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### **Evaluating Impact: the search for appropriate methods and instruments**

In seeking to understand what they may have achieved in terms of 'change' NGOs and other development agencies need to move beyond simply measuring output in quantitative terms: they need to move beyond the numbers game. Random surveys of project evaluations in a range of countries and sectors illustrate the extent of the problem: input and output, expressed quantitatively, are the only two consistent elements in most project monitoring and evaluation systems. Scant attention is paid to monitoring the changes over a longer period of time in order to assess whether they have had any sustainable impact on the original problem or situation. Thirty years ago, when NGOs and official agencies saw development principally in terms of economic and physical improvements, such a limited approach may have sufficed. In the current era, however, which sees development as being more about 'empowerment', 'participation' and 'capacity building' the demand is for an approach to evaluation which can monitor and explain the complex and significant changes in people's lives brought about by these processes. Having forced such processes onto the development agenda, NGOs should be concerned not merely to explain project activities but more importantly to assess their longer term impact.

The possible explanations for this widely recognised state of affairs are numerous:

1. Evaluating the impact of social development processes is complex and does not lend itself to easy quantification. Too often NGOs feel that the task is completed once the 'indicators' have been identified, without realising that it is the operationalisation of the indicators of these complex processes which is the major challenge. Building such an approach into NGO development projects will not be an easy task.
2. More critically, however, there is clearly a lack of internal capacity, in NGOs and official agencies, to develop appropriate methods and instruments to monitor, interpret and report on the qualitative changes (both positive and negative) which a development intervention might bring about. While little authoritative evidence is available, it is generally accepted that, in human resource terms, NGOs need a substantial injection of knowledge and skills in order to strengthen this critical aspect of their work.
3. There is very little incentive for project management to go beyond a reporting of numbers if donors are content merely to have confirmation that the inputs were used in the manner expected and that the programmed activities took place.

A number of recent studies have confirmed the extent and the nature of the problem among the NGO community. The evaluation of the Finnish NGO Support Programme in 1994, the SIDA evaluation of the Development Impact of Swedish NGOs in 1995 and the most recent 1997 OECD sponsored study 'Searching for Impact and Methods: NGO Evaluation' have all reported similar broad conclusions. They reveal that while evidence was plentiful and generally well reported in terms of achieving objectives, the studies overwhelmingly concluded that longer term impact proved difficult to evaluate. In most cases the monitoring had not taken place and the studies were unable to find reliable evidence of project impact. The recently completed Oxfam/Novib study into Impact Assessment might be expected to throw new light when it is published. Finally there is the current on-going INTRAC study of the Impact of Danish NGOs which is expected to present its findings in mid 1999. It is hoped that these two latter studies will throw some light onto such critical issues as:

- methods and techniques of beneficiary assessment in evaluating impact

- the use of self-evaluation
- the chain of input-output-effect-impact and how that can be built within an impact monitoring system; also whether the chain must be followed or can be bridged
- the different levels of impact evaluation
- the usefulness of instruments such as time-lines, key informants, focus groups and open questions, as opposed to indicators.

In the light of the above, the time may now be ripe for NGOs to make a substantial move to push their understanding beyond the immediate activities of a project and to develop the skills and systems necessary to assess their impact. NGOs cannot be content just to know that they have, for example, successfully distributed credit or run a training course. Development projects are about learning, experimenting and adjusting in order that real and sustainable changes - both physical and structural - can have an equally real and substantial impact on the lives of poor people. Unless a development agency can assess its work in these terms its achievements can only be measured in terms of delivery. NGOs have lead the way in arguing that 'development' is not just an exercise in physical improvement but is more to do with meaningful social change: NGOs should now ensure that they are able to explain the changes which they and those with whom they work are able to bring about.

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## **Strengthening Urban Partnerships**

As part of INTRAC's international workshop series, the conference Strengthening Urban Partnerships and NGOs for Urban Poverty Reduction, was held from the 1st to the 4th of February this year in Amman, Jordan. This successful event was organised in close association with the Institute of Housing Studies, Holland, and the Centre for Development and Emergency Practice, Oxford Brookes University in the UK. The conference was very warmly hosted by the Queen Zein Al-Sharaf Complex for Development, a division of Jordan's largest NGO the Queen Alia Fund for Social Development, whose chairperson Princess Basma Bint Talal, gave the workshop her generous patronage. With the sponsorship of DfID, Bilance and Novib, the event attracted over 60 international participants from more than 20 countries throughout the world.

The conference was based upon INTRAC's long standing NGOs in the City research programme, which examines the role and nature of urban NGOs and their relationship with other actors in development. Discussion of the research allowed development practitioners representing local government, donor agencies and NGOs from the northern and southern hemispheres to debate the partnership experiences of NGOs in diverse countries ranging from Bangladesh and India, to Peru and South Africa.

The issue of development partnerships has been the subject of much controversy in recent years and the Amman workshop was no exception. The importance of having a theoretical framework to underpin our understanding of relationships between NGOs, local government and beneficiary groups was a key theme to emerge. An adequate conceptualisation of partnerships, it was noted, required that they be placed on a spectrum according to the weighting of power within a relationship. Whilst partnerships work best when power is balanced and worst when the relationship is unbalanced, in reality most partnerships can neither be described as truly equitable or totally exploitative but exist somewhere on a spectrum between these two poles. The intention was to construct a way of seeing partnership issues which would bridge the gap between notions of NGOs relating to dysfunctional local government where any form of collaboration is doomed to failure, on the one hand, and southern NGOs relating to high performing local government, making their superfluous, on the other. This same illustration can be applied to the relationship between NGOs and their target groups, in that if marginalised communities have too little power, the role of the NGO becomes paternal and unaccountable; whereas if the beneficiary group has no real need of NGO support, the rationale for the organisation is removed.

The implication for NGOs of this conceptualisation of partnership issues, is that successful forms of co-operation are based upon a long-term strategy combined with an attention to short-term practical needs. This requires an assessment of the relative merits of each stakeholder's organisational capacity and a detailed consideration of the specific roles each partner is to take. Such an approach needs to be based upon an early diagnosis of the aims of a project and the commitment, flexibility and leadership skills to carry it through.

A more detailed analysis of these ideas, and others discussed at the conference, will be available in a major forthcoming publication by INTRAC. There will also be an informative series of occasional papers looking at urban NGOs in four case study cities - Lima, Dhaka, Addis Ababa, Ahmedabad - which will be available from our publications department towards the end of May this year.

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## NGOs and Decentralised Government in Africa

INTRAC has recently completed research on the relationship between NGOs and decentralised government in Africa. Given the trend towards decentralisation of central government authority in Africa since the late 1980s it is vital that NGOs develop appropriate strategies for working with decentralised government in supporting greater democracy in local governance.

A basic position taken in the research is that civil society and the state are mutually dependent in Africa and creating an analytical dichotomy between them is neither appropriate nor helpful. Development NGOs need to consider supporting elements within civil society and government in order to promote democratic and sustainable development. This applies to decentralised levels of government and it is therefore essential that NGOs understand the relationships between civil society and local levels of government before planning and implementing development interventions.

Key findings on the inter-relationships between NGOs and decentralised government are:

- There are a number of examples where NGOs have worked very effectively with decentralised government in providing local services.
- A key factor to successful collaboration is a long-term involvement in a district and a clear policy commitment from both parties.
- The budgets of many international NGOs far exceed that of government and some international NGOs have been accused of undermining local government through operating parallel structures.
- Some NGOs operate with minimal contact with the government, have little interest in national sectoral policy objectives or district development plans, and have little local accountability.
- NGOs projects have also been seen as harbouring the political opposition to the local authorities.

Key policy issues for NGOs which are suggested in the study are:

- Each country has its own unique combination of central and local government powers. In order for NGOs to engage strategically with decentralised government, rather than in an ad hoc manner as is commonly the case, they need to recognise the roles and responsibilities of different government bodies at the district level.
- NGOs need to recognise the political nature of administration and policy implementation in Africa and that it is at the level of local implementation that key contests over allocation of resources are realised.
- Engagement with decentralised government, whether these be deconcentrated administrative offices or local councils, at the level of implementing development programmes do offer opportunities for NGOs both to improve public sector management and advocate on behalf of excluded groups.
- Central policy does have a potentially vital role at the local level. Neither devolved local governments nor local civil society organisations have a monopoly on democracy.
- Both individual NGOs and the NGO community as a whole need to think strategically about how best to address this central-local government dynamic and how to engage in advocacy that covers both national policy formulation and local policy implementation.

The full report of this research is available from INTRAC as an occasional paper, No. 18. Further research on this issue is being planned and INTRAC would be interested to hear from NGOs' about their experiences of working with local government: please contact [andrew.clayton@intrac.org](mailto:andrew.clayton@intrac.org) for further information.

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Editor: Vicky Brehm, Researcher, INTRAC

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Welcome to *Capacity Building News No. 2*. In this issue we outline the key themes discussed at the Capacity Building Panel of the *NGOs in a Global Future* conference. Anne Garbutt shares with us her experience of institutional development in Central Asia, and details are given of training courses and a new publication that may be of interest to readers.

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## **NGOs in a Global Future Conference - Capacity Building Panel**

This conference, held in Birmingham in January, attracted over 350 delegates world-wide. Brian Pratt, the Chief Executive of INTRAC and Tony Dogbe, from CEDEP, Ghana, were invited to chair the Capacity Building Panel. The presenters for the panel were all experienced in the practice of capacity building, although the debates and presentations offered perspectives from a micro, meso and macro level.

The papers reflected a wide range of experiences of specific capacity building programmes. For example, Margaret Mwaura from CORAT (a church based NGO support organisation in Kenya) explored the importance of capacity building through leadership development within a church context. John Hailey, INTRAC senior associate, focused on the promotion of learning through a control and consent model, based on experience of working with the AKFC and NGOs in South Asia.

At a meso level, the panel explored the importance of partnerships and capacity building through two very different presentations. The first analysed a gender and development partnership of a British University and Centre for Development Services (CDS) in Cairo, and the second compared two forms of partnership: one between an international NGO and local NGOs in India and another between a private sector company in Europe and Indian NGOs. Conclusions suggested that the latter were rather less paternalistic and hierarchical in their approach than those between the NGOs.

At a macro level, the panel looked at an example of collaboration between organisations in Mozambique, which shared the experience of an international NGO promoting the development of an agenda for action for children at a socio-macro level. Anne Garbutt also presented lessons learned from NGOs in Central Asia from a wide ranging programme of institutional development in Central Asia, further explored in the following article.

Cutting across these were two presentations about capacity building in organisations. The first, from Rick James, summarised lessons from several experiences of organisational development in Malawi; the second was a more tentative and evolving piece on the changing nature of organisations in South Africa. Finally, there was a session explaining the work of the newly formed International Forum for Capacity Building with different speakers explaining some of the background to the forum and plans for the future.

By concentrating on actual experience, the panel provided an opportunity for key themes, in a variety of different contexts to be discussed. From this we were able to make tentative moves towards clarifying both needs and the types of support required for improved capacity building in the context of strengthening civil society.

A publication incorporating the papers and the discussions surrounding them will be published later this year. The Secretariat for the International Forum on Capacity Building is currently held by PRIA, 42, Tughlakabad Institutional Area, New Delhi - 110 062 Email: [pria@sdalt.ernet.in](mailto:pria@sdalt.ernet.in) or visit their new website at [www.pria.org](http://www.pria.org)

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## **Institutional Development of NGOs in Central Asia**

Building the capacity of NGOs alone is not enough. The environment in which NGOs exist effects the way they work, the way they think and the way they are able to operate. INTRAC has an [Institutional Development of NGOs programme in Central Asia](#). The programme contributes to the process of democratic transition in Central Asia by

supporting the emergence of a vibrant, effective and independent NGO sector in the region. In 1996, Jonathan Goodhand and Brian Pratt wrote that the organisational development and capacity building support to NGOs would only allow for limited development of the NGO sector while the "environment" remained poor.

INTRAC realised early on in 1994 that there was an absence of viable structures to work with. Multi-lateral agencies assumed that with the collapse of the old state structures, local NGOs would take on the role of creating a new safety net for the vulnerable. This was, however, going to be impossible without considerable input and support to the nascent NGO sector.

The NGO sector continues to function in a fledgling state throughout Central Asia, the oldest NGOs having developed since independence in 1991 (other than the state run social groups now also registered as NGOs). The present programme continues to ask itself three fundamental questions: · What is the environment ? · Who are the players ? · Who should INTRAC be working with ? In attempting to answer these questions, more questions are continually raised. INTAC finds, therefore, it is essential to remain flexible whilst working with NGOs in countries of transition.

At present INTRAC's programme has an integrated strategy working at multiple levels throughout Central Asia. The programme needs to operate at a number of levels otherwise progress made, for instance, within the NGO sector - developing sustainable and grounded approaches that also give due attention to NGOs' organisational needs - can easily be undermined by the short-term project-based funding offered by donors. INTRAC works closely with local NGO support organisations, in a mentoring role, helping them to prepare long-term strategies. At the same time, however, INTRAC also works with donors, through round table meetings and forums, helping them to understand why NGOs need long-term strategies and support.

The environment includes all the key players and institutions that the NGOs have to deal with in their day-to-day activities, as well as the institutions they may not deal with but who may have considerable influence over the success of their work.

These players include, the Government, donors, educational institutions, NGO support organisations, NGO co-ordination bodies, NGOs themselves and other civil society groups such as workers unions.

INTRAC works with any section of any sector that has an influence on the Central Asian NGO sector. Since we have remained flexible in our approach this includes any new players as well as those mentioned above. This approach demands that the staff who work alongside the Central Asia NGOs are of a senior level and with NGO management skills that they can call on at any time.

If you would like more information on the above programme please contact [Anne Garbutt](#), Central Asia Programme Manager, INTRAC

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## FORTHCOMING

### Seminar

#### **Institutional Development with NGOs in Central Asia**

Wednesday May 12 th 1999, London

- The emergence of NGOs in the transnational countries of Central Asia
- The institutional framework
- Strengths and weaknesses of NGOs in Central Asia
- Lessons learned and future plans

### Courses

#### **Organisational Development and Change**

1st - 5th November 1999, Oxford

- Understanding organisations: how they work, develop and adapt in a rapidly changing environment
- Approaches to Organisational Development: principles of good practice
- Different tools and methods in OD and management of change
- The learning organisation
- The application of OD insights in your own organisation and work situations

#### **Capacity Building - An Organisational Approach**

8th - 12th November 1999, Oxford

- Relating an understanding of organisations to the way you work with partner organisations
- Unpacking Capacity Building - what is good practice ?

- Examining the role of Northern NGO / donors in capacity building
  - Exploring new forms of partnership
  - Identifying implications for your organisation and your work
- For further details please contact [janice.giffen@intrac.org](mailto:janice.giffen@intrac.org)

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