

Empowering Non-governmental Organizations

Professor George Kent

The Problems

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with major social issues such as peace, hunger, homelessness, and the environment have similar experiences of fragmentation. Locally, nationally, or internationally, there are many organizations concerned with each of these issues, but they have trouble working together. For example, children's advocacy is splintered among many governmental and non-governmental agencies, both within countries and internationally, with each of them carving out narrow areas of specialization. The unfortunate fact is that children's advocacy organizations have not found the motivation and the means to pool their resources together. In any major metropolitan area there may be a dozen organizations working on hunger or the environment or some other issue. But each organization goes off in its own direction, and overall, the effort does not add up to very much. The struggles are particularly ironic when they are among advocates of peace and strong communities.

The splintering and fragmentation happens partly because of lack of leadership and coordination and resources. But these omissions arise for good reasons: the proposal for collaboration is viewed with particular suspicion. The idea that children's advocacy organizations have substantial common interests is

naive because each of them carves out its own distinctive niche. The smaller ones fear proposals for collaboration because they may be swallowed up. The larger ones don't see that they have anything to gain.

There are problems of inadequate coordination of NGOs of roughly the same power and status - horizontal coordination, and there also are problems in relationships between strong central organizations and weaker, more peripheral bodies - vertical coordination. Problems of vertical coordination are illustrated by the way in which volunteers have felt some discomfort in working with the Hunger Project. The project is happy to have them out in the world, enrolling and fund-raising and generally promoting the project. But many of the volunteers feel they don't know what is really going

on; they are "out of the loop." Some feel they are used, but not engaged.

There are similarities in the relationships of non-governmental organizations with UNICEF. UNICEF is pleased to have NGOs do fund-raising and promotion. But UNICEF has maintained a closed shop, never making it easy for the NGOs to know

what it was doing, and thus never making it easy for outsiders to participate. UNICEF has been courteous but diffident. It has been difficult for the NGO Committee for UNICEF to work out its role.

There are parallels here with the problems of a poor peasant dealing with a bureaucratic government. She too is a powerless outsider. She may be treated with courtesy, but never become fully engaged with local or national government in shaping the conditions of her life.

At abstract level, these problems of vertical relationships are all the same, the weak confronting the strong, and facing sustained marginalization. The root of hunger is not poverty but powerlessness. The Hunger Project's volunteers' frustration comes out of powerlessness, and thus the Hunger Project repro-

duces some of the problems of the world, problems of relationships.

Apart from fragmentation and marginalization, there is still another problem, a lack of cumulative effect in the work of many agencies dealing with social issues. Too often, successive meetings of groups dealing with difficult social problems have

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different participants. Each meeting seems to begin at the same beginning, with the same sorts of accounts of how awful the problems are. The same implausible responses are proposed over and over again. Resolutions are passed calling for unidentified actors to take vaguely specified actions. There is little learning and little programmatic planning.

Individuals and groups find it difficult to work together. There is real conflict in social action. Appropriate forms of conflict management might help to strengthen that action. The objective is not only to minimize conflict but, beyond that, to strengthen the bonds among the different players so that their efforts really add up. What is needed is a form of strategic planning that has a strong social dimension.

Conflict Management

What can be done? A good start can be made by acknowledging that there is real conflict among non-governmental organizations working on common issues. There may not be any direct violence, but there are real and perceived incompatibilities of interests. Perhaps the ideas and tools of the rapidly-growing field of conflict management can be usefully applied.

"Paradoxically, the quickest way to bring about voluntary integrative cooperation is probably through autonomy, with the psychological security this provides. From this security, persons can reach out and pursue their mutually advantageous functional relationships," wrote one of the leading theorists and practitioners of conflict resolution - John Burton. His approach is based on the recognition that individuals have distinct needs for such things as identity and recognition.

It is only a small step from here

to begin acknowledging that, like individual human beings, non-governmental organizations also have needs. The worst suggestion that can be made is that individuals and organizations should subordinate their own purposes and identities to some larger, "higher" purpose - with some remote individual serving as the leader. Instead, means should be found that would allow different individuals and organizations to work together in ways that do not require major sacrifice from any of them, but instead allows all of them to grow in their own terms.

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What is needed is an "empowering planning process", a distinctly social process. **Empowerment has been understood to be about strengthening individuals, but perhaps we should begin to see it as being about strengthening individuals in their relationships with one another.** Similarly, planning as conventionally understood is usually about a single individual or organization formulating objectives, designing alternative means, and so on. Little of the planning literature talks about the special issues that arise in collaborative planning, where different individuals and organizations working toward a common objective are recognized as having distinctly different interests and capacities.

Facilitation Plus

The strategic planning process can

be understood as an elaboration of facilitation techniques of the sort commonly used to make small group meetings go well. But it is not just any facilitation process. Sometimes facilitation is done badly.

Some years ago I started a process but I didn't know how to take it beyond the first steps. I arranged a meeting in Honolulu of several different organizations interested in the child survival issue. Representatives of each organization were asked to talk to the group about (1) what they did, (2) what they could do to help others, and (3) what others could do to help them. Some good came out of it, but not enough. What could have been done to bring these people together constructively on sustained basis?

Recently I participated in a meeting of several different organizations nominally interested in the same thing. They brought in a "skilled facilitator" with the usual toolbox of newsprint and colored markers. She proceeded with great determination with a process she just knew was right, and went on to kill off all potential for collaboration. The group hasn't met again.

At still another meeting, the facilitator came in with an agenda, recited it quickly, and moved right into carrying it out. The process and its merits were not seriously discussed, and thus the participants never really "owned" it. They certainly were not equipped to use it themselves.

A good process is done with people, not to them. A good facilitation process would be shared so effectively that participants understand its rationale and dynamics. After having both understood and experienced it, they should be equipped to apply it themselves in other contexts. Thus a good process could spread like a benign epidemic.

Empowering planning is comparable to facilitation as that is com-

monly understood, but it is grander than its ambitions. Facilitation is usually about helping meetings to go smoothly and stay on course. Planning, especially strategic planning, is about the design of a long-term sequence of activities to pursue designated objectives. As the term is used here, empowering planning is about getting a diverse group of people and organizations to work together effectively over the long term, with a collaborative plan designed to pursue objectives they share.

Empowering Strategic Planning

Several NGOs have become interested in the idea that people shouldn't have their problems solved for them, but instead one should use a strategy of empowerment, so that people can solve their problems for themselves. To empower people is to enhance their capacity to define, analyze, and act on their own problems. It may be useful to turn the thought inward, and explore prospects for empowering the NGOs themselves. We want to empower the hungry, but you and I and the groups we work with also need to be empowered. Indeed, we all need to support one another in the work of dealing with hunger and other issues, in a systematic and cogent way.

We need to practice and refine the skills of defining, analyzing, and acting on our problems, not individually, but jointly. This is strategic planning, a multilevel process whose main instrument is continuing dialogue. The dialogue is horizontal and vertical, looking left and right, up and down. The most important tools are orderly, directed talking and listening.

The major task of the planning process is to decisively and clearly identify the different organizations and their distinct roles in addressing the issue of concern. The methods can be simple. One organization could take the lead to arrange meetings of representatives of all organizations concerned with the issue, whether at local, national, regional, or global levels. After a brief round of introductions, they should be asked to describe their understandings of the issue, what they think should be done about it in general, and how their organizations relate to it.

After that background is established, discussion should open on what should be done about the problem, and who will take what concrete actions. The objective can be set as preparing, in written form, an agreed statement on who is to do what with the issue. This is not simply a matter of enumeration. Rather, it is like to emerge only after long discussion

and even negotiation among the different parties. The discussion may help some of them to discover and articulate what they can do. Doing all this in a thorough way

would actually take a long series of meetings. By focusing on the preparation of an agreed written statement, these meetings could greatly enhance the quality and productivity of the dialogue among the organizations.

Some mechanism should be established to maintain communication over time. The representatives of the different organizations could form a permanent liaison group. There could be frequent small meetings of special interest groups, occasional large meetings of all concerned, periodic newsletters, and telephone and computer

networking. The joint objective would be to form the overarching agreement, to act it out, and, from time to time, to revise it. This procedure could transform fragmented action into collective action.

It may not be useful to work out a finely detailed written program of action. The articulation of roles and functions and the establishment of means of communication would allow the action to evolve in a natural way. This in itself constitutes the core of empowering strategic planning. It is a systematic process of reflection that precedes and guides action, something that can be accomplished in many different ways. The process can be embellished with specific exercises regarding the formulation of objectives, evaluation of alternatives, and so on, but it can also function in a more evolutionary and intuitive way. The joint planning process means that individuals and organizations are recognized in their own distinctiveness and, through sustained talking and listening, they find their own perfect roles in the process.

Social power comes out of social organization, which means people and groups working together. Non-governmental organizations have enormous potential, but to be effective they will have to form alliances, aligning their efforts so that they push together in the same direction. The strategic planning process may result in an organization running exactly the same programs it had been running before, but with the difference that those programs are now an integral part of a larger whole. The work is the same, but it is now more meaningful.

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