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 fundraising 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 reproduces 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
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 organizations 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
it its ambitions. Facilitation is usually
about helping meetings to go
smoothly and stay on course. Plan-
ing, especially strategic planning,
is about the design of a long-term
sequence of activities to pursue des-
ignated objectives. As the term is
used here, empowering planning is
about getting a diverse group of peo-
ples and organizations to work to-
together effectively over the long term,
with a collaborative plan designed to
pursue objectives they share.

Empowering Strategic Planning

Several NGOs have become inter-
ested 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 prob-
lems. It may be
useful to turn the
thought inward,
and explore
prospects for em-
powering the
NGOs them-
sele. 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 indi-
vidually, but jointly. This is strategic
planning, a multilevel process whose
main instrument is continuing dia-
logue. 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 meet-
ings of representatives of all organi-
zations 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 estab-
lshed, discussion should open on
what should be done about the prob-
lem, 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 negoti-
tion 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 prepa-
ration of an agreed written state-
ment, these meetings could greatly
enhance the quality and productiv-
ity of the dialogue among the
organizations.

Some mechanism should be
established to maintain communi-
cation over time. The representa-
tives 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 proce-
dure 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 al-
low 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 ex-
ercises 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 organi-
izations are recognized in their own
distinctiveness and, through sus-
tained talking and listening, they
find their own perfect roles in the
process.

Social power comes out of so-
cial organization, which means peo-
ples and groups working together.
Non-governmental organizations
have enormous potential, but to be
effective they will have to form alli-
ances, aligning their efforts so that
they push together in the same direc-
tion. The strategic planning process
may result in an organization run-
ing 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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