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THICK PROBLEMS AND THIN SOLUTIONS: HOW NGOs CAN BRIDGE THE GAP

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Thick Problems and Thin Solutions: How NGOs Can Bridge The Gap

By Michael Edwards

Imagine life in a low-carbon community that delivers jobs, justice and human flourishing, all within the ecological limits of a finite planet. It's an attractive proposition, but to get there we'll have to transform our societies, politics and cultures in order to prosper together in a web of steady-state economies. Eventually that will mean lowering our consumption (not just adding in more energy efficiency), as well as sharing work, resources and responsibilities with each-other, managing the conflicts that arise from scarcity and the turmoil that comes with change, and accomplishing a thousand other things for which we are largely unprepared.

Fortunately, we don't have to do all of this by the sixtieth anniversary of Hivos in 2028, but it looks as though we'll hit peak oil production at least eight years before that date, run out of key mined resources like potash for fertilizer by 2060 at the latest, and experience a rapid depletion of cultivable land, soil and water in the meantime. If the values and visions of agencies like Hivos are going to mean anything in the future - whether expressed in terms of 'development', social change or human happiness and fulfillment - 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.

Generalizing about international development NGOs is obviously difficult. Some seem comfortably ensconced in the traditional framework of foreign aid while others are experimenting with rights- and knowledge-based approaches to the transformation of their societies, but neither group has been able to stem the rising tide of technocracy that is sweeping across the world of international development. As a result, the solutions promoted by most development agencies are getting "thinner" by the day: fixated on speed, growth, numbers and material success; dominated by technology and other "magic bullets;" framed by a philosophy that reduces human values to the competitive culture of the market; and aimed at increased participation in unsustainable economies and polities that are incapable of reconciling different interests.

Despite the tasks that lie ahead there is little talk of transformation in this scenario, more a hope that by doing more of the same more "cost-effectively" we will get where we need to go. Maybe I'm exaggerating to make a point, but it's clear that "thin" solutions like these are not going to get us anywhere near a sustainable human future. The good news is that NGOs like Hivos can act as bridges between "thick" and "thin" by integrating the best from their values and traditions with the innovations of today, extending their impact into the deeper structures of society and becoming agencies of transformation in the process.

"Thin" solutions are not irrelevant, just insufficient, and "thick" problems are not insoluble, just complicated, requiring a conscious effort to link the concrete actions that NGOs support to the broader shifts that give them more long-term influence and impact. That's more difficult than it sounds in a context where the pressure to generate short-term results is only going to grow, so what can be done? In order to answer that question I want to explore four key issues: why are problems getting "thicker?" Why are solutions getting "thinner?" How can NGOs help to bridge the gap? And what should they strengthen and phase out in order to play this role effectively?

Why are problems getting "thicker?"

Let's start with some positive news: child survival and life expectancy are rising nearly everywhere, and the percentage of people living below the poverty line is falling, largely as a result of progress in Asia. But inequality is increasing rapidly both within and between different countries, sustainability indices are falling, and social indicators are getting worse even in high-income settings like the USA, including things that really matter to human values like community cohesion, happiness, and a feeling that everyone can share in fashioning a more fulfilling vision of the future. In sum, increasing parts of the globe are facing material success with social failure, and some, of course, still lack material success as well.

These trends suggest three conclusions. The first is that richer countries no longer provide an adequate "end-point" to aim for in the process of development, if they ever did. The second is that what ties economic growth to human flourishing is less clear and predictable than it ever was. And the third is that these linkages can't be strengthened by doing more of the same, since we've tried that already and largely failed. Instead, existing systems of knowledge, politics and economics must be transformed, not simply expanded or made more accessible to the poor. So the tasks of social change are becoming more, not less complicated and contested - in other words, they are getting "thicker."

We can see this easily in economics, where at least the goal is clear: we need growth *and* equity *and* sustainability *and* justice in one package, but these combinations are extraordinarily difficult to achieve, especially in lower-income countries that are playing catch-up with the rich. For them, "self-reliance" seems decidedly unattractive as an option. "Efficiency" far outweighs "sufficiency" in the calculus of economic thinking, and there is little sign that new philosophies are gaining ground. There are, for sure, lots of interesting small-scale experiments at work, but none of them are powerful enough to change the fact that the benefits of growth are increasingly concentrated in the hands of a small number of people while the costs are externalized onto everybody else.

Even though these problems manifest themselves in economic outcomes they are rooted in political choices about the "good society," but the politics of development and social change are also "thickening" in important ways. Rising inequality distorts these choices because economic and political power are closely-linked, and as NGOs have recognized, governance is more complicated when authority diffuses across so many different actors, levels, and institutions. This process opens up different kinds of spaces for civil society involvement, along with new powers like China and India who are increasingly influential, but it also makes concerted action on contentious issues more

difficult because consensus is harder to create against the background of divergent interests and opinions. That's why stronger social and political mechanisms for conflict-resolution are so important.

Conflict stems from rising insecurity and inequality, and from differences that can harden into fundamentalisms of various kinds when they are insufficiently accommodated or well-managed. But social, political, religious and other cultural and ideological differences do not disappear as incomes rise, as was tacitly assumed by "trickle-down" theories of development that predicted a linear progression to "modernity" defined in liberal-democratic terms. In fact if the experience of the USA and parts of Europe offers any guide these differences become more embedded in society, and that makes "thick" problems even more difficult to resolve. Take the case of climate change for example, which is disputed by some as a problem at all and contested vigorously by others in terms of how it should be addressed.

In these cases what is needed is an open public sphere in which civil society groups can mediate between these different agendas and hammer out some sense of direction. The problem is that public spheres are getting weaker and civil societies are getting thinner, distorted by commercialization and the erosion of other-directed behavior, re-shaped by the worldwide professionalization of voluntary citizen action, weakened by the decay of face-to-face engagement across the lines of difference, and disempowered by the decline of mass-based social movements – notwithstanding the "Arab Spring." Societies are packed full with data, opinion and information, but they have less real or systematic knowledge and very little wisdom, defined as the ability to convert this knowledge into action through public work.

These trends matter for many different reasons, not least because they dilute the impact of civic and political engagement on social norms and behavior just at the time when these changes are increasingly important. For example, climate change can't be managed unless people lower their consumption, first in the rich world and then elsewhere, so there is no escape from personal change if we want the world around us to be transformed. Yet personal transformation is probably the "thickest" issue of all, posing questions about our own sense of identity and our relationships with one-another. Perhaps that is why it is consistently ignored in discussions about development and social change.

Any one of these issues would be difficult to address. What makes them even "thicker" is that they are all related, so they have to be tackled together and across national boundaries. Otherwise progress in one area will create setbacks in another. These problems are deeply-embedded in the nature of contemporary politics, economics, culture and ways of life. Small changes can improve parts of this picture, but they will never be enough to prevent larger problems from reoccurring further down the line. That's why the solutions we promote must be as "thick" as the problems they're intended to resolve.

Why are solutions getting "thinner?"

Unfortunately this isn't what is happening. By and large it appears as though solutions are getting thinner just as problems are getting thicker, seemingly oblivious to the scale and complexity of the challenges that lie ahead. Foreign aid has always been a "thin" solution to the "thick" problems of development, a veritable "anti-politics machine" in the words of one observer. NGOs have tried to

improve the workings of this "machine" by moving from "delivery" to "leverage" as the central motif of their work over the last quarter-century or so – by building research, advocacy, capacity-building and other activities around concrete interventions of various kinds. But even the most successful have found it difficult to penetrate very deeply into the mainstream of knowledge-creation and popular culture, political change and economic thinking. Faced by forces that are so much larger than themselves this is not surprising, but NGOs have not helped themselves by shying away from a more concerted effort to understand and influence these forces, support the capacities of their "partners" to do this for themselves, and build broad-based constituencies in their own societies that are willing to push for more than an increased budget for foreign aid.

Today it is even more difficult for NGOs to move from "thin" to "thick" solutions because there are more pressures that push them in the opposite direction. The world of international development is excited by the power of markets and technology, but not by the slow arc of building better institutions or changing values and relationships; by the efficiency of Results-Based Management but not by the task of democratizing foreign aid; by the ability of Randomized Control Trials to forecast interventions that deliver the best returns, but not by debates about what this means for the deeper dimensions of wellbeing; by "value-for-money" among NGOs as sub-contractors, but not by the need to establish financial independence for groups that are rooted in the South.

Cell-phones now hold the key to Africa's development we are told; revolutions can be launched via social media; and food security awaits those who are brave enough to embrace GMO technology and the market, and of course there is some truth in each of these assumptions. The problem is not that they are damaging in and of themselves, but that by exaggerating their impact we deflect attention away from all the other things we have to do in order to address our deeper problems. Nevertheless, the determination to "fix" the world as soon as possible in the most "cost-effective" way is very, very strong. Where does it come from?

I can think of at least six reasons for the rebirth of top-down, technocratic action. The first is "quantiphilia" as one writer calls it – a fixation on size, growth and numbers as indicators of success whose emergence is linked to the commoditization of increasing areas of life. Data and algorithms trump judgment and democracy when decisions must be made. The hard and supposedly objective reality of science is brought to bear on the softer mechanisms of politics and human interaction.

Secondly, the "new" is always more attractive then the "old", especially if innovations offer an easier route to success. That's why "social innovation" is the mantra of the moment, but innovation is not the same as effectiveness or impact, because many important things are not new at all – they grow out of decades of experience in tackling the legacy of power relations and politics. However, because these things - like building the capacity and independence of grassroots citizens' groups - are less glamorous, they are less attractive to fashion-conscious "investors" who are always looking for the "next new thing."

Thirdly, "philanthrocapitalism" – using business and the market to pursue social and environmental goals – has taken hold in the popular imagination. Such techniques are appropriate in some areas of development like vaccine research and social enterprise, but there's no vaccine against inequality or violence. We can't solve the looming global food crisis, for example, without tackling food prices, and therefore addressing the vexed questions of who owns and controls production, processing and

supply. And in these areas business and the market are part of the problem as well as part of the solution.

Fourth, the realities of politics, power and culture always create roadblocks on the highway to quick results, and therefore there's a tendency to ignore them among many funders. This drives resources towards simplistic solutions like GMO seeds in place of sustainable agriculture, for example, or drug delivery instead of strengthening health systems, or training female leaders instead of challenging the patriarchal structures and values that deny equality to women.

Fifth, deep down, we all feel more secure when we are "in control", when the world is predictable and problems can be permanently "fixed." But the world is not a machine in which levers can be pulled to deliver the desired results - it's an ecosystem in which actions create their own, unforeseen effects. So supporting society at large to find solutions as the world continually turns is much more important than identifying models that are supposed to be replicated and scaled up, but rarely are. There's also an endemic unwillingness to encourage ordinary people to make their own decisions, even though participation is the basic determinant of sustainability.

Finally, the desire for instant gratification is growing in contemporary societies, and patience is in short supply. Increasingly, we gravitate to the fast-paced stories of heroic individuals and not to the slower rhythms of collective action, wanting to believe that each of us can truly "save the world." Muddling through as best we can – which has been my experience of development and social change – no longer satisfies our emotional need for personal responsibility and closure.

Just like the factors that "thicken" social problems, the forces that drive "thin" solutions are all interrelated, and they combine to create a powerful culture that works against a nuanced and judicious use of new approaches in harmony with elements from the past. But NGOs are well-placed to counterbalance this tendency by linking "thick" and "thin" in mutually-supportive ways. Why is that so?

How can NGOs help to bridge this gap?

NGOs have always balanced vision with pragmatism in their efforts to respond to a changing world. By embodying their values in concrete action and tying these actions to deeper changes in society, they have been able to ground themselves in the struggles of ordinary people while staying focused on longer-term or deeper goals. This is a healthy combination. Initially these links were expressed through the desire to integrate short-term relief with longer-term development, then in terms of connecting human needs and human rights and the 'local' with the 'global,' and now NGOs face the task of bridging 'thin' and 'thick' solutions in ways that incorporate these pre-existing efforts.

NGOs are natural bridges because of their "intermediary" position - the fact that they are located in and between different societies and institutions and can therefore work across various levels and strategies for action. This bridging role is especially-suited to NGOs like Hivos which don't have large investments in field programs of their own, because they can be more flexible in exploring the room-to-maneuver that is generated by this intermediary position. However, bridging has to be a careful and deliberate strategy and not something left to chance.

The key is to consciously look for and make connections right throughout our work, exploring the neglected middle ground that exists between "thin" and "thick" solutions instead of being trapped in one *or* the other of these approaches. By strengthening these linkages NGOs can move the "thinnest" of innovations in the direction of deeper impact through a continuous stream of small changes that head in the same direction - "baby steps," if you will, along the road to transformation. What does that mean in concrete terms?

In terms of poverty-reduction the most popular "solutions" in play today are microfinance, social enterprise and small business development at the "base of the economic pyramid." Despite recent controversies in India and elsewhere it's clear that loans and other financial services like insurance do have positive effects on the economic security of poor people, and they can build up the bargaining power of low-income groups in local politics by strengthening individual self-coinfidence and group skills. But it is equally clear that without other measures to address land rights and the social division of labor (especially gender), alter patterns of ownership so that poor people can capture more of the surplus they produce, and tackle the environmental implications of even this form of broad-based economic growth, microfinance and microenterprise development can do little to ensure that the economy can generate justice and sustainability as well as jobs and higher incomes. By attending to these gaps NGOs can push these innovations further in the direction of transformation.

Support for 'social enterprise' is also growing rapidly - profit-making businesses that deliver a better balance between social and financial returns - and innovations like improved cooking stoves and water containers, and solar-rechargeable lighting, cell-phones and computers are sure to have an impact on individual wellbeing. But unless they can be mainstreamed into markets and production chains on a much larger scale they too will be unable to re-shape the course of economic growth, and over time they are likely to see their social mission eroded by competitive pressures in the market. The only way to prevent this from happening is by building up more radical interventions that alter the whole manner in which wealth is produced, distributed and used. "Commons-based" or "peer" production (like co-operatives and knowledge that is created using open-source techniques) are examples of this approach, as are interventions designed to alter the balance of power further up supply chains at the national and global levels. Support for these approaches will help NGOs to link "thin" to "thick" solutions in their work to transform the economy and not just extend participation to lower-income groups.

Similarly, NGOs can use the rising popularity of social media and ICTs to foster deeper changes in politics and civil society activism. Instead of celebrating "either" virtual interaction "or" face-to-face engagement as enthusiasts and skeptics tend to do, they can explore the fertile middle ground that's emerging between the two, converting a "thin" approach to technology into a "thick" solution that recognizes that all innovations have costs as well as benefits. These costs and benefits have been well-researched: social media strengthen connectivity and information flows and can sometimes affect the balance of power in society, but they are less successful in bridging different interests and in counteracting the structural problems that weaken participation of every kind (especially inequality). In these areas direct, face-to-face encounters are more important, since they have more of an impact on the power structures of democracy and politics and can lead to shifts in public norms and values when different views collide with each-other in real time.

But much less is known about the conditions under which these different forms of participation can be combined in order to increase their influence and impact. The shape of civil society is constantly evolving, and new forms of citizen organizing might tackle older issues of accountability, political engagement and conflict-mediation more or less successfully, for example in new networks like "Avaaz." The task is to give birth to new forms of activism that are appropriate to their context, taking account of the rise of a new generation of "digital natives" who may be less comfortable with the civic cultures of the past, but not assuming that their preferred modes of participation are "better" than those we have inherited, just different. By encouraging a new mix of technology-based and face-to-face participation, NGOs can help to find solutions that strengthen individual engagement *and* reinforce collective action in order to transform democracy.

What ties these examples together is the determination to keep burrowing through successive layers of development and social change, constantly looking for ways to complement the "old" with the "new" without sacrificing the imperative to go deeper in search of more transformative results. This is what distinguishes the best NGOs from governments, businesses, and other funding agencies, and also what protects them from the co-optation and exaggeration that can sidetrack even the best-intentioned efforts. Who, if not NGOs, will ask the bigger questions about "what" to do as well as "how" to do it most "efficiently," especially at a time when the pressures to conform to new orthodoxies are so powerful and the disincentives to break free are so strong? The role of NGOs is not just to knit together a thicker tapestry of solutions, but to give it a shape and form that is defined by social justice and the voices of the poor. But if they are to be effective in this role they will need to sharpen up their skills, build new capacities, and re-prioritize their resources in order to tackle "thick" problems in "thicker" ways.

What should NGOs strengthen and phase out in order to play this role effectively?

All bridges need strong foundations – NGOs that are clear about their mission, focused on specific areas where they have real expertise, and savvy about the different ways of promoting social change in a field that is increasingly crowded with actors, approaches and ideas. Too many NGOs are like Christmas Trees, constantly adding new decorations as they become available and putting them away once New Year comes around – a few million Pounds or Euros spent on the latest fashions of the funders before attention moves elsewhere. Adding things is easy, but taking them away is difficult, yet "thick" problems demand the discipline to stick with a small number of issues over time as well as the skills to knit disparate elements of their resolution together in new and creative ways.

No-one has a crystal ball, but if I'm right about "thick problems and thin solutions" then a number of areas will have to be strengthened in the NGO community. Chief among these are research and action on the nature of the "new economy" across lots of different settings, and a shift in emphasis from seeking a fairer distribution of abundance to the much harder task of managing scarcity and its political (and personal) implications. No-one knows what this will mean at any level of detail, so more investment in concrete experiments on the ground is vital, along with building up and sharing the knowledge they create. The suggestions detailed above on linking "thin" and "thick" in areas like

microfinance and social enterprise provide a strong platform to build from; the work that Hivos is doing on supply chains is another good example.

Building up these capacities will help NGOs to place themselves "ahead of the game," and to be proactive in raising new questions and different answers instead of being so reactive to a debate whose terms are set by others. A gradually-expanding body of knowledge and practice around sustainable development will help them to flag the conditions under which real progress is being made, and to question exaggerated claims about the success of "bottom-of-the-pyramid" investments, fair trade, the "new Green Revolution" and other high-profile innovations. Acting as "watchdogs" on claims like these will be extremely important in separating fact from fiction in what is sure to be a highly-charged debate.

The second area for expansion grows naturally from the first, and it concerns the kinds of politics and civil society activism that will be required to create and sustain successful new economy experiments. Again, Hivos has a head start here through its work on new forms of participation and communication, but progress on "thick" problems is likely to require more large-scale, direct public involvement and not just advocacy and public education of the sort that is already well-developed in the NGO community.

This is partly because no-one knows what policies will "work" in the emerging systems of economics, politics and social change that look set to dominate the future, and therefore a more open-ended process of intellectual and civic engagement on "thick" problems and their resolution will be more effective in creating constituencies that are capable of sustaining rational arguments, rather than persuading everyone to share a single, pre-determined point of view. But by mixing "inspiration" with "perspiration" – more powerful public messaging with concrete avenues for action on the ground – it should be possible to involve large numbers of people in a collective search for progress in terms that they define for themselves. These messages and actions should not be framed in terms of "Third-World development," since this frame is far too distant to trigger real changes in institutions, lifestyles and behavior. Perhaps this might also involve a revival in protest and civil disobedience of the kind that is beginning to be seen around environmental issues today. Training in these techniques (along the lines provided by the Ruckus Society for example) could be very valuable to NGO supporters.

Third, working in the evolving ecosystems of social change will require a particular set of personal capacities for "both/and" thinking and decision-making, including the ability to hold multiple perspectives in one's head, and to cross between different types of institution and approach while staying focused on democracy and social justice. Very few development workers are trained to look at problems and solutions through such holistic eyes, though the "Millennial Generation" is assumed to be more adept at various forms of boundary-crossing. How NGOs prepare their staff for these challenges will be critical to their ability to explore new pathways for success.

In terms of things that NGOs might phase out, three suggestions follow from the ideas described above, and all of them are controversial.

The first is simply to remove the organization from the technocracy and "metrics mania" that are sweeping across the world of social change, and to disinvest in its associated evaluation and

accountability requirements which are so expensive to fulfill. Trying to soften or reform "quantiphilia" is not a contest NGOs can win, and while the search for better evaluation methodologies should continue this process should be controlled by NGOs themselves in order to avoid being co-opted into a framework that leads only in one direction.

Secondly, if NGOs increase their involvement in knowledge-creation and constituency-building, it should be possible to scale back conventional advocacy and public education work, especially in relation to international institutions which are relatively impermeable to civil society influence. Having an office in New York, Washington DC and Geneva has become something of a "badge of honor" for development NGOs, but the influence of the United Nations and even the World Bank and IMF is waning as less formal and more fluid mechanisms of global governance take shape around them.

Third, since humanitarian response and contracting in areas like microfinance are increasingly performed by consulting firms and other specialists, NGOs do not have to compete with them for their own "share of the pie." With some exceptions these are "thin" solutions anyway so there is less incentive to stay involved, and the costs of building up the competences required to be successful are expensive. If NGOs do move in this direction, then most of their field offices can be abolished and their capacities diffused throughout the networks of each organization or NGO alliance.

These changes will be very difficult to agree on and carry through, hitting as they do against long-held traditions of NGO work and their institutional imperatives. A high degree of financial independence (or at least diversification) will be vital in generating the room-to-maneuver that more flexible organizations will require. Much will depend on how such changes are communicated to staff, funders and supporters, as exciting avenues for NGOs to become the "transformation" agencies of the future. These would not be the "thin" transformations of social enterprise and advocacy as we know them today, but the "thick" transformations of Gandhi, Martin Luther King and other social-ethical leaders throughout recent history. King defined the task of social change as "translating love into justice structures", which sounds an impossible dream. In fact, it would be the logical extension of NGOs' commitment to put human values into action as the world continues to shape itself around them.

About the author

Dr. Michael Edwards is an independent writer and activist based in upstate New York who is affiliated with the New York-based think-tank Demos, and the Brooks World Poverty Institute at Manchester University in the UK. From 1999 to 2008 he was the Director of the Ford Foundation's Governance and Civil Society Program in New York, having previously worked for the World Bank, Oxfam-GB, Save the Children-UK and other NGOs in Washington DC, London, Colombia, Zambia, Malawi, and India. His writings have helped to shape a more critical appreciation of the global role of philanthropy and civil society, and to break down barriers between researchers and activists across the world. He has recently been awarded with the The Gandhi, King, Ikeda Community Builders Prize.

About Future Calling

What will our world look like in the future and what does that imply for INGO strategy and policy today. Future Calling is a new Hivos Knowledge Programme initiative that will explore longer term horizons to ensure that we're well connected into the future. Together with local organisations in developing countries, Hivos strives for a world in which all citizens – both men and women – have equal access to resources and opportunities for development. The Hivos Knowledge Programme is *the* platform for knowledge development on issues imperative to the global development sector. The main themes are: Civil Society Building; Promoting Pluralism; Civil Society in West Asia; Small Producer Agency in the Globalized Market and; Digital Natives with a Cause? See www.hivos.net for more details.

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