

# The art of framing

NGOs have been joining forces to increase their effectiveness. They need to form alliances with social movements as well, however, to avoid working in isolation from broader social currents.

In nearly every nook and cranny of the world today, NGOs are active. Many of them aim to generate social change. Some of them work together to achieve this change at both local and national levels. A study conducted in 2008 and 2009<sup>1</sup> analyzed the nature of interaction between NGOs operating in Southern Africa, the Andes region and India. Their work covered a number of fields such as rights for women, gays and lesbians, people affected by HIV/AIDS, and ethnic and caste minorities. These for the most part experienced NGOs operate at local and national levels with aims to generate social change. Local interviewers probed senior staff members of each organization about what had driven or hampered interaction with other NGOs. They concluded that NGO collaboration can yield substantial benefits:

- More influence over how issues are talked about. Strong coalitions can create channels and venues in which questions can be interpreted and debated from new angles. NGOs can extend their influence by shaping public discourse.
- Organizations representing groups under threat or working in politically repressive settings see strength in numbers. They can shield themselves from attack and gain support by joining networks that address larger agendas.
- Collaborating with other NGOs can generate enhanced status and visibility.
- Interaction can help NGOs access the media and people with political influence, as well as a wider range of social organizations.
- Enhanced interaction enables NGOs to expand or adjust their range of themes.

NGOs tend to stress the first point, highlighting the importance of developing ‘talk’ among NGOs. Resulting discourses offer ways to clarify identities, sharpen ideas and improve development and human rights practice.

### Advocacy over skills

The most intensive collaboration, according to the study, usually takes place within a specific human rights sector. In India and Latin America, it sometimes developed on the basis of geography (typically in a metropolitan area), but

### summary

- A study analyzing the nature of interaction between 55 NGOs with other NGOs indicates several key ways they can benefit from collaborating with each other and with social movements.
- But few NGOs have begun to adjust their collaboration in ways that robustly match new realities.
- These alliances could start by reframing social issues, thereby improving their impact on mainstream discussions.
- For greater political impact, donors might extend their focus beyond lobbying and advocacy to mobilization and movement building.

thematic emphases – rights of women, minorities and other marginalized groups – tend to prevail in the long run.

Collaboration persists when NGOs share similar political ideologies. Outright breakdowns, though infrequent, arise from disagreements about objectives and aspirations. There were few cases of short-term, joint operations for achieving specific goals. But most interaction is a routine matter, mainly for sharing information and ideas. Many see these routine activities as elementary parts of activism and its interpretive potential.

A few of the older, more established NGOs in the study question the motives for collaboration. Donor-driven interaction in particular raises doubts. What is the added value of NGO leaders flying from one conference to another? Much more can probably be gained by mobilizing constituencies. But are donors getting these messages?

The study suggests they are not. Informants in Southern Africa, for example, point out that most donor-supported



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capacity building for NGOs overemphasizes advocacy and lobbying, whereas the many sophisticated skills needed to mobilize citizens for collective action get less attention. Donors as a rule do not focus on social movements. Yet often that is exactly what is needed.

### **Framing**

NGOs working in isolation from broader social currents and from politics are not very effective. Today, with NGOs and their donors under pressure to show tangible results, the quest for effectiveness is on. Good intentions no longer suffice. Given the remarkable achievements of emancipatory social movements – from cleaner air and water to votes for the politically marginalized – their potential political clout demands respect.

Some NGOs and a few donors have therefore begun focusing more on social movements. They try to find ways of working with them, but also to understand how these movements gain traction and move ahead. Movements are an older and looser form of organization than NGOs. Their informal nature – no bank accounts and no one to submit reports to – poses challenges to the ways the aid system does business.

One way of increasing movements' effectiveness is through the art of framing. Framing is like using a lens through which issues can be viewed and talked about in new ways. This brings us back to the importance NGOs attach to the discussion and development of common idioms and frameworks for interpretation. Indeed, NGOs could draw on social constructivist theories on social movement framing.

Social constructivists pay attention to how meaning and collective identities are shaped and effectively conveyed. They underscore the importance of ideas, morality and emotions in social movements. Take the case of public

systems of social protection. Most Europeans take it for granted that the unemployed, disabled and others are entitled to public assistance. Whereas a few generations back, such entitlements were almost unknown. Their public status had to be constructed. This involved efforts to reframe public welfare as a right rather than an act of charity. Disadvantaged groups were recast as fellow citizens, not second-class recipients of arbitrary alms. This earned the idea public respect and political force.

Such reframing, born of continual interaction and discussion among constituent members with their varying identities and 'blood relations', helps build the basis for collective action and political leverage. This interaction helps draw in more people and mobilize them in broader and more effective campaigns.

For example, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) organizations in India work to frame LGBT rights as human rights. LGBT issues then enter policy debates as human rights, making it more acceptable for local government, health authorities and the media to discuss them. Human rights NGOs may also be more willing to back LGBT issues, thus increasing the support base and political clout.

Movements often fail in their efforts to challenge hegemonic discourses, however, which by definition mask or sugar-coat the realities of subordination. There is an urgent need today, for example, to reframe ideas governing the 'self-regulation' of business and catchphrases such as 'self-correcting markets'. These ideas set the stage for today's economic crisis, with its devastating impacts on pro-poor, emancipatory agendas. Yet such ideas are now acknowledged as bogus and have simply not been challenged with sufficient force.

### **Mobilizing identity**

Identities in social movements are often multiple. Socio-economic and political roles shape the construction of identities. Identities can be anchored in many ways. For example, people may see themselves as Muslims *and* women *and* workers in the informal economy. They may see themselves as disadvantaged tribal minorities *and* as people affected by environmental destruction.

In her 2008 study of women's organizations, *Changing Their World: Concepts and Practices of Women's Movements*, Indian sociologist Srilatha Batliwala shows that women are organized according to 'particular identities, categories and circumstances', as opposed to the more generic classification of 'women'. These multiple identities and affinities can be effective for mobilizing social resources, such as increasing movement membership, cultivating allies and building political collaboration. But because identities and affiliations can run far deeper than donor and NGO agendas, bottom-up drivers of social movements can be disconnected from the top-down drivers of outside interveners.

The British political scientist James Putzel argues in his 2004 discussion paper *The Politics of 'Participation': Civil Society, the State and Development Assistance* that 'poor people

#### **What advances NGO collaboration? What sets it back?**

The research points to several factors in support of NGO interaction:

- Personal trust, particularly at a leadership level. Without this social 'glue' at the top, NGOs cannot easily keep inter-organizational links alive.
- Specific socio-political settings and events. Local or national political crises often drive interaction.
- Forging common ways of talking about and projecting issues and values. Diversity on this front can spell trouble.
- Incentives to collaborate. These may be conscious but have less to do with short-term gains, such as campaign victories, than with long-term benefits for each organization.

The research also suggests a number of factors putting collaboration at risk, or blocking it altogether:

- Irreconcilable differences in organizations' ideologies and objectives.
- Irreconcilable differences in leadership styles.
- Competition among NGOs for donor funding.
- NGO fears of being submerged by others.



Members of Brazil's landless workers movement

often participate in politics on bases that objectively have little to do with their interest in poverty reduction, or that may be counterproductive to any goal of poverty reduction'. In other words, mobilizing the poor politically is often achieved on the basis of their language, ethnicity, geography or religion. 'In fact,' Putzel says, 'it may be much more common for poor people to participate in these ways than around programmes or projects designed to directly improve their economic position in society.'

This poses challenges, though not necessarily insuperable ones, of how to forge sufficient adherence to a common idiom and a common frame. NGOs may risk aligning themselves with visceral public sentiments that deny respect and exclude people. In India, for example, movements in support of rights for Muslims, tribal and lower-caste people have aroused ugly counter-movements. NGOs and donors have to respect the complexity of identities and interests as they look for common points to forge alliances with emancipatory social movements.

### Political de-nationalization

How can NGOs use collaboration to get a grip on changing power relations and gain access to political spaces? The study suggests the following:


- The NGOs in question put priority on issues at the national level. However, stronger NGOs tend also to claim spaces in international settings, something weaker NGOs cannot achieve.
- NGOs realize that effective advocacy also relies on strength in numbers and thus on bringing various groups together. Success here can depend on shaping interpretations, or framing issues as well as on seizing political opportunities. NGOs stress that these twin powers of shaping ideas and mobilizing people are vital for moving forward.

The de-nationalization of politics and emphasis on nationally strong NGOs suggests that more attention needs to be devoted to locally based NGOs that liaise with local institutions. Since many NGOs work at a national level, it will be interesting to see to what extent they ally themselves with social movements. This may require a form of collaboration different from what they are used to.

Indeed, NGOs grappling with issues at a national level must now also get to grips with supra-national levels. Decision-making power seems to be migrating outward and upward, moving from territorial to supra-territorial levels. NGOs today face local authorities, such as in cities, with less overall decision-making power, yet are burdened with more responsibilities to implement policies decided elsewhere and to deal with social problems generated by many of those policies. Some Latin American NGOs have started reporting on their links with local government institutions. But few NGOs have begun to adjust their collaboration in ways that robustly match these new realities. ■

<sup>1</sup> The study described in this article was commissioned by Hivos, the Netherlands. Coordinated by Dütting and Sogge, the research was carried out in 2008 and 2009 by Daniela Sanchez, Nandita Gandhi, Nandita Shah and Venitia Govender.

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