

INGOs as agents of change

Shedding the charity cloak

INGOs need to intensify their support to, or even become part of, global social movements if they want to introduce structural change. They must also push for the creation of a global governance system for global public goods.

Contributors to the ‘Future Calling’ debate are calling for INGOs to abandon what has been a primarily palliative approach to development. Instead, INGOs should make structural political change a top priority in their response to a rapidly changing world and its increasingly ‘thick’ problems (world poverty, climate change, the food crisis and the financial crisis, to name but a few). How to go about achieving this change in approach is not self-evident, however.

By and large, many INGOs are service providers of aid (see ‘The road not taken’ in this issue). They aim to eradicate poverty with neutral or ‘technical’ development interventions. Of course there are inspiring exceptions. But on the whole, managerialism is prospering while there is a shortage of INGOs conducting in-depth analyses of the complex and interrelated root causes of local and global injustice.

Not fade away

The service-providing approach is precarious, according to Icaza Rosalba, senior lecturer at the International Institute of Social Studies, the Netherlands. Indeed, it stands to jeopardize the efforts to eradicate poverty and injustice. Rosalba also stresses that INGOs have increasingly become ‘intermediary’ organizations in recent decades, managing solutions for others. This has come at a price. The emancipatory goals that some INGOs stood for are fading away as a result.

She cites the story of Valentina Rosendo Cantu as an example. An indigenous woman from Guerrero, Mexico, Cantu was raped by soldiers when she was 17 years old and since has started a fight against impunity. Her suffering, says Rosalba, ‘cannot be appropriated by intermediary organizations who file reports to donors. In other words, the search for dignified justice and what this entails, doesn’t fit within the NGO log frames.’

Cantu’s story may be a local case of injustice, but it paints a larger picture. The fight for justice waged by INGOs has ebbed away at both the local and global levels. Indeed, they put more effort into talking about the plight of people in the South than fighting with them against the power structures

that are obstructing development and justice. This is precisely the reason why so many contributors to the ‘Future Calling’ debate are calling on INGOs to change their approach and introduce a radical structural change at the local and global levels.

Challenging power

Structural change means INGOs will have to leave their comfort zone and re-politicize themselves. Indeed, as service providers and intermediaries in an aid industry that believes poverty can be solved with mainly technical solutions, they have become increasingly apolitical. Re-politicizing is not the same as intervening in party politics, as some INGOs have done in the past. Rather, it means having the courage to challenge existing power relations – politically, socially and economically.

‘It is about changing the division of power, of access to and control of knowledge and resources,’ according to Farah Karimi, general director of Oxfam Novib.’ Karimi argues that as the scramble for land, water, food, fuel and other resources intensifies, the most vulnerable will inevitably end up with ‘the short end of the stick’.

The ‘Future Calling’ debate produced three alternatives of how INGOs can change or at least challenge the existing power structures. First, INGOs should join social movements locally and worldwide, and eschew partnerships with local NGOs that have also been ensnared by the bureaucratic aid regime.

Second, INGOs should support solidarity – not only solidarity with the poor and most vulnerable, or what Paul Collier calls the ‘trapped’ poorest countries in the world, but also with the people who fight for justice in emerging powers and the West itself. Finally, INGOs representing social movements in a global civil society should insist on the creation of a global governance system that safeguards global public goods. ➤

By **Evert-jan Quak**, editor at *The Broker* and freelance journalist specialized in development economics.

Joining social movements

INGOs may have begun their lives as the self-appointed spokespersons of the poor in the South, but today they are no longer accepted unquestioningly. What's more, there is a gap between INGOs and social movements. Few INGOs have succeeded in linking up effectively with social movements – such as slum dwellers and landless peasants in Brazil, for example, or the gay movement in Uganda, or migrant workers in China and the democracy and free speech movements in Arab countries – or with the broader narrative of structural change.

INGOs probably still view themselves as part of an international network of organizations that cooperates on the basis of principles like equality, trust and mutual respect. Willem Elbers, lecturer in cultural anthropology and development studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, points out that in many cases this is mere rhetoric. These values conflict severely with a managerialist approach, which only values 'direct utility' and 'assumes a low-trust environment' with their partners.

So, if INGOs want to transform themselves into game-changers and introduce structural change at the local and global levels, 'INGOs cannot remain the ones with the sack of money and the unavoidable strings attached to it,' argues Willemijn Verkoren, head of the Centre for International Conflict Analysis and Management at Radboud University Nijmegen. INGOs should ditch the tired division between North and South and re-establish ties with a buoyant network of global social movements to create a real global civil society.

To be truly global, this global civil society should not focus exclusively on the poor in low-income countries. Peter

Konijn, director of Knowing Emerging Powers, points out that 71% of the poor live in middle-income countries today. INGOs should therefore establish strategic alliances with a new group of civil society or social movements in emerging powers such as Turkey, Brazil, India, China, South Africa and Indonesia. Fortunately for the INGOs, says Konijn, the number of civic movements in many middle-income countries are on the rise – especially movements that are increasingly demanding accountability and anti-corruption measures.

Solidarity not aid

Global interdependency is another important point for INGOs to concentrate on. The global interdependency thinking of the 1970s was pushed to the margins by the dependency theory, which separated the world into a periphery of underdeveloped states and a core of wealthy states, says Verkoren. But we now live in a world that is globalizing at unprecedented speed. As a result, local problems are increasingly important at the global level and vice versa. An example is the interrelationship between climate change and local food security.

The current trend is still to play the blame game. The poor are responsible for their own underdevelopment, for example. They remain poor because they live in 'failing states' and have 'bad governance'. But Verkoren warns that there is no place for the blame game in an interdependent world. We all share the same responsibilities because we are part of the same global system. Other people's problems are our problems too. That is why a one-way aid flow to the poor is a grossly flawed system. In an interdependent world system, concludes Verkoren, INGOs have to 'return from aid to solidarity'.

INGOs do not have to look far to rethink their approach. Indeed, they can start close to home. Verkoren uses the Netherlands as an example. It can contribute to peace in war-torn countries by speaking out against weapons transports through Schiphol Airport and the Port of Rotterdam. 'The Netherlands has long been in the top-10 of arms exporting countries. That export is facilitated by export credit insurance for companies exporting to developing countries (including Nigeria and Iraq), which is often used for military exports. The Dutch government's practice of re-insuring these policies makes the export of weapons to poor countries a low-risk and thereby attractive business endeavour.'

Linking local to global

No one is suggesting that INGOs are completely neglecting the global justice agenda or the key issues on it, such as unfair international trade policy, pharmaceutical patents on life-saving medicines, the arms trade or neoliberal policies promoted by international financial institutions. The problem is more that INGOs' global justice agenda is 'fragmented and lacks vision', says Verkoren.

INGOs therefore need new ways of linking local problems with global issues and vice versa. For example, Chiku

Not all gloom and doom

It is not all gloom and doom for INGOs. There are plenty of success stories. Josine Stremmelaar and Remko Berkhout from Hivos cite several examples. 'From Oxfam's work on the Robin Hood Tax, to Save the Children's many achievements in the field of children's rights. From the groundbreaking work of [Just Associates](#) for women's movements to the courage and resolve of human rights groups fighting impunity in Central America. A new generation of Hivos programmes in East Africa connects "traditional" civic actors with ICT-savvy entrepreneurs to drive citizen-led initiatives for accountable governance.'

Some INGO successes are kept hidden. For example, Stremmelaar and Berkhout mention that the WRR (the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy) report *Less Pretension, More Ambition* embraces the innovative internet platform Ushahidi 'as a fresh alternative to the established NGO scene, but it forgets to mention that since its early days, Hivos has been a key investor. NGOs may have not turned out to be the magic bullets to "fix" development, but there is plenty of evidence of a much more meaningful impact on the global civil society eco-system than its critics suggest.'



Alamy | Malcolm Schuyf

Malunga, a Malawian author and organizational development consultant, suggests that some of the main problems in Africa are the consequence of ‘bad or greedy leaders who put self before the people, a culture among the citizens of accepting a negative status quo rather than fighting for change’. But international politics, trade rules and the aid system also shoulder part of the blame by maintaining the structures that enable incompetent leaders to flourish.

The same can be said about the problems caused by the current economic and financial crises, argues Wieck Wildeboer, ex-ambassador for the Netherlands to Oman, Bolivia and Cuba. ‘Corporate leaders put profits, shareholder prices and bonuses before public goals,’ he writes. To ensure that the activities of private enterprises are in line with public goals, economic power structures need to be re-balanced at both the local and global levels.

Wildeboer and Verkoren would therefore like to see INGOs interacting more with social movements in the West itself, such as the Occupy Movement, that challenge the world system and its imbalances in order ‘to channel it into a real power base’.

Globally ours

INGOs will face key challenges in a multi-polar world as they attempt to establish effective and just governance mechanisms to manage the key interdependent global

problems, or ‘thick’ issues as Michael Edwards from Demos in New York puts it. These thick issues include climate change, loss of biodiversity, food and financial crises, poverty, inequality, and scarcity of natural resources and energy. These problems can only be solved by global collective action. However, the global governance mechanisms to do so are lacking.

Rob Annandale, a journalist and founder of the blog Beyond Aid, implicitly points to the incompetence of the global governance mechanism by asking when the last time was that international negotiations produced an accord that was ambitious, legally binding and inclusive all at once. What’s more, says Annandale, because attempts to sign an agreement on global public goods continuously fail, INGOs that are involved in these negotiations run the risk of ‘legitimizing a process that holds little prospect of delivering the significant changes they seek’. Nation states will only push through an agreement if they compromise on their short-term national interests and deal with the free rider problem.

Konijn foresees severe problems for INGOs wanting to introduce a global governance system for global public goods, however. He questions ‘whether the Western world order, as we know it, will even persist under non-Western leadership’ in a new world order with a dominant role for emerging powers. His answer is quite pessimistic. ‘In a multi-polar world there will be less support for interventions >



Reuters / David Gray

by the international community as a reflection of the limited consensus. This limits the space for INGOs to mobilize the international community into action.'

So the INGOs' role in bridging the gap between interdependence and the absence of global democratic institutions to manage it depends, according to Konijn, on 'their ability to adapt themselves to the reality of the multi-polar world'. But this should not prevent INGOs from developing more tools for implementing new global values – bearing in mind that these values should represent citizens and not the countries they live in.

INGOs must begin by pushing for a global democratic structure with accountability mechanisms and incentives that do not rely on the current nation-state system, argues Annandale. 'And since the task will be a difficult one, they must do what NGOs are forever calling on governments to do: work together.'

Neophytes and neo-citizens

Are INGOs dying a slow death or will they rise to the challenge and transform themselves into agents of structural change? Whatever the case may be, generalizations about INGOs abound, according to Josine Stremmelaar and Remko Berkhout of Hivos, and they tend to obscure the fact that many INGOs do groundbreaking, innovative work (see box).

Stremmelaar and Berkhout have a point, of course, but few INGOs' have managed to find an integrated mode of dealing with a multipolar and interdependent world. It is worrying,

they themselves point out, that INGOs are not creating any momentum at present because they 'are hiding their most progressive work behind a terminology of charity to please the general public'.

If INGOs decide to orient themselves towards becoming agents of change, they would be free to join the real game-changers and the social media bandwagon, or become what Ahmed Zidan, editor in chief of the Mideast Youth network, calls neo-citizens. A neo-citizen, Zidan writes, is a 'fully oriented individual armed with effective social media in a critical attention age, or post-information-age'.

Neo-citizens were the driving force behind recent battles to change power structures. Think of the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement and the 15-M (Indignados) movement in Spain. Most of these neo-citizens are young men and women, and they acted without any help whatsoever from INGOs. 'For INGOs to strengthen their leverage and take such frustrated youth by the hand,' writes Zidan, 'they have to mainly stay committed and focused on the organization's main goal, and to stop, or at least limit, any possible governmental infiltration.'

Perhaps INGOs can reinvent themselves by joining forces with social and civic movements, and particularly with the neophytes, the online movements and the neo-citizens. This would not only help them to solve the legitimacy dilemma and 'to shed the uncomfortable old-fashioned charity cloak once and for all,' as Verkoren puts it, but it would also arm INGOs in their effort to create a balance between the existing and emerging power relations of a multipolar, interdependent world order. ■