

Development INGOs

Retirement, replacement or rejuvenation?

The NGO community agrees that the foreign aid frame is no longer a viable option, even if that means that NGOs have to evolve into something else. The question is, should today's NGO be retired, replaced or rejuvenated?

What is the right thing to do when you reach sixty? This is a question that many NGOs, which were founded in the burst of internationalism that followed the end of World War II, are asking themselves today as they reach late middle age. Oxfam celebrated its 60th anniversary in 2002 and CARE in 2005, while Hivos will reach this milestone in 2028 and ActionAid three years after that.

Most people at such a respectable age would start thinking about retirement, pulled by the attraction of endless days in the garden and pushed by the need to hand over to a new generation of leaders with fresh ideas and enthusiasm. But that seems to be the last thing on the minds of agencies like these, despite their difficulties adapting to a rapidly changing world.

Another step change

Such criticism is understandable given that NGOs have already enjoyed a full and productive life, but not one that necessarily prepares them for the challenges that lie ahead. They were born with optimism but not much experience, grew rapidly in their twenties and thirties as NGOs became more popular, and responded pretty well to the first signs of a mid-life crisis in the 1990s when questions about their impact and accountability sparked a shift from 'delivery to leverage' as it was described at the time: building up research, advocacy, capacity building and other activities around concrete interventions of various kinds.

However, since 2000 there have been few signs of another step change like this. The revival of political support for foreign aid has provided a security blanket for current practice, and most NGOs have continued to strengthen their 'leverage'

within a conventional development frame by building up their research and advocacy without changing their structure, role or position in society in any fundamental way.

Some have become bolder by internationalizing aspects of their management or making the co-creation of knowledge central to their identity. However, most organizations today would be instantly recognizable to their founders, still raising money in the rich world and spending it in poorer countries, adding more 'bells and whistles' along the way.

Is this going to be enough in a world that is changing so quickly and so profoundly? And if not, what pathways are available for the future? Retirement may not be necessary or desirable (after all, the world is not exactly overflowing with organizations that promote solidarity and human rights) but rejuvenation is certainly required.

This is good news. As I explore in a think-piece for Hivos, titled '[Thick problems and thin solutions](#)' (see box), exciting times lie ahead for NGOs that can seize the opportunities for transformation provided by a more fluid global context.

Richer countries no longer provide an 'end point' to aim for in the processes of development and social change, because they generate too much inequality and too many social and environmental failures to serve as an example. In fact, no contemporary society has figured out how to tie economic growth to human flourishing in a future that will be dominated by the demands of climate change and other collective problems that cannot be tackled by the 'North' or the 'South' in isolation.

Therefore, existing systems of knowledge, politics and economics must be transformed, not simply expanded or made more accessible to the poor (wherever it is they live). So the tasks of social change are becoming 'thicker' by the day – more complicated, messier, more politicized and contested.

Unfortunately, the solutions promoted by most development agencies are actually getting 'thinner'. They are fixated on speed, growth, numbers and material success; they

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are dominated by technology and other ‘magic bullets’; they are framed by a philosophy that reduces human values to market competition; and they are aimed at increasing participation in unsustainable economies and polities that seem incapable of reconciling different interests.

Intermediary position

Despite the huge tasks that lie ahead there is little talk of transformation in the current scenario, but rather a hope that by doing more of the same more cost-effectively, we will get where we need to go. This is unconvincing. However, NGOs can act as bridges between ‘thick’ and ‘thin’ by integrating the best from their values with the innovations of today, extending their impact into the deeper structures of society and becoming agencies of transformation in the process.

For example, instead of conventional microfinance and micro-enterprise development they can support more radical interventions that alter the way wealth is produced, distributed and used, such as ‘peer production’ and measures that alter the balance of power further up supply chains. Climate change will force NGOs to shift from a focus on the fairer distribution of abundance to the much harder task of managing scarcity and its personal and political implications, since we know only too well that copying the consumption patterns of the rich world is unsustainable, a shift that will challenge the paradigm on which NGOs have built their activities.

But is it really possible to re-tool NGOs in this way? Maybe not for organizations turning over hundreds of millions of euros or dollars and which have so much at stake, but in general terms I think NGOs are well-suited to embrace these challenges precisely because of their ‘intermediary’ position.

They are intermediaries geographically (sitting between different countries and levels of local-global action), institutionally (working in the spaces between civil society, government and the market), functionally (committed to justice but flexible

in how to realize it in practice), and philosophically (as ‘pragmatic visionaries’ who strive to embody their values in concrete action). What is required is a change of mindset that seeks to make the most of these links at every opportunity.

It is no accident that visioning exercises are increasingly common in the NGO community. Nor is it coincidence that they all reach pretty much the same conclusion: it is time to ‘retire’ the foreign aid frame even if the organization evolves into something else. But these organizations have been re-visioning themselves for twenty years or more without doing very much about it. The ‘future may be calling’ as the title of the [new Hivos initiative](#) puts it, but what is it telling us? Is it time for retirement, for rejuvenation or for replacement by a different set of institutions? You tell me. ■

‘Thick’ problems facing NGOs

If the values and visions of NGOs are going to mean anything in the future – whether expressed in terms of ‘development’, social change or human happiness and fulfilment – then we had better start preparing for these transformations now.

But consider for a moment what this would actually involve: the alliances that would have to be constructed across so many different and conflicting interests; the constituencies that would have to be created against the tide of self-interest that runs so deep in societies today; the shifts in industry, agriculture and business that are required to promote greater self-reliance; the reforms in finance and investment that are needed to nurture long-term sustainability; and the changes in our own identities that a less materialistic worldview demands.

This is what ‘thick’ problems look like, thick because they are so complex, politicized and unpredictable, and these thick problems will dominate the landscape of our work in the century to come.