
THE CONDITIONS AND CHARACTERISTICS THAT PERMIT NGOS TO IMPLEMENT PROGRAMS EFFECTIVELY

As ECCD becomes more and more of a priority throughout the world, donors and governments turn to NGOs to help support the development of services for young children and their families. As the result of increasing experience working with and through NGOs, those who have been involved are realizing the NGOs cannot do everything, and, in fact, they may not be the paragons of virtue it was once believed they were. Thus, before linking closely with an NGO there are some questions that need to be asked. They include the following:

WHAT IS THE NGO'S POSITION VIS-À-VIS GOVERNMENT?

The degree to which an NGO can be effective will depend somewhat on its political positioning. If, on the one hand, the NGO is essentially in an opposition role, governments are unlikely to want to engage with them in a project, no matter how effective they might think they are programmatically and administratively. It may be more fruitful to link with NGOs that are more neutral in terms of their political positions.

WHEN IS AN NGO NOT REALLY AN NGO?

It is important that NGOs not be seen as instruments of government. There are NGOs that play this role because they have been created by governments. These are frequently referred to as GONGOs (government NGOs). Generally these are heavily resourced by government and government personnel may staff them. In some instances they have been created as a way to circumvent government bureaucracy and/or to avoid being linked with a given political party. These quasi-governmental organizations are frequently able to receive funds from donors, bi-laterals and multi-laterals, and because of their more independent status the use of funds is more transparent than it might be if funds went directly to government. Nonetheless GONGOs are not true NGOs. They do not embody the advantages of independence, efficiency, and linkage to the community that may be necessary to implement an ECCD program effectively.

TO WHAT EXTENT IS THE NGO REPRESENTATIVE OF AND GENUINELY LINKED TO THE COMMUNITY?

Prior to the 1990s in Eastern and Central Europe there was no tradition of NGOs; the government provided for the people. However, as those countries are shifting to a market economy and the government is providing less and less, the number of NGOs has escalated at a rapid rate. Some of these NGOs have no linkage to communities and the needs of people whom they claim to serve. Known as briefcase NGOs, some entrepreneurs are able to put together portfolios of

accomplishments and present their case well. Thus before engaging in a discussion with an NGO about the implementation of an ECCD project it is important to have an in-depth understanding of their experience and to know that they are an authentic representative of those they claim to serve.

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE FUNDERS GUILTY OF THE PROLIFERATION OF NGOS IN THE SEARCH FOR INNOVATION?

Writing about the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved with income generation projects, Tendler (1987) described what she saw as a common phenomenon among them.

“Programs have difficulty achieving impact partly because they are plagued... with the syndrome of “reinventing the wheel.” NGOs claim they are pioneering with a new approach when, indeed, they are not, those who create projects allege that past efforts have not worked when, indeed, there is not enough of a record to know whether or not this is true... There is a lack of comparative knowledge about what has worked and what has not.” (1987, vi)

The same can certainly be argued for NGOs involved in innovative ECCD programming. Donors and foundations seek novelty—a new and better way to do things. In this drive to discover and promote new work, NGOs re-package what they do or go off in different directions in order to attract funding when the approaches they have already developed have not really had time (and possibly the necessary resources) to be fully evaluated. Thus, rather than always seeking the innovative, funders might be better advised to seek to explore more fully current efforts in order to understand their strengths and weaknesses and then to create new programs based on this understanding rather than seeking novelty for its own sake.

While some people have questioned whether sizeable funds should be committed to one NGO, as in the case of BRAC, others have argued that, given there is already a proliferation of groups, it is more valuable to provide adequate backing to those which are working well than to support numerous small, untried NGOs. (Smillie, 1988)

TO WHAT EXTENT DOES NGO STRENGTH, OFTEN DERIVED FROM ITS SIZE AND HOMOGENEITY, GET LOST WHEN THE NGO TRIES TO EXPAND TO REACH A LARGER NUMBER OF PEOPLE?

There are myriads of instances within the early childhood field of very good small-scale demonstration programs that have been unable to expand to reach large numbers of people. Ten years ago there was considerable pressure for projects to go to scale in order for the program to reach large numbers of people. But the process of going to scale—a process that requires a change of role and functions of staff, a distancing from the community, frequently a belief that what has been accomplished through a community-building process can be packaged and delivered over night, and a sense that there are models that can be transferred without adaptation from one setting to another—changes an organization. Roles change, the nature of the task changes (from one of responding to and working with communities to one of providing training on something developed elsewhere). Thus it is not surprising that there are few instances where small-scale projects have truly gone to scale. As argued elsewhere, it is advisable to seek coverage through implementation of a variety of approaches rather than assuming one model meets the needs of all.

HOW QUICKLY CAN AN NGO GROW, AND HOW LARGE CAN IT BECOME AND MAINTAIN ITS ORIGINAL FLEXIBILITY?

It is often difficult for NGOs to maintain a balanced growth. When an NGO is doing valued work there are times when donors want to provide additional support for that work. This is valid and important. What can happen, however, is that an NGO that has created a program with a structure and management style appropriate to the funding base can be overwhelmed and knocked off balance when expanded. When donors want to give the organization a large sum of money (perhaps five to ten times the current budget) the organization may not be able to accommodate the necessary changes. For example, if too many new people have to be brought into the organization in a short period of time the dynamics change, roles have to be shifted, and organizational characteristics that were critical to its operation (open discussions, mutually-shared goals and commitment, good communications among staff, trust relationships) may be lost. Ironically, while the more common case is for NGOs to discontinue their work as a result of a lack of funds, NGOs have collapsed as a result of a large influx of resources as well. Thus donors need to be aware of the possible implications of an influx of resources and their associated requirements in relation to the capacity of the NGO.

WHAT IS THE ABILITY OF NGOS TO ADMINISTER LARGE-SCALE PROGRAMS AS CONTRASTED WITH PILOT OR EXPERIMENTAL PROJECTS?

If there is a balanced growth and if leadership within the NGO sees the importance of and is able to take on an evolving role, then it is possible for them to operate large-scale programs and more complex systems. However, it will depend a great deal on the personalities of the leadership. Even what would appear to be moderate shifts in roles can be significant in terms of the long-term viability of a project. For example, among early childhood projects there are examples of creative people who have needed to become NGOs (to incorporate) in order to receive funding. Because of this they have been shifted from creative workers and trainers to administrators of organizations. This has not always been a successful shift. Unless the individual is willing to give up some measure of control (i.e., let someone else run the organization while they continue to do what they do best), there is likely to be a struggle between further developing the ideas which were funded and devoting time to the maintenance of an organization which may, in fact, get in the way of the message. The challenge is knowing when people should be supported to do what they are currently doing best, and when they are ready to take on new challenges. It is not always obvious.

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN WE SUPPORT NGOS TO THE EXCLUSION OF GOVERNMENT?

Many good ECCD programs have been developed by NGOs, and their flexibility, relatively small size, their linkages with communities, and their relatively low costs made them attractive organizations to fund. However, many of the large funders of ECCD programs (bi-laterals, UN agencies, Banks, and others) are mandated to work through government. More important, however, is the fact that the sustainability of programs is ultimately linked to government commitment to young children and their families. There is recognition of the need to bring together what NGOs can offer with the infrastructure that government can provide, and to link that with what communities need and their capacity to implement and maintain programs. Thus the current emphasis is on partnership.

TO WHAT EXTENT CAN THE COSTS PER BENEFICIARY IN PROJECTS DEVELOPED BY NGOS BE TAKEN ON BY GOVERNMENT IN AN EXPANSION OF THE PROGRAM?

The costs per beneficiary associated with small-scale projects are almost always more than governments can afford. Thus, a large-scale dissemination of any approach that has been developed first on a small scale will almost always necessarily involve decreasing per beneficiary costs. The challenge is to do this without loss of quality. This challenge is illustrated by a project in India. The Center for Learning Resources (CLR) in Pune produced excellent curriculum materials for use by preschool teachers. A complete set of materials adequate for a teacher's use for one year, with minimal replacement in subsequent years, was mass-produced at what appeared to be a relatively low cost (US\$16/set). While all who reviewed the materials agreed on their high quality, it was clear that if the materials were to be adopted on a large scale (i.e. within the Integrated Child Development Services), the costs to the government would be prohibitive. So, a compromise was made. CLR produced another set of materials at about half the original cost. This brought the costs within a manageable range, and the materials were then made available to government training centers. However, even that compromise did not get the materials directly to teachers, and the new materials are not as durable as those in the original set.

REFERENCES

- Smillie, I. 1988. BRAC at the Turning Point: The Donor Challenge. (unpublished paper).
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