows between government and INGOs. For example, Mackie (1992) presents an overview of the experience of Voluntary Services Overseas in integrating INGO work into existing government structures. He suggests that such integration has helped pay rich dividends in terms of impact, replication and sustainability of development projects. In cases such as these, experiential learning reveals that the development of effective institutional linkages between INGOs and government has been slow given the nature of the bureaucracy and that agencies must commit themselves to partnership for long periods of time in order to see results (Bratton, 1990).

Rather than working directly within the structures they intend to influence, INGOs are choosing to increase their impact by lobbying government and other structures from outside. This has become a popular activity for INGOs around the world as part of their efforts to focus on advocacy work (Edwards, 1994; Turner and Hulme, 1997). These INGO strategies range from direct lobbying of key individuals within bilateral and multilateral agencies, through staff exchanges and working together in the field, to publications, conferences and participation in joint committees such as the World Bank-INGO Committee (Edwards and Hulme, 1992).

With this strategy, deliberate networking strategies with intermediate NGOs, GROs and intended beneficiaries are considered to be even more crucial to improve learning experiences from the field (Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Wils, 1995; Meyer, 1997). In their networking efforts, INGOs have begun to make much more systematic use of information systems – both ICT-based and non-ICT-based – in order to improve the flow of ideas, experiences and information across national frontiers between INGO headquarters, national offices and the grassroots level. In a small number of INGOs,

such as Save the Children Fund (SCF), an increasing amount of energy and resources are going into information activities at the country and regional-office levels with many offices having full-time information officers with a brief to collect, analyse and disseminate information internally and externally.

Recent advances in ICTs mean not only cheaper information sharing, but also that networking is made simpler as cohorts are connected by fax and email. For example, in a recent study of INGOs and their use of ICTs, Bergman (1997) found that the vast majority of these organisations make frequent use of phone-, fax- and modem-based communication. However, in most INGOs, systems for accessing, storing, transferring and disseminating information are underdeveloped. With the increased use of ICT-based communication in INGOs, there is an added acute problem of information overload. Staff complain bitterly of huge amounts of information being sent electronically every day, but too little structure to sift out what is relevant for learning to take place in the organisation (Edwards, 1994).

Learning need not be restricted to the experience of the organisation itself. Macdonald (1995) argues that the notion of organisational learning often focuses on internal aspects of the change process, neglecting the essential contribution of external information to internal change. Development projects succeed by networking and learning from a history of negotiation, coalition and change in the structure and behaviour of the INGO in response to interaction between the agency and other organisations, be they development agencies, academics, or partners. Some INGOs have made real strides in this area over the last few years. For example, there has been a marked increase in collaborative ventures between INGOs and academics. SCF, for example, has mounted joint research programmes with the Institute of Development Studies on food security and famine early warning, with the London School of Economics and Political Science on sovereignty and humanitarian intervention, and with the Institute for Development Policy and Management on NGO impact and accountability (Edwards, 1994). By contrast, communication and collaboration between INGOs has been poor. For example, Bergman's (1997) study revealed that only 35% of information is shared with other INGOs. More recently, some initiatives

have been taken by INGOs such as Oxfam and Action Aid to work on common themes.

This section has emphasised the importance of learning from the field for assisting both international advocacy and local accountability. It has described networking and information strategies that have been adopted by INGOs towards this end. There has been some effort amongst a few INGOs to learn more about the impact of their work, and the wider forces shaping people's lives. For example, Action Aid undertook participatory research into the impact of economic change, environmental degradation, and population growth on the rural sector in Nepal using the allocation of children's time to different tasks as one key indicator (Edwards, 1994). However, in general, weak learning in many INGOs has contributed to a basic lack of clarity about future form and function and has manifested itself in an unprecedented period of self-questioning, with almost continuous strategic reviews, restructuring and new mission statements (Bergman, 1997). The final section of this paper focuses on the issue of appropriate institutional structures and information-sharing skills to improve learning from the field.

C. Enhancing the Learning Process with New Structures and Skills

INGOs are large, multi-layered, complex systems in which the learning process must be carefully structured. Different types of learning carry different implications for the INGO in terms of skills, structure and information exchange processes and there may be trade-offs to be made. The balance between participatory, field-based learning and learning which feeds into wider policy and advocacy-related work is the most difficult to maintain. However, direct, experiential learning amongst field workers remains the foundation for other forms of learning linked to good practice, policy, and advocacy work.

In order to achieve this learning, many INGOs have shifted from a centralised to a decentralised organisational structure. Hierarchical, centralised control-oriented structures are recognised as inimical to learning as they distance decision-makers from reality thereby compromising the link between learning and action. Learning organisations are increasingly recognised as decentralised, organically-structured and task-oriented with flexible units and teams build around themes for which they are jointly accountable (Wierdsma and Swieringha, 1992). For example, Action Aid has introduced the idea of working in task-oriented teams working on core priority themes identified by the organisation. At present, these teams comprise staff at international, national and sub-national levels who are addressing the themes of education and food insecurity. Horizontal linkages are deliberately fostered and professional distinctions blurred between programme and research staff in order to create more transparency between advocacy, accountability, research and evaluation activities.

With an emphasis on non-hierarchical communication and openness to learning, INGOs have the potential to remain flexible in responding to changing circumstances and to innovate solutions to complex development challenges. This has been elaborated in great detail by many writers under the label of participation (Korten, 1980, 1990; Chambers, 1994, 1995; Clark, 1995). An example is the highly sophisticated federation of local NGOs that has developed in the Philippines in an

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attempt to exchange information and negotiate collective action at grassroots level in order to challenge national policies and establish new institutions. These mechanisms have proved to be very effective – more so than formal, democratic and representative mechanisms introduced from outside (Constantino-David, 1992; Hall, 1992).

The focus is moving away from channelling information away from the field to be consumed by the headquarters, towards acceptance of locally-generated information and communication channels. It is recognised by many writers on organisational learning that much critical and influential information for learning comes in through informal and individual contacts (Argyris and Schon, 1984; Macdonald, 1995). However, so far, INGOs have tended to be excessively dependent on the written word although there is already evidence to suggest that field staff and partners react more favourably to indigenous and informal forms of information exchange such as folk media, drama, story telling and village meetings (Edwards, 1993). Mundy and Compton (1995) describe how these media interact with one another to form a network that constitutes the information environment of local communities, and an important source of empowerment and a conduit of change.

One intermediate NGO called Jana Sahayog based in Bangalore aims to improve the information environment of slum dwellers in the city. Recognising that much critical information comes in through informal sources from slum dwellers themselves, Jana Sahayog tries to identify and enhance traditional communication skills in the slums. For example, slum dwellers are encouraged to produce audiocassettes and videotapes describing their problems and requirements. Apart from isolated cases, however, much of the research on indigenous communication has concentrated on using indigenous channels to promote exogenous (increasingly ICT-based) innovations rather than on the dissemination of indigenous knowledge among communities. This has led to neglect of local initiative in the design of development efforts and a threat of the erosion of indigenous and informal systems due to the influence of formal, ICT-based, western-oriented information systems typically packaged with foreign aid.

What is most important in the information sharing and learning culture is not the information per se, as that may become rapidly obsolete and need updating. Meyer

(1997) argues that building learning capacities should take precedence over building costly structures for information storage and retrieval. This capability building for organisational learning has to be legitimised by senior managers and the necessary resources provided. For example, Oxfam UK has recently initiated a cross-programme learning fund to create more space for learning (Roche, 1995). Experience shows that people are unlikely to use or value learning if they see it as someone else's responsibility, perpetuating the traditional divide between those who 'think' and those who 'act'. So INGOs need to pay special attention to encouraging learning among those who traditionally have not been encouraged to see themselves in this light (Meyer, 1997). This may require a much more imaginative approach using visual communication, and informal face-to-face dialogue to encourage a thirst for reflexive inquiry.

While field experiences are the building blocks of INGO advocacy, they must ultimately be generalised to have any influence in wider policy circles. The dilemma is that the reality of the situations in which INGOs intervene is complex, diverse, uncertain and contingent. This makes the issue of generalisation a real challenge for INGOs, yet one to which they need to give a lot more theoretical consideration (Meyer, 1997).

A number of avenues have been suggested as ways of distilling lessons of experience without over-generalising (Edwards, 1997). For example, rather than trying to aggregate the experiences of a region, a generalisation strategy may be to identify key common elements in patterns of experience or to focus on experiences that seem especially interesting or different. Another strategy may be to look for differences in interpretation of the same experience among different stakeholders and to treat that as a signal that indicates something important is happening. Generalisation may also be achieved by experimenting with purposive sampling of project-level experiences to reduce bias. Finally, generalisation may be achieved by building on long-term project experience and local research to give a rich picture of trends and to pool resulting information from different INGOs in the same area. For such wider learning to take place, more emphasis clearly needs to be placed on research and on the documentation

and dissemination of indigenous experience in order that key lessons of experience can be drawn on to improve the quality of development work.

To conclude, due to their simultaneous attachment to the global and the local, INGOs offer the most hope for seeing communities as focal points for reconceiving and reconstructing the meaning of development. Figure 1 summarises the 'INGO network of stakeholders', indicating dual channels of global advocacy and local accountability, and institutional links with intermediate NGOs, GROs and beneficiaries. In particular, this paper has argued that encouraging action, reflection and learning from experience on a continuous basis among field staff and partners in projects must take top priority as depicted in the diagram. This learning needs to be supported by decentralised, flexible institutional structures that are more amenable to experimenting with indigenous forms of information and communication channels. For learning systems to become institutionalised within the INGO, new skills – in information sharing and learning, and in generalising from the field – must be in place.

Figure 1: The INGO Challenge – Advocacy, Accountability and Learning from the Field
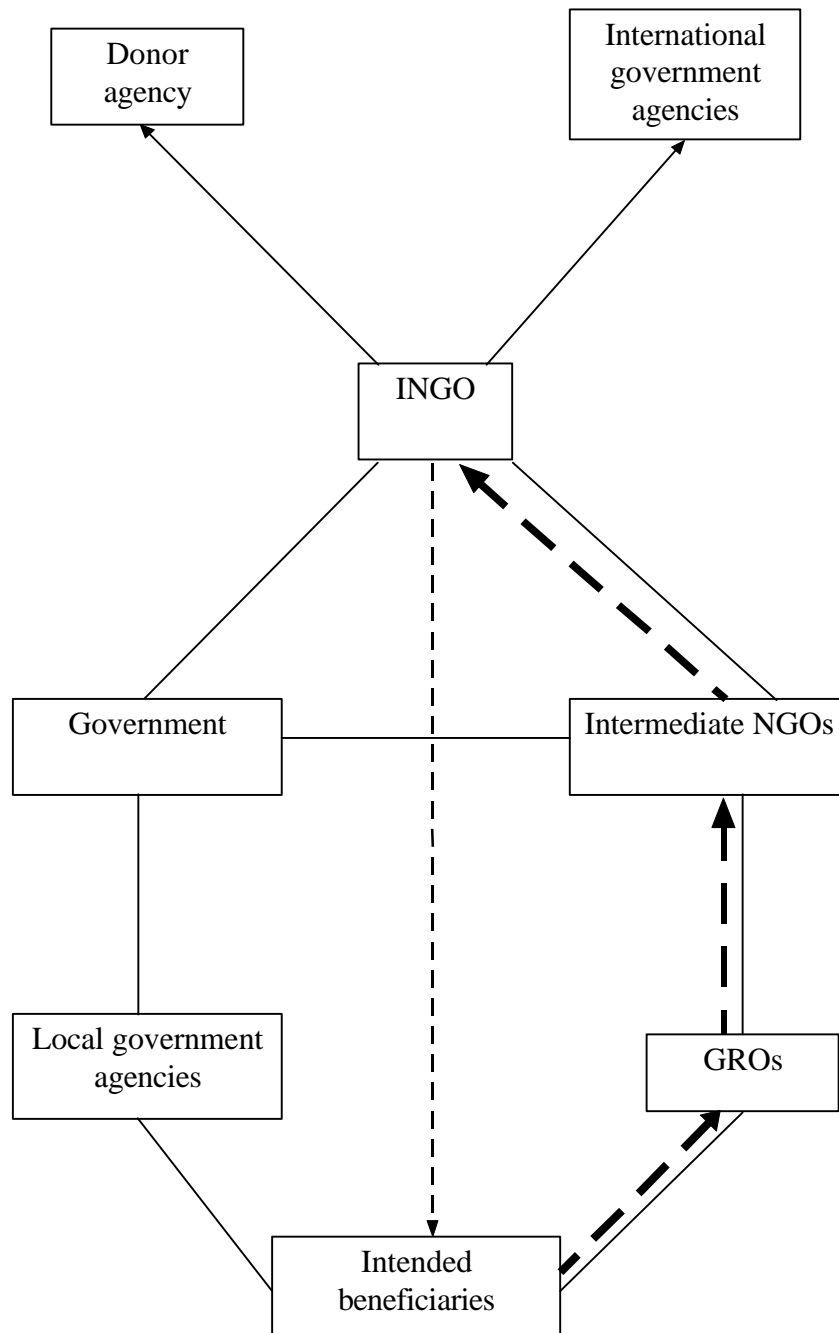
	Global advocacy
- - - ►	Local accountability
	Networking and information flows between development agencies
━━►	INGO learning from the field

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