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THE BROKER

Special Report

The future calling

A second life for international NGOs

Rooting INGOs in their home soil ★ Retirement, replacement or rejuvenation? ★ The road not taken ★ Shedding the charity cloak

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CONNECTING WORLDS OF KNOWLEDGE

THE BROKER

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***The Broker*, issue 28, March 2012**

The Broker offers knowledge of global development issues. *The Broker* aims to contribute to evidence-based policy making and action by encouraging exchanges between knowledge producers and development professionals. *The Broker* will be a reliable source of information for all those concerned with development and globalization, especially in the fields of economics, human security, governance, and science and technology.

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The future calling

Our world is changing quickly and profoundly. Rich and poor – regardless of where they live – are faced with increasingly 'thick' problems and social change is more politicized and contested than ever before. And yet, most international development NGOs (INGOs) keep offering 'thin' solutions to these problems. Solutions geared to measurable material success. Solutions that are aimed at increasing participation in unsustainable economies and polities.

In December 2011, *The Broker* began hosting a debate to address these problems and the future of INGOs. It took place in the context of the Hivos knowledge initiative 'Future Calling'. This special report is a follow-up to that debate, taking into account the many views and opinions submitted to the 'Future Calling' blog by contributors.

There is general agreement that INGOs need to change course. In his article for this special report, a condensed version of a think-piece for Hivos, Michael Edwards examines various options open to INGOs, suggesting it is time for INGOs to leave behind the trodden path and explore new avenues. He sums up these options by asking whether INGOs should be retired, replaced or rejuvenated.

Ellen Lammers suggests in her article that it is decision time for INGOs. They are trapped in a midlife crisis and need to adapt to a changing globalized world with shifting power centres – in which the West is losing ground to emerging powers – and a redistribution of the world's poor populations. These problems cannot be solved by a single government, country or INGO. The main challenge ahead is to bring together different economic, social and political players, locally and globally, to collectively safeguard the world's global goods.

If INGOs are going to successfully adapt to a changing world and introduce appropriate structural change, they are going to have to leave their comfort zone and re-politicize themselves, argues Evert-jan Quak in his article. That means challenging political, social and economic power relations – by joining social movements and supporting the poor and those who fight for justice in emerging powers, in the West and in poor countries.

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editorial

Rooting INGOs in their home soil

Frans Bieckmann
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I recently chaired a forum that discussed whether a new paradigm has emerged in the field of development cooperation, and if so, what does it consist of. A great deal of time at these kinds of debates is spent exploring definitions and their usefulness. Is it really a new paradigm, or a new narrative or something less consequential? In the end, it does not really matter what we choose to call it. What does matter is that we are facing new circumstances that will fundamentally alter the way we design development policies, whether they be bilateral, multilateral or non-governmental.

This special report asks whether international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) need to adapt to these new circumstances, and if so, how should they go about it. The same question was asked in an online debate hosted by *The Broker* called 'Future Calling'. It elicited many responses representing a variety of viewpoints. However, only a handful of people reflected on how the world has changed in recent decades, a time during which NGOs matured.

Interdependence, here to stay

The most conspicuous feature of these recent changes is that the world we live in is becoming increasingly multipolar. This will certainly alter the way traditional geopolitics are played out and fundamentally challenge the omnipotence of the West and its ability to control and steer the world.

Another striking feature of these changes is the revolutionary use of new media, such as the internet and social media, which is putting governments all over the world under unprecedented pressure to be more open and transparent. It has also paved the way for democratic and other popular uprisings, the end of which is not yet in sight. However important these social media are for the lives of many millions in developing countries and elsewhere, though, in the end they are merely new tools.

The most fundamental repercussion of the changes that have taken place in recent decades is what several contributors to *The Broker* debate referred to as global interdependence. This may seem self-evident because of all the talk about globalization in the past decade, but the consequences of the fact that global interdependence is here to stay have not completely sunk in yet. We still think we are living on isolated islands called states – but that time is definitely behind us. Interdependence has manifested itself in the context of a growing scarcity of resources, which has resulted in a massive challenge of redistribution. Addressing global inequality will be central to this challenge.

We – people from countries across the globe – rely on each other like never before. We will have to solve our current and future problems collectively, whether we like it or not. But that is only one element of the transition we are experiencing. The other element is much more political. We need to stop looking at the world as being vertically divided by borders separating national states and realize that it is horizontally divided: globally connected elites and middle classes are taking a larger and larger portion of the pie, leaving the poor (in South *and* North) with nothing more than crumbs.

This means rethinking the traditional aim of development policies – poverty reduction. This special report covers several challenges such as how to respond to the fact that most poor people now live in middle-income countries – the same emerging powers that are reshaping the multipolar global landscape and which have experienced a meteoric rise in GNP in the past decade.

Countries such as India and China still have enormous numbers of poor, but their economies are growing and they are home to increasing numbers of relatively rich and very wealthy people. Those Western donors who want to help the poor in India, China and elsewhere, however, may find that these countries' governments no longer welcome their aid – or even allow it. Indeed, these countries have started to take on the role of donors themselves.

It is not so much aid money or development projects that are needed, but effective political pressure on the elites in government and business in the North and South to redistribute the fruits of economic growth. This pressure will have to be exerted by local social movements, with foreign donors and INGOs accepting a facilitating, supporting or financial role in the process.

This also means hard times on the horizon for bilateral donors. Aid has traditionally been neutral or technical, but as soon as it becomes politicized, bilateral donors will effectively be interfering in other countries' national affairs.

Therefore the main challenge for bilateral donors – or for the departments of 'international cooperation' or 'global justice' yet to be established – will be to work at a *supranational* level. They will have to handle the non-national aspects of international challenges and find solutions at a global level for the systemic problems that have caused the recent financial, climate, food and resource scarcity crises. Therefore, they will have to find new ways of governing and managing global public goods.

NGOs as watchdogs

But this special report is not about bilateral donors – it is about non-governmental organizations. Their role in this new set-up is to act as national and global watchdogs. They have to ensure that

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the way global public goods are handled is not at the expense of the poor and powerless, but that it benefits them.

Some INGOs have already assumed this role by critically lobbying national governments and stating their case at international negotiations and summits. However, they are being increasingly co-opted in a bureaucratic circus of negotiations. They have become part of the multilateral processes that have freed themselves from national realities and which have gotten bogged down by a lack of political will and public urgency.

To counter this increasing alienation, which is inherent in abstract global processes, INGOs have to be much more rooted in local societies. They have to connect local struggles to global challenges, thus pushing for solutions at the local and the global levels. INGOs are in a much better position than governments to ally with local and national social movements and organizations promoting equality or other social values.

If international cooperation is to become a political project instead of the technical endeavour it is now, it should redirect its focus to internationalism and l solidarity with the world's marginalized: the poor, but also the oppressed in authoritarian countries and minorities everywhere. International NGOs are in the best position, and should equip themselves accordingly, to become the architects and co-implementers of this political project.

States mainly have the power to obstruct. They are the problem, not the answer, as Rob Annandale, journalist and founder of the blog 'Beyond Aid', stated in his contribution to *The Broker* online discussion, 'The thing that feeds the other ills'. Bound as states are to serve their own populations (and in many cases only a small portion of them) they will, in a time of growing scarcity, increase competition over resources, which will lead to geopolitical tensions and conflict. Moreover, the inevitable and necessary struggle to regain some democratic national control over the global economy, which has been relinquished to multinational companies during 30 years of neoliberal rule, might also result in dangerous political and cultural nationalism.

If states are not the answer to development problems, this will place a great responsibility on international NGOs. Most international development NGOs are facing a dilemma: contrary to other social organizations, such as trade unions, consumer organizations and religious communities, they are based in one place (usually a rich Western country) – yet their mandate is to serve the needs of people somewhere far away. Traditional social movements, on the other hand, always serve the interests of people in their immediate vicinity.

Most international development NGOs were totally silent when the Occupy movement started to gain momentum, just as they were silent ten years ago when the alter-globalist movement started making waves. The Arab Spring took them by surprise, and they looked foolishly on as hundreds of thousands of young *Indignados* took to the streets in Spain and other Southern European countries, unable to understand that these people are fighting a similar struggle to the poor in 'developing' countries.

International NGOs can only really become agents of structural change if they are also rooted in their respective societies. They will have to engage the challenges that Western societies are facing and worrying about. And, again, they must address the common international and global systemic causes behind these challenges. This is the only way that they can create sufficient critical mass – political power – to help solve those problems. ■

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

By **Michael Edwards**, distinguished senior fellow at Demos in New York, USA, and an honorary senior fellow at the Brooks World Poverty Institute at Manchester University, UK.

Alamy / Papilio

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.

INGOs at a crossroads

The road not taken

INGOs are at a crossroads. Caught up in a tide of technocracy, they have become increasingly managerialist – 'outsider' experts disconnected from the real struggle. But which road should they take? Can they transform societies, or should they opt for a more realistic role, as catalysts for change?

The crisis is real. For over 60 years, Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international NGOs were clear and confident about their purpose. More than any other player in the sector, they were close enough to the poor to be their trusted spokespersons and help improve their plight. They enjoyed public and political support for their work, partly fed by collective guilt about colonialism and its lingering legacy, and a broad-based notion of solidarity. But now INGOs are in the uncomfortable position of being in a midlife crisis.

Not that INGOs failed to contribute to development. Their focus may have covered a variety of problems over time – HIV/Aids, gender issues, microfinance or farming, to name a few – but they all had one thing in common: they were service-oriented. They served the poor to help them escape poverty.

A small minority of Western NGOs and INGOs, however, had a different take on what development means and needs. They considered themselves watchdogs of the state, whistle-blowers exposing corruption or even promoters of democracy. Some were actively involved in political struggles, against apartheid in South Africa, for example, or dictatorships in Latin America.

Today, however, INGOs that engage with the 'politics of the oppressed' are far and few between. Instead, they – and the partner NGOs they chose to work with in the South – have not been able, as Michael Edwards from Demos in New York puts it, 'to stem the tide of technocracy that is sweeping across the world of international development'. Professionalization has meant a relentless move towards specialisation and managerialism. This has, it is only fair to add, not necessarily happened of the INGOs' own volition.

Crossroads

INGOs are at a crossroads as a result of these developments. Edwards even suggests that it may be time for their retirement in his article on development INGOs that kicked off the 'Future Calling' debate on *The Broker* website. So what is happening? First, there is criticism coming from close to home. As Duncan Green, head of research at Oxfam Great Britain, puts it: 'NGOs feel under political and economic siege … from government, right-wingers and the media, attacking everything from senior salaries to aid effectiveness.'

Willemijn Verkoren, head of the Centre for International Conflict Analysis and Management at Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands, calls it the legitimacy question, which among other things entails the 'growing doubt about the extent to which aid really contributes to development'. She agrees with Edwards that, to make things worse, the Western development model 'is losing its appeal – not only because of the problems the West itself is facing, but also due to the rise of alternative models like the Chinese'.

The NGO sector has not risen above the criticism by parrying with clear or solid responses – rather, it has mainly taken on a defensive role. However, the continued value of INGOs in the 21st century needs to be more forcefully argued – not only in response to the often cynical criticism at home, but also because the world in which they operate is changing, and changing fast.

Change

Different developments of the past decade illustrate the fundamental changes that are taking place across the world. Contributors to the 'Future Calling' blog emphasize that these changes are also impacting foreign aid – including the role of INGOs – which is becoming a whole new ball game.

First, the emergence of a multi-polar world is heralding the end of Western dominance – not only its dominance of the global economy but also its political influence and the values underpinning it. The new powers (China, India, Turkey, South Africa, South Korea, Indonesia and Brazil) have their own ideas of how foreign aid should be structured, often based on strong convictions about non-interference in sovereign affairs.

By **Ellen Lammers**, managing editor of *The Broker* and partner of the research bureau WiW – Global Research & Reporting.

Alamy / Tony Cortazzi

The Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, South Korea in late 2011 illustrated that these countries' priorities and methods are not always easily reconciled with those of the traditional aid giants (also see the Busan blog on *The Broker* website and the country articles on China, Brazil and Turkey In his blogpost, 'INGOs in a changed world order', Peter Konijn, director of Knowing Emerging Powers, argues that a multipolar world will make it more difficult for INGOs to maintain their legitimacy since new powers will consider them to be a 'Western invention' – and not its best one.

Second, the global distribution of poverty has shifted. Two-thirds of the poor today live in middle-income countries (MICs). But for INGOs to continue their work in these countries they need to attract official development assistance funds from Western donors. This may not prove to be easy, and attracting funds from the general public is likely to be even more difficult.

It is a tricky story to market, because in the current cynical climate who is willing to support the poor in an economic powerhouse like China, or a nuclear power like India? These countries, as Konijn writes, 'are seen as major economic competitors and people fear that their jobs will move east. In this context aiding the poor in India is seen as aiding the competitor'.

On the other hand, if NGOs were to withdraw from MICs, this would immediately raise the moral question of why the poor who happen to live there are less deserving of support than the poor in low-income countries like Malawi or South Sudan. This is the message INGOs need to send in no unclear terms: they are supporting the poor, not their governments. And at the same time they should consider establishing and working together with national offices or branches, as Oxfam International is doing with Oxfam India. There is no doubt that it will be easier for INGOs to keep supporting the poor in MICs than it will be for bilateral aid agencies – so this is the responsibility they have to take.

'Thick' problems

Third, another change affecting the work of INGOs is that they are facing an increasing number of what Edwards calls 'thick' problems. Thick problems are complex and unpredictable because they are interdependent. Examples abound: climate change, increasing scarcity of land, water and resources, stark inequality between countries and within them, food crises, chronic conflict, and, of course, continuing poverty.

In other words, thick problems threaten people's access to global public goods. One vital characteristic of these problems is that no government, no country and certainly no INGO can solve them on its own. The main challenge for the 21st century, therefore, is to bring together different economic, social and political players, locally and globally, to collectively safeguard the world's global goods.

More than anything else, this is a political challenge. Thick problems require global governance (see 'Shedding the >

charity cloak' in this issue), which is complicated by the free-rider problem (people using public goods but not paying for them). But new global politics is not the only thing at stake. Business interests, which are inevitably tied to political interests, are too.

The global food crisis, for instance, cannot be solved without tackling food prices. This means addressing the question of who owns and controls production and processing, and challenging the financial market regulations that condone food speculation. At the end of the day, today's complex problems, says Edwards, 'are rooted in political choices about the "good society"' – so why, one may ask, aren't INGOs making it their mission to challenge these choices?

It is no surprise then, given the current global turmoil, that INGOs are suffering an identity crisis. What is their role; who are their partners; and what can they reasonably contribute or achieve? Edwards asks whether it isn't time for INGOs to retire. Or if it is too early for that, then certainly they must rejuvenate themselves – or be replaced. The contributors to *The Broker* debate seem uneasy with all three options. Some think there is still a place for old-style INGOs, while others are suggesting a fourth possibility: radical transformation.

Replenishing lives

What roles can INGOs fulfil in this changing world? There are basically two choices: palliative care or working towards a comprehensive, non-cosmetic makeover. The vast majority of INGOs subscribed to the former in recent decades. And there is no reason to be dismissive of this vocation.

INGOs have done very important work in complementing and supplementing, as Chiku Malunga, a Malawian author and organizational development consultant, terms it in his contribution to the debate, the failing or insufficient basic services and protection delivered by the state in many developing countries. NGOs and INGOs have been on hand to 'replenish depleted lives,' as Shirin Rai, professor of politics and international studies at the University of Warwick in the United Kingdom, says, when governments have been unable or unwilling to help carve out a better life for their rural poor and urban dwellers.

This work is still fundamentally important for millions of poor people with acute health or livelihood problems. In fact, Martine Billanou, senior programme officer at Alliance 2015, fears that 'the economic and societal changes coming will have such drastic implications for larger proportions of poor and vulnerable people that it will be essential to maintain the significant "protection" and "support" role that many NGOs provide and this, increasingly, in developed countries as well as in developing ones.'

Even though the palliative role of INGOs serves a clear purpose, critics are increasingly questioning it. These efforts 'become relief work,' writes Malunga, who argues that they are 'not sustainable'. This is in line with Edwards' contention that 'thin' solutions are not irrelevant, but 'they are not going to get us anywhere near a sustainable human future.'

Rai raises an additional important argument that is also supported by Farah Karimi, general director of Oxfam Novib, and Rosalba Icaza, senior lecturer at the International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), the Netherlands: palliative care will never solve what is really at stake, namely the 'justice deficit' in many of today's local societies and certainly the global one. On the contrary, she writes, the replenishing role is 'self-supporting – the INGOs reproduce themselves through "philanthrocapitalism" just as capitalism [remains] less challenged because of this ameliorative work'.

Paul Currion, an information management consultant for humanitarian operations, calls this 'the worst case scenario' for INGOs. 'They find themselves filling in where government has failed … or find themselves filling gaps where corporations have proved unable or unwilling to extend their reach, creating pseudo-markets which are largely unsustainable. Where these scenarios come to pass, INGOs will twist themselves into new shapes not in order to challenge the systems that lead to these governance and market failures, but to prop them up instead.'

Transformers

For the critics of 'palliative care' there is only one alternative: work towards structural change, or redistribute the powers that be in order to achieve a more just, fair and equal world. In Rai's terminology this means that INGOs should move from replenishing lives to transforming lives. 'In a world where millions are being forced to take risks to survive in the everyday,' she writes, 'and where risks taken by others are affecting the lives of millions, the mobilization of peoples without addressing how social relations under contemporary global capitalism might be transformed often leads to disappointment and worse.'

An 'increasingly grim' fight is taking place between and within countries for access to vital resources, according to Karimi. It 'is more than ever a political battle – not one in terms of party politics, but one in terms of power relations. It is about changing the division of power, of access to and control of knowledge and resources'.

Joanna Maycock, head of Europe for ActionAid International, is more positive. 'The social, political and economic turmoil in the world,' she says, 'seems to present an opportunity to make fundamental positive changes to the way we organize our societies.' In short, many contributors to the debate agree that 'transformation' is at stake – more importantly, 'fundamental' and 'structural' transformation. But how can this be achieved?

Solutions and methods will not be found along the trodden path. We cannot end poverty or even inequality, says Edwards, by doing more of the same in a more efficient or cost-effective way. Technocracy, quantiphilia (more is better) and managerialism are not going to do the job. Instead, Edwards argues, 'it is time to "retire" the foreign aid frame.'

Foreign aid, he seems to be suggesting, has neglected to focus on 'deep change' and has been far too apolitical in its view of the world and why inequalities persist. The future work of INGOs will be about altering the balance of power in

Alamy / David Parker

supply chains rather than paying farmers a 'fair' price for their coffee. This, says Edwards, requires a 'shift from a focus on the fairer distribution of abundance to the much harder task of managing scarcity and its personal and political implications'.

It must be said, however, that for all the commentators who believe structural change is the future for INGOs, there have been conspicuously few practical suggestions about how to tackle this. One suggestion has been to move closer, and link up with, social movements in order to create a global network of countervailing power (see 'Shedding the charity cloak' in this issue). INGOs are probably aware that there are obstacles to overcome before they can become structural game-changers.

Grand stories

Are today's INGOs equipped for the task of becoming transformers – and if not, why not? Some contributors do not beat around the bush. Ria Brouwers of ISS writes that Edwards 'feeds the megalomania' of INGOs by suggesting that they can be 'transformers of societies, politics and cultures'. Simply look at the past, warns Malunga, and you will soon realize that NGOs, for all the good work they have done, 'have always been weak at influencing structural or power shifts between the "rulers" and the "ruled"'.

In Malawi in 2011, it was not the INGOs that orchestrated, or even played a visible role in the nationwide demonstrations against the bad governance and economic mismanagement of the ruling party. The same has been said about the Arab Spring and the new form of social mobilization – the work of 'neo-citizens', writes Ahmed Zidan, editor in chief of the Mideast Youth network – that this unprecedented uprising used.

INGOs are not transformers, but they should concentrate on being 'catalysts for change', says Maycock. Konijn agrees: 'Any pretension of INGOs to be a transformative agent capable of changing locally embedded power structures is false. They can play a modest role in supporting local civil society that seeks to transform exploitative structures of power.'

In a changing world, where, as Zidan writes, 'everyone [is] reluctant about their previous comfort-zone-understanding of the composing factors of social mobility; individual, government, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs),' this is in itself a big enough challenge for INGOs. So let us be wary of sweeping pronouncements and grand new schemes. 'Millennium Transformation Goals with a starring role for NGOs?' ask Josine Stremmelaar and Remko Berkhout of Hivos. Their answer is no.

Outsider experts

Another obstacle to becoming catalysts of fundamental change is that INGOs have become excessively bureaucratic. Jennifer Lentfer, founder of www.how-matters.org, sees 'smart, driven and committed people' who spend most of >


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their days 'controlling finances and demonstrating results based on donors' needs'.

INGOs, in other words, are immersed in a culture of managerialism. The worst thing about this, argues Willem Elbers, lecturer in cultural anthropology and development studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, is that this 'clashes with the principles of INGOs at the level of values and assumptions regarding the nature of reality'.

For one thing, 'the managerial emphasis on distrust and direct utility as the starting point of inter-organizational relations conflicts with the importance that most INGOs attach to partnership[s]' with organizations in the South. More important in the light of this discussion is that managerialism – which assumes that 'development can be planned, is controllable and measureable' – implicitly 'reduces development to a technical and apolitical process and diverts attention away from questions of politics, power and distribution.'

This explains why quite a few INGOs, by professionalizing, have become disconnected from the real struggle – or the people that this struggle is about. Icaza writes that NGOs have lost their emancipatory role and instead have become 'outsider experts'. It is a cultural change, and like all cultural habits, not easy to reverse. INGOs need to re-politicize themselves, Icaza writes, and that means minimally that 'they need to be attentive to the cracks and fissures in the system of multiple and interrelated oppressions in which they operate.'

Lack of self-reflection

Perhaps the most tenacious problem that prevents INGOs from becoming agents of structural change is their lack of self-reflection. 'Most NGOs,' writes Edwards, 'have continued to strengthen their "leverage" … without changing their structure, role or position in society in any fundamental way … today [they] would be instantly recognizable to their founders – they are still raising money in the rich world and spending it on projects in poorer countries...'

This 'organizational inertia' of INGOs, Maycock says, 'is caused by internal power dynamics; income and financial realities; a lack of clarity of purpose; and a disconnect between our values and analysis of the outside world and our internal structures'. She observes that INGOs have 'great tools for power analysis and challenging what is wrong with the outside world, and yet we fail to turn these analytic tools on ourselves'. The consequence is that organizations 'have failed to shift power internally or ensure that they are answerable to communities they work for'.

In fact, after a process of self-reflection, ActionAid was the first INGO to move its headquarters to Africa. Currion supports Maycock's plea, arguing that 'we need to acknowledge not just that the world has changed, but to reflect that change, rather than attempt to manage it.' Perhaps unconsciously paraphrasing Gandhi, he concludes that 'We cannot pretend to be agents of change if we are not prepared to change ourselves.' ■

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 Schuyl

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. ■