NGOS, management and the process of change:
New models or reinventing the wheel?

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The past decade has seen a steady growth of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) at the local, national, and international level – along with an increasing interest from both donors and the NGOs themselves in seeking ways to make NGOs more effective. The profile of NGOs has grown among policymakers, activists, and researchers in both North and South. NGOs now feature prominently in discussions of service delivery, advocacy and lobbying, social movements, philanthropy and charitable giving, building ‘civil society’, and social entrepreneurship. This rich diversity of NGOs in North and South is widely celebrated, with growing numbers of publications devoted to them. Although there are voices challenging the claims which are made for NGOs, these are generally restricted to the context of humanitarian assistance in emergency situations and NGOs continue to be ‘flavour of the month’ in development circles. One well-known development publisher recently told me that they were actively seeking ideas for new books on NGOs because they sold so well. Another senior academic in the same week could be heard complaining that his manuscript dealing with issues on public administration could not find a publisher at all because NGOs and ‘civil society’ were all they were interested in.

Yet in amongst all the furore generated about NGOs there has been very little attention given to the management of these organizations. The priorities, until recently, have been the contribution of NGOs to development activities and to creating new ideas about development. Interest in management and organizational issues in the North began to appear in the late 1980s when the newsletter ‘NGO Management’ was produced from the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) in Geneva. It laid the groundwork for discussing NGO management, though it had ceased publication by the early 1990s. The International NGO Research and Training Centre (INTRAC) was established in the UK in 1991. In the US, the Institute of Development Research (IDR)
in Boston has for many years worked on the organizational issues of
NGOs, while in the South the Society of Participatory Research in In-
dia (PRIA) and El Taller in Tunisia among others have also pursued
NGO organizational training agendas. Despite these growing numbers
of initiatives, however, we have not yet seen the evolution of a clear set
of ideas or a distinctive field of ‘NGO Management’.

This is a surprising omission and the reasons behind it are I think
quite complex. The first is that NGOs are first and foremost charac-
terized by a ‘culture of action’, in which NGO leaders and staff are
sometimes reluctant to spend too much time thinking about organi-
zational questions because it might interfere with the primary task of
‘getting out there and doing something’. Related to this is the wide-
spread view that NGOs should use almost all their funds for working
with poor people and should not spend money on administrative over-
heads or waste too much time on administrative questions. A second
set of problems revolves around the view that many NGOs are estab-
lished by people searching for alternatives to mainstream thinking
and there is sometimes a feeling that management and administration,
with its strong associations with the business and the public sectors,
is something NGOs could do without. A third set of problems (lin-
ked to the first), relates to the rapid growth and change which many
NGOs have experienced. Organizations which started out as small, in-
formal structures in which management issues could be dealt with on
an ad hoc, informal basis may grow in size and develop more complex,
multi-dimensional programmes, and suddenly find that they need new
ideas, systems, and procedures to cope. Finally, as some NGOs have
grown closer to official donors they have been required to develop new
systems of accountability and their effectiveness has been questioned
and challenged. This has led to the feeling that some of the impetus
for the new interest in NGO management has come from outside, and
has taken the form of an imposed ‘managerialism’ rather than being
part of an NGO’s own agenda.

SWIMMING IN THE MAINSTREAM

As a result of all these factors, the current state of thinking about NGO
management is not perhaps as clear as it should be. Should NGOs take
the need to improve and adapt management systems more seriously,
and if so, what kind of management models should they be interested in? Do NGOs pay enough attention to the basic ‘nuts and bolts’ of mainstream business and public sector management theory? Or will such techniques move NGOs away from being primarily value-driven and voluntaristic towards a more professional approach to their work? (Business schools around the world are currently waking up to the new NGO market and trying to recruit NGO staff onto courses which offer this type of professional approach, sometimes relabelling otherwise mainstream MBAs for the purpose.) Or should NGOs turn instead to the growing field of what is termed ‘non-profit management’ – a growth area particularly in the United States where the non-profit sector, it has been argued, now requires a new set of specialized models and concepts to help these distinctive kinds of organizations to improve their management? Or should development NGOs seek to develop different models? Should NGOs be exploring the possibilities that other forms of management approaches may offer outside the boundaries of current practice, and outside primarily Western templates of organization?

There are no clear answers to these questions. NGOs are a diverse group, ranging from the small, informal association with a few members who give their time voluntarily to large bureaucratized corporate entities with thousands of professional staff. In addition to these structural differences, NGOs engage in a bewildering variety of different tasks. What is the task that has to be managed? For some NGOs the delivery of services will doubtless require a set of practices and techniques which could usefully draw upon public and private sector approaches. For NGOs involved in networking, perhaps less of this material will be of value and new approaches are needed. For most organizations some basic management skills will be needed to keep accounts, make decisions, and plan work. NGO management is probably best seen as an area of ‘development management’, but there is no broad agreement on what exactly the tasks are in development that need to be managed.

What is management?

‘Management’ is itself a difficult term for many people. Definitions of management range from those which emphasize ‘control and authority’ to others which speak of ‘enablement and participation’, from
the functional definition of ‘getting the work done by the best means available’ to the more diffuse idea of ‘reducing anxiety’. As in any organization, management for NGOs can be seen as having both an instrumental purpose (achieving the desired results) as well as an expressive quality (a certain organizational style or culture which is both appropriate to the task at hand as well as in keeping with the values of those involved).

What is clear is that NGOs must have the ‘basics’ in order to function, but that they also need to adapt ideas from other sources, as well as innovate ideas of their own. Tom Dichter (1989) provides all-too-familiar examples of NGOs which tried to run before they could walk – trying out elaborate participatory ideas about development without having a system to ensure, for example, that their fleet of vehicles is properly maintained. On the other hand, the danger exists of imposing inappropriate and constraining formal management systems on NGOs, which can easily kill their spirit and their originality. First, NGOs need to clarify their vision and goals. Alan Fowler’s recent book Striking a Balance (1997) makes a good attempt at setting out for the first time many of the management challenges faced by NGOs. He emphasizes the need both to balance a range of internal and external factors and to keep a clear eye on ‘what is to be managed’.

NGOs need to develop appropriate strategies for the tasks at hand – and these are very varied. Some will require hierarchical, bureaucratic structures while others will work in loose, informal, decentralized ways. Secondly, NGOs need to learn how to manage themselves in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing world. Kelleher and McLaren (1995) emphasize the turbulent context in which NGOs work and use the phrase ‘grabbing the tiger by the tail’ to encapsulate the challenge of taking control of organizational change. Thirdly, NGOs need to be able to manage their own formalization and growth either by resisting pressures to grow (as some of the case studies which follow seem to suggest), or by developing and changing their management practices and structures in keeping with their organization’s own development.

**A DIFFERENT PATH**

There are many ironies to the new interest in NGO management. One is that many NGOs, as they ‘discover’ management and organization
development (or are pushed into taking it seriously by outside interests), tend to make straight for the business management world, reading Peter Drucker, Charles Handy and the management gurus of the moment even though these ideas are intended for very different types of organizations. (Although Drucker and Charles Handy have gone on to adapt some of their ideas to the non-profit organization world). Another irony is that NGOs have sometimes unwittingly incorporated a lot of older-style management ideas such as strategic planning (now dismissed by one of its originators Henry Mintzberg as having failed to live up to its promise when it was developed in the 1970s), rather than heading straight for the more up-to-date ideas. A third and particularly frustrating irony is that the most up-to-date mainstream management theory and practice is now concerned with areas which NGOs themselves should be on top of - flexible work teams, reduced hierarchies, building on organizational values and cultures.

The articles which follow have been commissioned with two main purposes in mind. The first is to show how NGOs as organizations change over time: they grow, mature, and fade in the manner suggested by Shakespeare’s ‘seven ages’, and it was this quote (see below) which inspired this edition of Appropriate Technology. NGO management therefore can be seen as a process, as NGOs struggle to adapt and survive within an increasingly complex environment. The second is that NGOs are diverse, and may adopt different approaches to organization and management – from the one-person NGO such as EduCare Trust, the challenge of operating without formal structure in the case of Vetwork, to the adaptive, professionalizing cultures of NGOs such as Healthlink and BRAC. This edition of Appropriate Technology presents some ‘snapshots’ of organizations at different stages of their development as they confront a range of difficult challenges and questions.

The current interest in NGO organization and management questions is important in that it may bring our sometimes unrealistic images and expectations of NGOs down to more practical, manageable, proportions. It may lead to a stronger focus on what NGOs can achieve and what they cannot, and on improving their effectiveness, and it may enrich our wider understanding of management by bringing to light new ideas and alternative approaches – ones rooted in different values
and cultures, and in a genuinely developmental approach to overcoming obstacles to positive social change.

NOTES

1. Far more attention has been given to issues of organization and management in the Northern ‘non-profit’ literature than amongst development NGOs, a point which is discussed in detail in Lewis (1998).

2. This was demonstrated by Joy Mackeith’s (1993) annotated bibliography NGO Management: A guide through the literature. Alan Fowler’s recent Striking a Balance (1997) sets out an ambitious management agenda for NGOs and is essential reading for NGO managers. Bonnie Koenig’s (1996) The management of international non-governmental organizations in the 1990s provides a good overview from an international NGO perspective.

REFERENCES

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.
And then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel,
And shining morning face, creeping like a snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the part,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation,
Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin’d,
With eyes severe, and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slipper’d pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose well sav’d a world too wide
For his shrunk shrunk; and his big manly voice,
turning again towards childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness, and mere oblivion.

William Shakespeare,
from As You Like It