

PVO AND NGO FUTURES

A FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTION AND DIALOGUE

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August 2004

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The following pages provide perspectives on possible future roles and directions for private voluntary organizations (PVOs) and their non-governmental counterparts (NGOs) overseas. This paper's broad objective is to contribute to reflections within USAID on strategies for PVO financing and provide an input to dialogue with PVOs and NGOs. Perspectives and arguments draw on extensive literature noted in the references and readings. To assist in discussion, an annex provides possible topics and questions for self-reflection and dialogue.

The paper follows the US naming convention. PVO means non-governmental, non-profit organizations dedicated to international development that originate and are governed within donor countries. USPVO will be used when American organizations are the specific focus. NGOs denote non-profit development organizations originating from and governed within aid-recipient countries. Community based organizations (CBOs) are a typical constituency that PVOs and NGOs intend to serve and are regarded as primary civic associations. PVOs, NGOs and CBOs are constituent parts of, but are not equal to, civil society.² The time frame adopted is a medium term of five to ten years. That is a period to around 2015.

At least four sets of conditions are shaping PVO and NGO futures. The first set is to be found in a general predominance of goal-based poverty reduction as the objective for international aid, thereby focusing and 'harmonizing' PVO and NGO work with that of official aid. Another cluster of external forces stem from concerns about legitimacy and accountability that place stricter demands on the way that PVOs and NGOs are governed and retain public trust. Responding to these demands will require a much better ability to demonstrate performance. Relationships are a third source of pressure for change. Here, two trends are particularly noticeable. One is the drive to form complex 'partnerships' that combine PVOs, NGOs, government and businesses. Another is the displacement of PVOs and NGOs as agents of structural change by member-based activist and other civic entities. Fourth, both PVOs and NGOs face major changes in terms of raising money for their work. Common sense suggests a strategy of financial diversification, but this may create conflict between PVOs and their NGO counterparts. Hence strategic choices to ensure resource continuity may not be straightforward.

The global scenario

A guiding assumption is that within the next five to ten years the 'big picture' conditions within which PVOs and NGOs operate will not substantially improve in terms of positive shifts towards greater stability or certainty in global affairs and human prospects. Further, foreign assistance will be part of strategies to advance overall foreign policy objectives, including counterterrorism. Consequently, foreign assistance will be a means to a) promote long-term stabilization, and b) help address and contain short-term negative social and political consequences of disruptive global development and change. In such a scenario, official finance will be driven more by geopolitical considerations than by moral imperatives. It will value PVOs and NGOs for their pragmatic problem solving capabilities and their long-term contribution to breaking a believed causative link between poverty and terrorism.

¹ This paper does not reflect the opinions or policies of USAID and is the sole responsibility of the author.

² For discussion on civil society, its definitions and constituents, see Pratt, 2003; Edwards, 2004.

Significant trends

Two major development trends are influencing the future for PVOs and NGOs. First is general clustering of donor strategies around realizing the Millennium Development Goals.. Located within international high agreements on aid financing, sustainable development and trade, the aid system is moving towards a more comprehensive framework for action. This structure includes policy priorities on poverty reduction, good governance, economic reform and human rights allied to practical instruments such as Challenge Funds, Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, Sector Wide Approaches and budget support. These interlocking factors are likely to remain the way that the international aid system aligns its efforts, invests resources, and develops ever more complicated relationships. In turn, these choices are setting critical, unifying parameters for PVO and NGO access to official aid and are increasingly determining the organizational agendas and competencies they require.

The second trend can be found in a general push towards social problem solving and public service delivery based on multisectoral collaboration, or partnership, between government, business and civil society. This movement is expanding an overlapping institutional terrain, creating opportunities for PVOs and NGOs to address development in innovative relational ways. In sum, the operating environment for PVOs and NGOs is narrowing in some respects while opening up in others.

PVOs and NGOs in Development - Roles in supply and demand

Development work involves two, major complementary roles for both PVOs and NGOs. On the “supply side,” PVOs and NGOs typically engage in the provision of public services alongside and in support of governments. On the demand side, PVOs and NGOs increasingly act as advocates for change in government policy and practice. Fulfilling these two functions will probably play out differently for PVOs and NGOs and may cause tensions between them in the process.

The framework of policies, commitments, priorities and mechanisms of official aid³ will bring PVOs and NGOs closer to government in terms of the supply-side delivery of public goods and services. This movement has the potential to erode PVO and NGO advantages of heterogeneity and adaptability as their development practices become standardized around official norms and practices. Such a shift will also draw PVOs and NGOs into applying official definitions and explanations of poverty, rather than their own necessary analysis of causation and remedy, typically under conditions of rapid globalization. Further, aid is likely to concentrate in ways that exclude people who are located in poor countries and places that are not donor priorities. PVOs and NGOs need to work out how such potentially negative influences on their choice of location, effectiveness and even independent existence can be avoided.

Under emerging aid conditions, the pressure PVOs face from donors, southern governments and NGOs to stop being operational is likely to grow. But, for many PVOs, the ‘bottom line’ financial/survival consequences of “capacity building their way out of a job” continues to make it difficult to remove themselves from the direct delivery of development services.⁴

³ Fowler, 2003.

⁴ Van Rooy, 2000.

PVOs and their funders still need to work out how this contradictory reality is to be resolved so that NGO mistrust of PVOs' intentions and "partnership" can be at least reduced, if not avoided all together.

PVOs, but more significantly NGOs, are expected to fulfill demand-side roles such as social accountability, budget watchdogs and civic claim making. Opportunities for doing so are opening up at local, national and international levels. However, closer proximity through government financing is likely to reduce their ability or willingness to take on these potentially risky functions. As 'guests' in a country, PVOs are often wary of playing overt demand-side roles, especially where this involves advocating against government policies. In other words, trends in the aid system create obstacles in terms of PVO and NGO positioning and effectiveness to advance advocacy goals.

Notwithstanding their legal forms, as part of civil society NGOs are inevitably, part of a political landscape.⁵ Hence, the coming years are likely to see a greater developmental focus on the complicated interface between civil society and political society of political parties and legislative processes. How PVOs and NGOs position themselves in terms of managing the 'politics of an apolitical role' requires attention and conscious donor strategy.

PVOs and NGOs in humanitarian assistance

Alongside developmental tasks, some PVOs and NGOs provide humanitarian assistance. The humanitarian scene is, in fact, dominated by PVOs that overshadow NGOs. While some types of humanitarian intervention are best served by 'outsiders', such as PVOs, not all situations require this solution. A necessary topic for a PVO/NGO futures dialogue is to arrive at an agreed 'configuration of humanitarian response capabilities' that are distributed nationally, regionally and globally and suited to different types of demand. For donors, this implies consideration of systematic organizational strengthening, i.e., to establish a humanitarian response infrastructure across the world that reduces excessive reliance on PVOs.

PVO and NGO legitimacy and accountability: focusing on performance and governance

This decade has seen a growing 'backlash' against PVO and NGO success in influencing public policies and decision-making processes. Such achievements have raised charges of illegitimacy because many PVOs and NGOs operate without a representative mandate. The sources, timing and style of criticism point towards a deep-seated problem of inadequate public governance, locally, nationally and internationally. By default, PVOs and NGOs are starting to fill the moral vacuum that poor governance has produced. But, irrespective of a backlash, PVOs and NGOs must be accountable for what they say and do. This, rather than representative legitimacy, is their common Achilles' heel.

PVO and NGO accountability is tied to organizational achievement in terms of actual change realized, not effort or money expended. Demonstrating accomplishments is a prerequisite for being held to account for actions and resources. It is beyond the scope of this paper to detail how technical issues of performance assessment can be addressed. This area is already the focus of greater PVO and NGO attention, albeit without as much progress as one would like and is essential.

⁵ Blair, 2002.

However, the problem of adequately demonstrating performance is not simply one of technical methods. To guide methodology, there is need for debate and agreement on minimum development performance categories that PVOs and NGOs should report on. This is not an argument for uniform measures, like international accounting standards. But it is an argument for PVOs and NGOs to be more forthcoming and similar in reporting on the key areas of development, i.e., change in the lives of their constituencies. Without this step, PVOs and NGOs will always face a reputational risk. One source of risk is the minefield of media exposure and inability to respond to unfair or unfounded criticism because organizations have not collected, know about or have published countervailing evidence. Here, a donor role could be to stimulate debate about PVO and NGO minimal standards and public disclosure.

Inadequate PVO and NGO accountability is often due to poor governance. This condition is found in individual organizations, collaborative arrangements and across the sector within a society.

A common feature determining the quality of PVO/NGO governance is the division of authority between governing body and the chief executive. NGOs frequently face governance problems associated with a stage of growth that is yet to move beyond the founder-leader.⁶ Further, board-CEO relations are too seldom the site for systematic review and improvement, while board recruitment and leadership transitions are commonly non-transparent processes that would merit agreement on standards of openness. In as far as governance dimensions of capacity building are addressed, particularly in relation to NGOs, activities are too often focused on individual leaders at the cost of organizational leadership, which includes governing structures and processes. Improving PVO and NGO accountability and credibility will be served by direct attention to and investment in these areas.

For PVOs, especially those federating in one or other form, one issue meriting attention is ethical and pivots around the inclusion of NGO perspectives and voice on governing bodies.⁷ NGO inclusion is morally compelling, socially just and a vital source of information, experience and part of 'downward accountability' leading to better policymaking and oversight. PVO credibility in international debates and advocacy will increasingly be influenced by board composition, as well as by functional NGO-PVO relationships. It will also be affected by the ways in which debates and disagreements between members on international issues and positions are mediated.⁸

There is often too little public understanding about how PVO advocacy issues and positions are arrived at. Making public the processes and protocols used to reach decisions about campaign and other such interventions are an additional element in improved transparency that helps credibility. Availability of information from transnational PVOs is, apparently, significantly weaker when compared with other transnational institutions.⁹ This condition also undermines a credible profile in international debates.

⁶ Smillie and Hailey, 2001.

⁷ A comprehensive treatment is provided in Lindenberg and Bryant, 2001.

⁸ Lister, 2004.

⁹ Kovach *et al.*, 2003.

NGO communities can be plagued by organizations with motives that are not for the public good. Consequently, with continued growth in numbers, the need for adequate regulation is becoming more important for NGO futures. Self-regulatory mechanisms and self-compliance systems to satisfying this requirement will only come about if NGOs, aided by PVOs, take the initiative. Identifying reliable and capable NGOs will continue to be a difficult issue for donors and for national and local governments. Investments that establish fair and reliable methods for reaching this type of judgment could generate significant returns for many stakeholders.

Engaging in more complex relationships

As noted above, the trend is towards more intense and complex development relationships. Days of working in isolation or separation are ending. As is already happening, PVOs and NGOs need to develop capabilities to work with government in ways that do not erode autonomy and identity. Similar requirements apply to development-oriented engagement with businesses, where their motives and commitment need to be understood case by case. Expanding these types of relationships offer a mix of opportunities, cautions and learning by doing.

A tricky futures question for PVOs, and particularly NGOs, is: what is their place within civil society? There is a potential watershed in the way both PVOs and NGOs are seen, and must perceive themselves, as 'agents of change'. A driver for this reflection is the emergence of influential member-based social movements. Flexible, dynamically organized groupings of activists and disadvantaged people are growing in scale, number and political significance.¹⁰ Consumer boycott movements, Shack Dwellers and Landless People are oft-quoted examples of activist civic emergence rooted within and supported by members. These formations interact with governments and are as much a civic force as an 'organization'. With a few exceptions, in comparison PVOs and NGO are seen as aid-dependent, co-opted technocratic incrementalists increasingly acting as suppliers and incremental improvers within a practical and technocratic framework that reflects the 'partnership' or harmony theory of change employed by official agencies.¹¹ It is argued that they will not create structural change benefiting the poor. PVOs and NGOs will benefit from candid reflection on this criticism.

With respect to sustainability, many NGOs are still finding it difficult to embed in their own societies and economies in terms of adequate support from the public at large or from government budgets. One study on the role of NGOs in relation to governance concluded:

“It also means opening up debate on whether the Western model of professionalized NGOs is broadly appropriate in developing countries, given the relatively high costs of many such organizations relative to the local economies, and discussion of alternatives that might fit better in host societies.”¹²

¹⁰ Khagram, et al, 2002.

¹¹ Van der velden, 1996; van Rooy, 2000.

¹² Ottaway and Carothers, 2000:309.

A serious look is needed at why NGOs have seldom established 'niches' that can be sustained from within their country.¹³ In other words, why have NGOs generally remained aid-dependent and not an embedded part of civil society? Despite concerns for sustainability, there has been inadequate investment in the social and economic rootedness of NGOs. A topic for a futures debate is whether this situation is desirable and tenable.

A third relational dimension is to understand why PVOs and NGOs have yet to form strong bonds with other major civil society actors, such as Trade Unions, faith-based bodies and professional associations.¹⁴ To some extent it can be argued that aid has permitted, if not caused, a continued separation of PVOs and NGOs from the mainstream and body of civil society in the North and South.

Finally, the push towards partnerships between multiple institutions with different combinations of incentives, motivations, resources and forms of power will be difficult to realize without some form of mediating or bridging capability. Given the significance of this trend, consideration could be given to investing in or supporting professional facilities that are able to bring diverse actors to the table in ways that build trust and mutual confidence.

PVO and NGO resources

Three factors will possibly influence PVO or NGO access to official aid. First, Sector Wide Approaches (SWAPs), program aid and donor support to government budgets for self-supply, contracting out or privatizing public services will continue. Second, accessing funds on a competitive basis – usual for USAID and USPVOs - will expand to become a common method for PVO and NGO selection and resource allocation across many other donors. Third, decentralization of donor resources to developing countries and regions is unlikely to reverse. This mixture of factors will require PVOs and, especially NGOs, to negotiate with recipient governments for contracts, less and less so with donors directly.

In addition, more widespread competitive procurement may accentuate the significance of differences between PVOs and NGOs in terms of levels of experience, competence, adherence to reporting standards, international connections and contingency resources. Typically, such differences will favor PVOs over NGOs. Safeguards are required to ensure that further shifts to competition-based aid allocation as the norm is not unfair in terms of PVOs' overshadowing NGO access to finance. To help level the playing field, funders could require collaborative PVO-NGO proposals to be submitted by NGOs and, if awarded, be financed through them.

Alongside official aid, PVOs, NGOs and donors can look for and foster resource alternatives. One path is by creating an 'enabling environment' of legislation that, for example, gives tax incentives for organizations established to benefit the public and for donations to them. Another is through the promotion of 'philanthropy' amongst a growing middle class and through the encouragement of corporate social investment. Though perhaps modest in amount, the quality of such local resources can help NGOs retain identity and room to negotiate in increasingly competitive environments. Further, financial diversification for

¹³ Many governments are not viable outside of international aid. This argument can postpone but not alter the ultimate reality that many NGOs have little realistic prospect sustainability in a PVO form and cost structure.

¹⁴ *Development in Practice*, Vol. 14, Nos. 1 & 2, February 2004.

NGOs can involve becoming for-profit/non-profit hybrids by starting income-generating enterprises that may or may not be developmental. A futures factor to bear in mind is whether such choices about diversification made by individual NGOs will collectively alter the character of the sector with potentially negative implications for public perceptions, trust and government support.

Funders are seldom willing to provide endowments or to otherwise invest financially to ensure NGO sustainability. This policy is unlikely to change, which implies that some NGOs will not endure. A strategic question for donors will be – which ones and why?

PVO options and choices

In responding to trends, PVOs and NGOs can consider two related sets of options: rethink functions and/or evolve identity. What is possible has similarities and differences between PVOs and NGOs.

In terms of *development functions* PVOs have an option to work more domestically – particularly in terms of development education - as well as overseas. An option for NGOs is to expand their work South-South, which could figure as a donor strategy to level opportunities. Both PVOs and NGOs could opt to concentrate within the areas prioritized by the aid framework. A selective approach could establish the organization in a particular niche or area of specialization – girls’ education, health, water, HIV/AIDS. Both NGOs and PVOs could then work towards recognition in a competence that eventually transcends dependency on the aid system. Indeed, donors could also start to apply a ‘post-aid’ strategic perspective in whom and how they fund.

Administrative decentralization, as well as privatization of local public services, are creating significant opportunities for NGOs to become actively engaged with local government. This could itself become a type of specialization and niche that NGOs can choose.

The emerging terrain of multisector development initiatives offers a major potential in terms of PVO and NGO strategic choice. NGOs may face difficulty in gaining from this new area because many businesses are foreign owned and local pressure towards corporate social responsibility is less developed. Choosing this path will involve trade-offs in image and credibility towards existing constituencies. A further aspect of multisector partnerships is the opportunity it presents for PVOs and NGOs to act as fee-earning ‘brokers’ and facilitators. This option would require active networking and gathering of ‘intelligence’ about the demand for development services and the possible sources of supply that could work collectively.

Post-conflict development and peace building are substantial areas of humanitarian work fulfilled mainly by PVOs. The financing model for this type of work often provides an economic ‘foundation’ that enables more developmental tasks to be undertaken. The biggest PVOs all include humanitarian work in their portfolios. Growing experience indicates that peace-building processes are long-term. This condition brings a perspective of more stable contracts than is common in much development work. In turn, this view invites expansion of humanitarian service provision, with an acceptance of the human risks involved.

In terms of *identity*, PVOs and NGOs usually profile towards one or both of two constituencies: the general public and development professionals as peers or potential

fundes. Strategically, a PVO needs to review the constituencies it seeks to engage with and profile towards, which may now include corporations. Many NGOs have an enduring problem of reorienting their image away from the aid system towards the local 'gift economy'. On balance, therefore, it looks as if local economic embedding for many NGOs will be via government contracting. This calls for 'branding' based on technical competence. An NGO alternative is to become a for-profit/non-profit hybrid.

Related to reviewing constituencies is the issue of organizational self-understanding. Today it is misleading to see most PVOs or NGOs as 'voluntary' organizations, dominated by an altruistic ethos. It is more honest and appropriate to consider contemporary PVO and NGO-ism as forms of social entrepreneurship. Taking this step in self-understanding would help clarify what values should guide organizational actions, competencies and internal and external relations. It will also help rebuild public confidence by being transparent about what such organisations really are.

Unlike NGOs, PVOs can make a strategic choice with respect to 'localization', that is to create a locally governed NGO that becomes part of an international family. While trends are pushing towards this option, localizing PVO identity has many pros and cons that need critical assessment.

Implications for donors

In addition to topics already touched on, implications for donors can be looked at in terms of strategy and operations. A strategic view suggests that donors need to appraise the PVO and NGO configurations within a country to gain a clear understanding of their place in relation to civil society as development actors. A long-term view may elevate or relegate (some types of) PVOs and NGOs in terms of effective development investment. It is not sensible to assume that more NGOs are always better than more of other types of civil society organizations. It is also necessary to more critically question the extent to which the PVO model imported to, and copied within, the South is appropriate to local conditions outside of continued aid.

Second, there is an implication for donors in terms of promoting PVOs, but more critically NGOs, into roles that are meant to have an impact on government policy choices and their effective delivery. An issue for donors is to ensure that NGO activity in this direction does not undermine weak or embryonic democratic political systems that are supposed to determine public policies and hold the administration to account.

Donors need to address issues arising from supply-driven expansion in NGO numbers. Performance-based standards are required if PVOs and, critically, NGOs are to gain public understanding, trust and increase the possibility for local financing. This process requires priority investment to: a) establish collective standards; b) improve PVO and NGO governance; and c) strengthen monitoring and evaluation systems. It also calls on donors to create well considered "exit strategies" from locations and development priorities to ensure that past investment in PVOs and NGOs is not wasted but endures in effect.

Funding policies shape PVO and NGO behavior and relationships. This reality tasks donors to find clear answers to some strategic questions. How best can multisector collaboration be encouraged? Is competition or, perhaps, brokering more appropriate? To what extent should

the official aid system be the dominant framework for financing PVOs and NGOs? Is greater flexibility in donor policies and mechanisms required to ensure that PVO/NGO comparative advantages are not eroded but used to the fullest?

In terms of operational perspectives, analysis indicates the importance of improving possibilities for demand-led financing coming from within the South. In this arrangement, the task of PVOs becomes one of investing to create systems within NGOs that satisfy effectiveness, accounting and reporting requirements instead of fulfilling this task themselves. In other words, this change would alter an NGO's dependency position in PVO-NGO bidding relations.

A further operational change would be in NGO capacity building. A struggle remains to provide a funding system that allows NGOs to select the capacity building service provider it considers most appropriate. Greater attention can, therefore, be given to financing NGO capacity building through, for example, locally managed resources that they can access for this purpose.

Finally, donor criteria determining PVO and NGO eligibility for funding could accelerate the establishment and adoption of minimum standards. For example, requiring compliance in terms of public reporting and accountability can send important signals and create incentives for change that increase public understanding of and trust in PVOs and NGOs. Satisfying these conditions can also improve the likelihood that NGOs will become part of civil society instead of a presence within it. This, probably, is the most significant challenge facing both the PVO/NGO community and donors today and tomorrow.

Annex

Topics and Questions for (Self-)Reflection and Dialogue

The following are offered as candidates for topics or questions that could be usefully included in reflection and dialogue about NGO futures.

Meeting external trends

1. How can PVOs and NGOs ensure that their distinct practices, autonomy and civic identity are recognized and applied within the tightening framework of international aid?
2. How can PVOs and NGOs apply their perspectives on causes and remedies for poverty into today's aid framework?
3. What should and can PVOs and NGOs do to address deprivation and poverty in locations that do not enjoy donor priority?
4. Can and should 'supply side' service delivery and 'demand side' civic empowerment roles be combined within one PVO or NGO or better become complementary specializations?
5. How can the risks of the 'politics of an apolitical role' in governance be shared and managed between PVOs and NGOs?
6. What steps can PVOs and NGOs take to deal with a 'backlash' to the success of advocacy?

Legitimacy and accountability

1. What roles of PVOs and NGOs in public governance systems are desirable or inappropriate and under what conditions?
2. Do ethics and international credibility call for equitable inclusion of NGOs in governance of federated or multi-country PVOs?
3. Open a debate about (minimum) development performance categories to be publicly reported.
4. Create generally accepted standards for transparency in PVO and NGO governance.
5. Prioritize investment in capacity building for NGO and sector governance and leader transition.
6. What should NGOs do in terms of self-regulation systems and adequate compliance?

Roles and relationships in and beyond aid

1. What strategy will continue the 'demand side' roles of NGOs in post-aid settings?
2. How can the aid system support PVO or NGO collaboration with businesses to ensure that complementarity capabilities result in greater development gains?
3. Should PVOs and NGOs negotiate complementary roles with social movements?
4. Are alternative models of NGOs required to increase the prospect of their sustainability?
5. What should and can be done to forge PVO and NGO connections with other civil society actors?
6. Should investment be made in the creation of professional resources to facilitate the creation of more complex development relationships?

Resources

1. How can PVOs deal with the conflict of interest in capacity building of and potential replacement by NGOs?
2. Should donors take (more) steps to 'create a level playing field' in terms of competitive tendering between PVOs and NGOs?
3. What are effective directions in resource diversification for PVOs and NGOs that do not perpetuate over-shadowing?
4. What should NGOs do to improve their context for resource mobilization?
5. Should a changing character of the NGO community – for example as service contractors - be a concern in terms of public understanding, trust, etc?

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