

*Theme 1*

**Institutional Co-operation between  
African NGOs and External Partners**

***“Current Constraints and Ways Ahead”***

**Background paper prepared by INTRAC**

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This paper sets out to explore current and potential patterns of co-operation between African NGOs and their external funders and partners, in the wider context of the need to build the overall capacity of the African NGO sector in a way that is both long-term and holistic. This need is based on the assumption that donor funding needs to move from its over-emphasis on delivery of projects and programmes and its tendency to see capacity building as meaning training only. Furthermore, African NGOs need to develop new ways of working, given their dependence on foreign funding and the way in which this limits the space for them to set their own agendas. In particular, there is a need for African NGOs to have an independent voice based on sustained analysis of the context in which they work.

The paper starts by defining what is meant by a 'sustainable NGO', organisational 'autonomy' and 'resource mobilisation' within the context of building the capacity of African NGOs. It then provides an overview of current humanitarian and development aid regimes in Africa, with a summary of current trends in aid and in co-operation between African NGOs and their Northern funders – both NGOs and official donors. It concludes by suggesting ways forward for strengthening the relative position of African NGOs within the aid system, and their ability to influence the aid agenda both in the humanitarian and development fields.

First and foremost, although the paper is concerned with providing a generic overview, it is recognised that the analysis covers a wide-ranging and heterogeneous set of actors. For example, the African NGO sector is itself very diverse and some suggestions are made concerning the definition of the sector. Furthermore, both NGO and official agency donors are recognised as being diverse and bringing a range of different approaches and agenda. Despite a significant overlap in humanitarian action and development aid regimes in Africa, there are distinct actors and practices in the two sub-sectors.

In terms of trends in official aid, the paper highlights a re-focusing by official donors on the state and channelling funds through African governments. This has been coupled with a trend away from funding projects to programmes as part of longer-term country strategies, for examples through SWAPs (sector-wide approaches); tying aid to PRSPs (poverty reduction strategy papers); basket funding; and partnership agreements around strategic aims. This has been in addition to the long-term trend towards competitive bids and contracts for service delivery, which often disadvantage African NGOs because of the high overhead costs needed to sustain the tendering process. There are a few exceptions to this pattern; for example one official donor has provided core funding to an African NGO, recognising the need for long-term funding particularly for organisations focusing on advocacy.

The paper also draws attention to the striking lack of research on the part of official donors to the effects of their funding strategies on the capacity of African NGOs as organisations. This gap is significant in showing that the capacity building of civil society is not a priority for most official donors in practice.

Concerning the relationships between African NGOs and Northern NGOs, this co-operation has increased as many Northern NGOs have withdrawn from being operational and now work exclusively with local partners. Northern NGOs, like official donors, retain an emphasis on their own funding priorities and agendas, and often funding core costs of African NGOs is a neglected area. Furthermore, many Northern NGOs are reducing the numbers of partners they work with as they take on a more strategic focus, and as they move towards supporting networks and advocacy. In certain geographical and programme areas this is affecting the availability of funds to African NGOs.

The trend within humanitarian interventions is such that the Northern NGOs are actually becoming even more dominant, with very little attention to building the capacity of African organisations. In fact, in East Africa there is even evidence of an erosion of local humanitarian capacity in recent years. Whilst the paper recognises the constraints in local capacity to respond in humanitarian situations, this is often used as an excuse to justify bypassing local actors. The development of standards in humanitarian situations is increasingly becoming a condition of funding and could present a further barrier for African NGOs.

In summary, current aid co-operation between African NGOs and Northern actors is heavily constrained by Northern-dominated aid regimes, models and priorities. African NGOs are alienated from the process of establishing funding priorities and they are often projected into roles determined by outside actors. African NGOs expend huge amounts of time and money dealing with donor management systems, particularly reporting systems and tools such as the logical framework, which further eats into their overheads. Northern actors take on a narrow and instrumental view of organisational capacity building whereas African NGOs tend to want capacity building to address broader concerns to help them become sustainable autonomous organisations.

Thus, the relations between Northern actors and African NGOs remain characterised by mistrust: power remains with the Northern donors and this is at the heart of the skewing in the international aid system. Northern actors are powerful, setting the agenda and imposing their models of development and change, and this limits how far aid can respond to the priorities of the poor.

The challenge that African NGOs face is therefore how to identify African approaches to development and humanitarian aid within the constraints of the existing regime. How can they become autonomous, empowered organisations that can determine their own strategic directions and follow them? How can they avoid replicating the unsatisfactory relationships of the aid regime among African NGOs?

It is essential for African NGOs to have a clear strategic focus to avoid being caught up in a contract culture, where they take up whatever position is required to get the next round of funding. Organisational capacity building is more empowering when the funding for it is provided at arm's length from programme funding. For African NGOs to make progress towards capacity building that empowers, they need to have alternative channels for funding it. Any NGO must attempt to diversify their funding sources in order to improve their financial stability and reduce dependence on any one donor.

A way forward is for African NGOs to increase their collaboration to build up the NGO sector as a whole. They need to develop a mechanism for exchanging ideas and experience and work out some common African approaches to development. If such a mechanism takes an organisational form, it may be able to establish streams of diverse funding. It may also provide a platform for launching capacity building initiatives for African NGOs, which are focused on the needs and priorities of the African NGOs. The paper concludes by identifying a need for a forum to conduct research into humanitarian and development aid from an African perspective, to identify models of good practice and to build an African framework for humanitarian action and development aid.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper sets out to explore current and potential patterns of co-operation between African NGOs and their external funders and partners, in the wider context of the need for the overall capacity building of the African NGO sector in a way that is both long-term and holistic. This need, identified as the cornerstone of the Symposium, is based on the assumption that donor funding needs to move from its over-emphasis on a project or programme focus and its tendency to see organisational capacity building as meaning training only. Furthermore, African NGOs need to develop new ways of working, given their dependence on foreign funding and the way in which this limits the space for them to set their own agendas. In particular, there is a need for African NGOs to have an independent voice based on sustained analysis of the context in which they work.

In preparing background material for this paper, there was very little research readily available which assessed the effect which Northern collaboration and funding processes have had on the African NGO sector, in either humanitarian or development contexts. Amongst official donors and, to a lesser extent, Northern NGOs, there is at best a reluctance to make any such studies available publicly and at worse a lack of concern as the effects of their funding on African NGOs as organisations and as a sector in long-term. The overall preoccupation of Northern funders has been with programme delivery. In fact, over the last two decades, international development agencies – both official donors and international/Northern NGOs – have moved towards an emphasis on management and results as they seek to measure the outcomes of development interventions in ever more tangible ways. Whilst it remains unclear what effect this has on results in practice, it has meant that funding has become increasingly tied to immediate and tangible programme implementation with a lack of funding for organisational core costs.

As an NGO support organisation, INTRAC itself would argue for a greater balance in the orientation of development aid to support organisational capacity. We see this not only as a means to make organisations more effective in delivering programmes, but also as a positive end in itself – to help develop sustainable autonomous NGOs. We should emphasise that in this paper we are referring to organisational capacity building rather than building the capacity of communities to respond to development and humanitarian needs. There is no space here to discuss the latter, which would call for another whole paper.

This paper will set out to explore some of the underlying assumptions on which the Symposium is based, before analysing in depth the nature of African NGO co-operation with external funders and partners. It concludes by suggesting ways forward for strengthening the relative position of African NGOs within the aid system, and their ability to influence the aid agenda both in the humanitarian and development fields.

As a starting point, what would a 'sustainable' and 'autonomous' organisation look like? Wardle (2002) has argued that sustainability is not just about an organisation becoming 'self-financing'. This is a narrow and unrealistic understanding of sustainability, often imposed on Southern NGOs by donors. He argues that: 'A **sustainable NGO** is one that has a reasonable prospect of continuing to function and develop over the medium term (three to five years) and to work productively with its target group'. This relates to four key areas:

- To carry out meaningful work (the 'capacity for what' aspect).
- To develop good relations with key players such as the target group, local government, other NGOs, and so forth.
- To have diversified funding sources.
- To be organised and managed well.

Wardle argues that such an organisation should attract support because donors themselves are looking for credible organisations capable of effective delivery.

Similarly, autonomy relates to an organisation's overall position and capacity in relation to others, including donors:

*Autonomy is seen as an organisation's freedom to determine its own strategic direction and development without undue pressure from external actors, particularly donors. Autonomy is also defined relationally in the context of North–South relations of power: an autonomous organisation is able to maintain horizontal relations with other actors as equals. A dependent organisation, by contrast, becomes locked into vertical relations, often with a donor, in which its freedom to determine its own strategic direction is constrained. (Brehm 2004.)*

Based on these holistic concepts of a sustainable and relatively autonomous NGO, this paper would argue for a focus on **resource mobilisation** within the context of developing organisational capacity:

*Resource mobilisation is concerned with building the capacity of NGOs and other civil society organisations to develop the [competences] that will enable them to engage appropriately as serious players with the different sectors of society in which they operate. (Giffen 2002).*

Resource mobilisation requires a combined assessment therefore of both the external environment and the internal capacities of the organisation.

## **2. AID REGIMES AND AFRICAN NGOS**

The focus of discussion in this paper is on the international aid regime: 'a loosely organised entity, held together more by common norms and purposes than authoritative arrangements of funding and decision-making, a sort of governance without government in a defined public policy sector' (Suhrke 2003:20). This regime includes the set of actors (national and international NGOs, the UN agencies, governments and so forth) as well as a body of practices (such as funding mechanisms and accountability systems) which are widely recognised and share key characteristics across Africa and in many areas of the world. The humanitarian and development aid regimes are often seen as quite distinct. They each involve different actors, types of interventions, modes of operation and, perhaps most crucially, funding streams. However, there is significant overlap.

The sharp distinction between relief and development practice has been eroded from both sides. The view of relief as a temporary distortion from the 'normal' process of development has moved forward, through a relief-development continuum (relief, rehabilitation, development) to a recognition that coping with crisis at personal, community or national level is part of the normality for many of the poorest in Africa. Short-term humanitarian action cannot be undertaken with a neat exit strategy once the crisis is over, but must take a longer-term developmental perspective including concerns such as sustainability and organisational capacity building. Likewise, development programmes are increasingly including aspects of disaster mitigation and preparedness, conflict resolution and other concerns from the humanitarian world.

However, the divide remains around the key issues of the funding arrangements and donors for humanitarian and development aid. For NGOs, emergencies and humanitarian action bring in large volumes of funds, with little of the conditionality and strings attached to development funding. For example, within the same organisation it is commonplace for development staff to struggle for years to raise the funds for a new vehicle for a rural development project, while their humanitarian colleagues are able to order new Landcruisers for an emergency on the basis of a quick telephone conversation with a friendly donor.

International, mainly Northern, NGOs dominate in the humanitarian arena. This is often attributed to their experience, competence and coverage, but it is also a reflection of their strategy to maintain their privileged positions. Emergency aid brings in a large proportion of the income of many of the major NNGOs, and provides essential overheads and core cost for the whole organisation, which effectively subsidise their development work. In this way, there is a critical link between the humanitarian and development aid regimes.

The African NGO sector in reality is, of course, very diverse and therefore requires further analysis, although it is recognised that a paper of this nature is primarily concerned with overall trends and generalisations. Writing of South Africa, *Bornstein* (2001:15) observes that some African NGOs have adapted to the existing aid regime and seem able to operate comfortably within it. Although they are dependent on donors, they are capable of coping with the shifts of donor interests. These are the largest and well-funded NGOs. A second group of NGOs are those that have established strong sectoral expertise or long-standing alliances with particular donors. A larger group of NGOs are those which have limited, if any, direct contact with the international aid regime. Similar points have been made by *De Coninck* (2004) about Ugandan NGOs.

In Ghana, *Mawdsley et al* (2002) highlighted the diversity of NGOs and identified the following broad categories:

- Centralised international NGOs with Ghana office
- Ghanaian members of international NGO federations/networks
- Major indigenous service or intermediary NGOs
- Established grass-roots NGOs
- 'Briefcase' or one-man band NGOs

What such studies suggest is that the focus of the international aid regime will exclude the majority of African NGOs and many other civil society organisations. There are, however, countless organisations and initiatives that may provide long-standing support for development and relief but remain outside the aid regime. Examples include the churches and mosques which provide assistance to the communities they serve, local associations, membership organisations and institutions for charitable support, organisations affiliated to international movements such as Rotary Club, Lions, Mothers' Union, Scouts and Guides.

### **3. CURRENT TRENDS IN AID CO-OPERATION**

#### **3.1. A Return to the Role of the State**

After the boom years of the 1990s when bi-lateral and multi-lateral donors channelled a significant proportion of development aid through NGOs in preference to the state, the pendulum is now swinging back. Donors are turning once again to African government structures, especially through the PRSP process, which is seen as promoting good governance and ensuring development aid is strategically directed towards poverty alleviation. Already the funds channelled by donors directly to international and African NGOs are shrinking. In some cases, the potential funding available through African governments in the contracts for service delivery will continue as the role of the state is rolled back and services are 'contracted out'.

#### **3.2. From Project Funding to Country Strategies**

Whilst both Northern NGOs and official donors might previously have responded to individual project requests, increasingly, they have now developed country and global strategies. This has changed the nature of co-operation between African NGOs & donors.

Whilst African NGOs might have successfully approached Northern NGOs or other donors with funding requests for a particular project, now they have to demonstrate how the project fits within the donor's strategy. This has in many cases further constrained the funding available for local initiatives which fall outside donor priorities and, arguably, has increased the dominance of donor-driven agendas in aid funding.

### **3.3. From Service Delivery to Advocacy**

Within international donor agendas, there has likewise been a shift towards funding advocacy and lobbying activities and – especially amongst Northern NGOs – away from service delivery. In practice, this has meant a greater availability of funds for African NGOs to engage in advocacy and policy dialogue processes, particularly related to PRSPs at the country level. However, it has also created pressure on African NGOs to take up these new priorities sometimes at the expense of service delivery. It is open to debate how far this growing emphasis on policy and advocacy process is appropriate in the poorest countries, where the state may struggle to provide the most basic services required for peoples' survival.

## **4. AN OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN NGO – NORTHERN CO-OPERATION**

### **4.1. Development Co-operation between African and Northern NGOs**

A common theme over many years has been the enthusiasm, at least on the part of Northern NGOs, for partnerships with African NGOs. In fact, the origins of much of the African NGO sector have been closely related to the emergence of international co-operation, particularly with Northern NGOs. The proliferation of NGOs as an organisational form is, to a large extent, a result of the international aid regime and in particular the role of Northern NGOs in it. As Northern NGOs have increasingly moved away from being operational since the mid 1980s, they have looked towards African partners, mainly NGOs, to deliver programmes. Thus, many African NGOs have from their inception been created 'in the image' of Northern NGOs in order to meet the latter's need for partners in implementation.

This statement is, of course, a huge generalisation; there are countless African NGOs which have been set up through local initiative and drive. However, as a general trend it may be helpful in identifying the root of how co-operation between African and NNGOs has become so skewed towards Northern agendas and funding priorities. Other forms of civil society, such as community-based organisations and grassroots membership organisations, may overall be a more indigenous (organic) form of organisation that has not been as driven by the availability of international funding.

INTRAC has recently concluded an in-depth study of North-South NGO partnerships (*Brehm 2004*). This included a sample of ten well-established European NGOs, all of whom have African partners, and an in-depth case study of one organisation's relations with partners in Tanzania as well as two other case studies in Brazil and Cambodia. The case studies drew on the perspectives of the Southern partners through interviews and workshops.

This research found a clear distinction between Northern NGOs who take a 'functional' approach to their relations with Southern partners, as a means of achieving their own organisational objectives. These Northern NGOs have usually been operational in the past and have relatively recently moved to working 'through' local partners. Although Northern NGOs may depend on a partnership network in order to access funds from its donors and deliver its programmes, the evidence suggests that the power in the relationship remains outside Africa. In many cases, the perception of the African NGO is of highly unequal partnerships.



At the other end of the spectrum are those NGOs who take a 'solidarity' approach to their partnerships. Within this approach, they tend to have a greater emphasis on capacity building as a means of strengthening civil society. Whilst their partnerships retain an undoubted emphasis on programme delivery, these Northern NGOs tend to be more responsive overall to local partner initiatives and recognise – at least in principle – the risk of 'imposing' their agenda on their partners. As the case of MS Denmark described below demonstrates, such relationships are often contingent on the ongoing support of the Northern NGO's back donors. The good principles of equal partnership are still subject to changes in donor strategies.

***MS Tanzania and its Partners***

*The case study of MS (the Danish volunteer-sending agency) and its relations with its Tanzanian partners illustrates some elements of 'good practice' in international co-operation. MS has developed long-term relations with its partners, providing continuity and a range of 'capacity building' inputs alongside support for service delivery. The Tanzanian partners themselves felt overall that MS had contributed to developing their capacity and autonomy as organisations, within the constraints of a heavily aid-dependent context. For them, empowerment in partnerships is defined by one interviewee as 'the ability to say no to potential relations with other Northern NGOs' (Brehm 2004). This suggests that the Northern NGO's relation with its Southern partner can in fact lead to a number of potential outcomes; for the Southern partner 'empowerment' is not necessarily about complete financial independence from Northern donors. Rather, it is related to organisational confidence and the ability to diversify funding.*

*The case study also presents an interesting example of the funding pressures faced by Northern NGOs. MS was forced to phase out of many of its partnerships in Tanzania due to cuts in funding from the Danish Government. Other Northern NGOs face similar cuts in funding and pressure to rationalise funding; this is clearly reducing the space for Northern NGOs to contribute towards the long-term capacity development of African NGOs. Again, there is a huge range of situations here and this applies particularly to Northern NGOs who have a weak public constituency and are heavily dependent on official funding sources. (Brehm 2004)*

As Northern NGOs have gone through the process of developing global, regional and country strategies, many have called into question some of the partnerships they have maintained with African NGOs over many years. As the Northern NGOs have come under pressure to demonstrate results, they have passed on that pressure and have often come to the conclusion that some of their partners are not helping them reach their strategic goals. Many have dramatically reduced the number of partners they support in an attempt to achieve a more strategic focus, often with painful results on African NGO partners. For example, at least one major UK NGO has accompanied the rationalisation of its partner portfolio – a dramatic reduction - with a steady increase in its headquarters staff.

In the face of such challenges, Christian Aid provides an example of good practice in institutional development with its partners in Burkina Faso.

***Christian Aid and Capacity Building in Burkina Faso***

*After working in Burkina Faso for over thirty years, Christian Aid opened a field office in the country and employed an 'accompanier' to work with its partners. Its review in 1999 identified some serious problems, particularly that some partner organisations had become more preoccupied with project funding than with the struggle against poverty, lacking a clear vision and effective management.*

*After much debate it was decided to support a capacity building programme among the partners that would look at their organisational culture as a whole. A Burkina NGO was identified to lead a process of organisational development among Christian Aid partners. This NGO has gained acceptance by the partners and Christian Aid report that its partners are now calling for more involvement from this NGO to help their organisations to move forward.*

*This approach showed a commitment to partners at a point when it might have been easier to stop and start fresh with new partners. By working in ways that have helped increase trust between Christian Aid and the partners, the programme appears to have steered its way through potential tensions around power. The programme also shows the difficulties of assessing the likely outcomes of capacity building work. It requires an investment of time, money and patience that will only yield results in the medium term. It also requires an adaptable process with continuous dialogue. (Christian Aid 2004, unpublished).*

Covering core costs remains a constant challenge for all NGOs, in both North and South. However, the former have become more adept at covering management costs in programmes and at times they are able to export the burden of administration to their partners. For example, in the search for results, many Northern NGOs have developed strategies to support networks and umbrella organisations to gain wider impact. This places greater emphasis on policy influence and advocacy with the intention of addressing the root causes of poverty. At the same time, this strategy tends to drive administration and other core costs down the aid chain toward African NGOs (Bornstein 2001). If a NNGO can give a single large grant to an umbrella NGO in Africa, it is up to that African NGO to manage the fund and cover the costs involved. The NNGO can show a low level of overheads and require a similar low level from its partners; but the partner has to do more administration dealing with lots of small grants to many local NGOs.

#### **4.2. Development Co-operation between African NGOs and Official Donors**

As mentioned previously, the absence of official donor studies of the overall effect of their funding strategies on the evolution of the African NGO sector, or indeed of civil society as a whole, is striking. Since this absence cannot be attributed to a lack of resources available, it can be assumed to be a result of a lack of institutional transparency and the fact that it is not given priority by donors. In any case, the lack of studies in this area highlights the critical need of evidence-based research on the actual effects of international aid on African civil society and the potential for improvements in policy and practice.

There is, of course, a danger of talking in generalisations when referring to Northern or international official donors, and it must be recognised at the outset that this is not a homogeneous group. There is a plethora of actors and approaches across the continent, and whilst this paper does not attempt to provide a detailed analysis some overall observations can be made. Starting with the multi-lateral agencies, the interface between the World Bank/IMF and African NGOs has mainly been through the indirect means of the PRSP processes with varying results in different contexts. The United Nations agencies constitute a separate category with a very different form of interaction, often having substantial contact with African NGOs at local level and through the UNHCR system. Lastly, the European Union remains a significant source of funding to African NGOs indirectly through the substantial programmes of Belgian and French NGOs in Francophone Africa and – increasingly – through the direct funding of African NGOs in-country.

The bi-lateral agencies display a similar diversity in approaches. Anecdotally, there is a perceived split (or perhaps a spectrum?) between those agencies with some commitment to participatory development processes and to building the capacity of African actors, and those for whom aid is used more explicitly as a political tool. The former group includes many of the Northern European – particularly Scandinavian – bi-lateral and Canadian CIDA, which is influential in Francophone in the area of capacity building. The latter group could include the French aid programme and USAID, which is perceived to be very directive and short-term in its target and consequently in its relations to and funding of local NGOs.

Beyond these general differences of approach and orientation, a number of recent trends in official donor policies have become evident. The general funding trend is away from direct disbursements to recipient NGOs for individual projects and towards channelling

funding to particular programme areas as part of longer-term strategies. This can be seen in the general move towards bi-lateral funding for budget support and SWAP (sector-wide approaches) at recipient government level, and in the tying of aid to country-level PRSP processes.

Where donor funding is available it is much more likely to be through 'partnership' agreements based on shared strategic aims rather than a detailed project proposal. Such agreements are sometimes made with Northern NGOs. Donors are also contributing to 'basket funds', most of which are managed under contract by Northern NGOs (for example, CARE in Tanzania). In Uganda, for example, most of DFID UK's funding for NGOs is only accessible to UK or other European Union NGOs based in Uganda. The Ugandan NGOs main route to DFID funds is thus indirectly through 'basket' funding channelled through local government, which in turn contracts local NGOs for service delivery (*De Coninck 2004*).

In some cases, basket funds are managed by local civil society intermediary organizations. For example, local bodies are emerging as steering groups for the ACP-EU programme. In such cases, it remains unclear to what degree these new arrangements are able to tackle both procedural and other management issues, and as yet there is a lack of publicly available assessments of how they function in practice.

However, there are exceptions and in some cases NGOs are receiving funds directly from donor governments that may even cover core costs. For example, DFID has supported the development of advocacy organisations in Uganda where it fitted with its overall strategic framework DFID as detailed below. While this included core funding, it is still linked to indicators and a logical framework that includes the development of strategic and funding strategy for the network including the mobilisation of membership fees.

***DFID Funding for Civil Society in Uganda***

*A review of the DFID Uganda support to civil society (KANJI 2000) highlighted that core funding is a critical problem, particularly for advocacy organisations that need a pool of flexible funds in order to be able to react quickly to issues that arise. The subsequent phase of the DFID Uganda the Civil Society Umbrella Programme adopted a range of funding arrangements to address these issues, including some longer-term programme support to selected civil society organisations and support to policy-related processes.*

*One national network organisation received funds under a strategic partnership arrangement over three years that explicitly included support to core funding for aspects such as organisational learning, staff development, resource mobilisation and upgrading office systems. It was successful in obtaining because of its national role as a membership-based advocacy and policy-focused organisation and trust in its leadership.*

Another route to donor funding for NGOs is through participating in competitive bids for contracts to deliver services or manage programmes on behalf of donors. Such contracts are paid retrospectively by invoice on completion of agreed milestones in the contract. In practice, only those organisations with sufficient capital to sustain operations prior to payment and take the risk of delays in payment can participate in these bids. This tends to exclude all but the largest and best funded African NGOs. Although the contracts may make significant contributions to core costs once they have been completed, they require significant investment in preparing bids and coping with the cash flow requirements. A further weakness of the bidding system is also its vulnerability to a lack transparency or even corruption in the way bids are awarded.

**4.3. Humanitarian Co-operation between African NGOs and Northern Donors**

The rhetoric and practice of partnership and co-operation is less developed in the humanitarian arena and examples of positive practice are scarce. There has in fact been considerable debate about the scope for building local capacity for humanitarian relief.

Some view this possibility instrumentally as a way of improving effectiveness, reducing costs, bringing ownership and sustainability. There is a common argument against attempting to build local capacity in humanitarian emergencies, which focuses on concerns about the difficulty of finding competent staff, corruption and, in conflict zones, the difficulty of local actors avoiding association with one side of the conflict (Suhrke 2003).<sup>1</sup> However, the same argument can be turned against international organisations, which face exactly the same problems but come with very limited understanding of the local context. They can blunder into appalling errors, which may be both expensive and dangerous for both the NGOs and the local population.

Despite this, as noted above, international NGOs are the major NGO actors in humanitarian action and if anything the position of Northern NGOs is becoming ever more entrenched, with very little attention paid to building local capacity. The case of humanitarian aid for refugees in Africa vividly illustrates the move away from local capacity for relief towards international responses. Juma and Suhrke (2003) give a clear description of the 'erosion of local capacity' in east Africa over recent decades. In the 1960s and '70s, responses to refugee and other humanitarian crises were led by national governments in collaboration with local governments. During the 1980s and '90s, the situation changed dramatically as the UNHCR took to the driving seat of humanitarian response and governments and other local actors largely withdrew.

For example, in Kenya, the National Church Council of Kenya was the leading NGO in refugee response at end of 1980s. However, during the 1990s, it was eclipsed by Northern NGOs as the responses shifted to focusing on refugee camps (Kagwanja 2003). Similarly in Tanzania, the contingency plans developed in 1990 for potential refugee influxes from Burundi and Rwanda only involved external partners (Rutinwa 2003). In the response to the Rwanda refugee influx in Ngara, Tanzania in 1994, the response was exclusively managed by UNHCR and international agencies or their local branches.<sup>2</sup>

There has been great concern about the lack of African capacity to respond to humanitarian crises over many years. In 1994, UNHCR launched its Partners in Action (PARinAc) process in collaboration with the International Council for Voluntary Action in order to improve its collaboration with NGOs. A major aspect of this initiative was to support the development of local capacity for humanitarian response with refugees. Since 1994, UNHCR's collaboration with NGOs overall has improved somewhat. NGO representatives are now routinely involved in UNHCR Executive Committee Meetings and UNHCR has developed Framework Partnership Agreements with NGO partners to provide core funding to develop their emergency response capacity. However, international NGOs continue to eclipse local organisations and there are few signs of a genuine will for change. International NGOs retain a comparative advantage given their ability to absorb start-up costs.

Throughout most of the continent, the lament from UNHCR is that they cannot find sufficient appropriate African NGO partners and are therefore constrained to channel most of their funding through Northern NGOs. However, *Juma* (2003) suggests that in some cases UNHCR's attempts at improving collaboration through PARinAc may have contributed to the further erosion of African humanitarian capacity as detailed below. Despite the negative outcome, this example is worth citing in some detail as it suggests that there is potential for locally driven humanitarian co-ordination, outside the international aid regime.

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<sup>1</sup> Suhrke does point out that many modern ideas of European humanitarianism have their roots in 'solidarity humanitarianism' in the 1930s, where partisan outsiders intervened to provide humanitarian aid on behalf of the socialists in the Spanish Civil War.

<sup>2</sup> The Tanzanian Red Cross had a formal presence but its operations were dominated by expatriate managers from the International Federation. The Lutheran World Federation operated under the name of the Tanzanian Christian Refugee Service.

**UNHCR Partnership in Action in Kenya (PARinAc)**

*Prior to the initiation of the UNHCR PARinAc process, Kenya was host to large numbers of refugees whose presence attracted numerous humanitarian actors. Unprecedented in scale, this emergency generated multiple challenges for policy makers as well as practitioners. In response, a forum was set up to provide space for implementing agencies to debrief each other, share information on programmes and present their work to interested parties. Known as the Ad-hoc Refugee Advocacy Group (ARAG), this group was housed within the Kenyan Chapter of the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ). Starting from a small group of volunteers, ARAG expanded to include all humanitarian agencies, as well as the Government of Kenya, which was granted observer status.*

*ARAG gained a stature as a legitimate and independent arbitrator within this arena. It began to receive and adjudicate disagreements between actors, and to intercede and make petitions on behalf of refugees and NGOs (particularly local ones) to the Government and UNHCR. By the beginning of 1993, ARAG was injecting a measure of transparency into the humanitarian arena in Kenya. However, the fact of this organisation being locally conceived and run independently of the humanitarian industry caused much unease amongst powerful actors such as UNHCR.*

*In March 1994, ICJ was invited to the regional PARinAc consultative meeting in Addis Ababa. At the meeting, Kenyan delegates reported on the progress of 'their' PARinAc process in Kenya. In spite of its critical role, neither the ICJ nor the ARGA were invited to the final PARinAc meeting held in Oslo in June 1994. Nonetheless, considering the matter of establishing a PARinAc focal point as a fait accompli, Kenyan delegates to Oslo endorsed the ARAG cum ICJ as the country focal point. This was not to be. The UNHCR Branch Office in Nairobi together with some international NGOs blocked the endorsement of ARAG as Kenya's PARinAc focal point on two counts. First, UNHCR argued that a PARinAc focal point had to be field based and, second, UNHCR insisted that the nomination of ARGA was undemocratic and demanded elections of a focal point. Encouraged by UNHCR, one international organisation organised an election in which it was itself 'elected' as the national and regional PARinAc focal point. This agency then started calling 'PARinAc' meetings on the same day as ARAG, causing immense confusion within the humanitarian arena.'*

*In April 1995, the Geneva based International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), the NGO global PARinAc focal point, organised a follow up meeting in Nairobi but did not invite neither ICJ nor ARAG despite protests from other NGOs. When the representative of ARAG came to the meeting she was refused entry, 'an act that ...effectively put the last nail in the coffin of the PARinAc process in Kenya. The UNHCR-sponsored focal point never called a meeting after this incident, feeding suspicions that UNHCR's key objectives was to kill the local initiative.' (Juma 2003)*

It is important not to underestimate the challenges for external agencies in identifying local NGO partners in humanitarian crises, especially where they are new to an area. There are limits to local relief capacity as local organisations can be overwhelmed by the crisis that may involve all their staff. They are also likely to be constrained by insecurity and displacement. For international NGOs, there are major problems of trust in establishing funding relationships with local NGOs in new areas. Building trust takes time and this is not seen as being available in humanitarian aid. Making mistakes can be dangerous for all. For example, in Somalia as Northern NGOs looked for local NGO partners, huge numbers of NGOs were established as they were seen to offer 'good business' to those who controlled them (Gundel 2003: 151). Working with such NGOs served to reinforce the position of the warlords who behind many of them.

These real obstacles to international organisations co-operation with African humanitarian actors are built up further by a tendency to assume away any local capacity to respond to crisis and presume that local people and organisations are overwhelmed. Juma points out, however, that humanitarian agencies usually make a false dichotomy between zones of peace which produce interveners and zones of conflict which require intervention. It is assumed that the latter 'lacks any capacity for remedial action' (Juma 2003:159). International humanitarian actors thereby justify bypassing African NGOs in humanitarian action and show little practical interest in building local capacity.

## **5. CONSTRAINTS ON CO-OPERATION**

As noted before, it has been difficult to find many examples of good practice of institutional co-operation between either donors or northern NGOs, and African NGOs. The limited research carried out into these issues contains many more examples of the challenges and constraints on such co-operation and some of these are briefly outlined in this section.

### **5.1. Models of Change**

Both development and humanitarian aid interventions are designed to bring about change for the better in the lives of the intended recipients. The intended link between the intervention and the desired change is based on a particular understanding of social processes, which is culturally bound. An aid regime dominated by Northern actors is based largely on models of change that have been developed in the north. In general, most donors and Northern NGOs work adopt a public management approach, which tends to understand change as a linear process with predictable paths and open to bureaucratic management. As De Coninck (2004) notes, these linear model of development are often inappropriate in the African context where social transformation is a much more 'complex, contingent experience'. As a result Northern NGOs tend to work in universally prescribed ways regardless of the local context and with no understanding of local ways of thinking. This creates barriers to understanding between African NGOs and Northern NGOs, which hinder the establishment of strong institutional co-operation.

### **5.2. Priorities**

The agenda for development aid is largely determined by the priorities of Northern donors. The move away from project to programme funding has introduced some elements of stability as both donors and Northern NGO have established strategic plans. This reduces the seemingly arbitrary nature of funding decisions on a project basis, but it has the disadvantage that funding for African NGOs are conditional on their fitting with the strategic priorities set from the north.

African NGOs are largely alienated from the process of establishing aid priorities, even when the original concern arises from the continent. For example, local expressions of concern around gender and participation in Uganda have been taken up within the international development regime and become an established part of the international development agenda. These issues have then been repackaged with new language and externally developed tools and exported back to African NGOs as one of the conditions for funding (*De Coninck 2004*).

These priorities established by donors are not necessarily consistent. For example, as the emphasis of the aid regime has moved towards advocacy and lobbying, African NGOs have been pushed into following suit. However, they have not had the resources to develop their own advocacy arguments and representation and have ended up pushing the donor lines. One of the areas of concern for donors has been to encourage local NGOs as key players in monitoring the performance of governments in implementing poverty reduction strategies. However, at the same time, the NGOs are also encouraged to work with government as sub-contractors to supply basic services. This leaves African NGO compromised as they are lobbying the government for which they work (*De Coninck 2004*).

Despite the stability promised by longer-term strategic plans, donor-funding priorities are still subject to sudden change. These may relate to changes in leadership within donor organisation – for example, a change in the UK Minister for International Development will be felt through DFID and the organisations it funds. They may also reflect new interests of

particular donor or the establishment of special funds for particular issues, increasingly driven by Northern (largely US) philanthropists – for example Bill Gates (HIV/AIDS Global Fund), George Soros (Open Society), Ted Turner (United Nations Foundation).

### **5.3. The Need for International Standards and Co-ordination**

Another aspect of conditionality for humanitarian aid is arising from the attempt to establish standards for humanitarian action in a range of areas. These include the NGO Code of Conduct, various technical sectors (Sphere) and dealing with staff (People in Aid). Increasingly there is a trend for donors to require that an NGO should be able to meet such standards, especially Sphere, as a condition of funding. Although the Sphere Handbook does insist that the standards must be interpreted for local conditions, in practice it is the standards and indicators referred to in the text that are taken as the target (minimum volumes of water per day, etc.). Meeting such standards, which may exceed the living standards of the national population not involved in the emergency programme, may not be the first priority for local NGOs, but they are required to conform if they are to receive donor funds. There is a danger that such global standards and procedures may act as a barrier to African NGOs playing their full role in humanitarian action. Proving compliance with such standards will consume ever-greater core costs for African NGOs:

*'Improving performance, in theory an admirable goal, has spun out of control. The northern aid community is currently caught up in a search for perfection that is producing a growing amount of studies, conferences and processes and is calling for increasingly sophisticated administrative and financial procedures' (AHA 2002).*

As a result, the dominance of Northern NGOs seems likely to be reinforced.

### **5.4. Management Systems**

African NGOs receiving funds from donors and Northern NGOs are usually obliged to use management systems imposed by the funding organisations. Every donor has different systems and this creates enormous difficulties for African NGOs, who often have to deal with multiple reporting formats with different financial years. Some resort to employing specialist staff dedicated to dealing with relations with donors and others are forced buy in expertise to cope with reporting deadlines. Some of the largest NGOs are able to negotiate with donors to reach a common reporting system but for most African NGOs reporting involves large overheads, which eat into the limited core funding.

The logical framework (or logframe) remains the most common tool for project for project management. Although some see that they can provide a useful summary of the project, they are widely perceived as inflexible and inappropriate method for designing and managing aid interventions in Africa. Logframes cannot cope with the changing realities of the programmes and as a result reports based on logframes become divorced from the developments on the ground. As a result, some African NGOs find themselves running a parallel reporting system with community based monitoring reports not tied into donor reports that based on the logframe. This has the advantage that logframes are 'contained' at the head office communities are protected from their negative influence (Bornstein 2001). However, it raises questions about how far such reporting requirements add to accountability or transparency in practice (De Coninck 2004).

Both donors and Northern NGOs spend a lot of resources training African NGOs how to use these alien management tools (Wallace and Chapman 2003). 'Learning how to do the logframe had taken a lot of training, time and money. Few international donors or NGOs had spent comparable amounts of time or money on how to build partnerships at the local level, how to be responsive, and how to engage with social change at the community level' De Coninck (2004).

### **5.5. Relationships**

From the perspective of African NGOs, their relationships with Northern NGOs and donors appear to be characterised by considerable mistrust. The emphasis of northern actors on ever more detailed management systems, increasing conditionality on funding, a lack of transparency and reluctance to fund core costs is widely interpreted as a reflection of the desire of donors and Northern NGOs to maintain control over their African partners. Most northern actors would deny such motives and argue that they are required to follow such procedures by their own donors, they have to demonstrate accountability and they are concerned to maximise the impact of the limited resources available. In particular, they argue that providing core funding to African NGOs will undermine their sustainability, at the same time as providing budget support (core funding) to African governments. Not surprisingly, their position is interpreted as a lack of trust in African NGOs.

Whatever the motivations in the relationships, the result is most commonly disempowering for African NGOs who are caught in a vicious circle. They lack the core funding and infrastructure to comply with donors' requirements, which causes frustration, delays and strained partnerships. This inevitably undermines the results of their work and gives further justification for donors to tighten their control further (AHA 2003).

De Coninck (2004) identifies some factors, which contributed to more supportive relationships, including:

- Face to face discussions
- Shared trust and values – trust built between key individuals
- Relationships focused on learning, sharing and support rather than 'investigative'
- Provision of appropriate and adequate training
- Negotiations from early stages in development of strategy
- Equal involvement in evaluation and learning.

However, as long as African NGOs do not have core costs available to them, the power in the relationship will remain firmly with the donor, who will be the party with the capacity to travel to hold meetings.

### **5.6. Understanding of Capacity Building**

Capacity building requirements tend to be defined by the donors rather than by their southern partners. Many donors and Northern NGOs take a narrow, instrumental, view of capacity building, which is limited to improving the capacity of organisations to deliver more effective programmes. 'As a result, capacity building, to the extent that it occurs, rarely aims higher than building a better handling agent – more transparent, more accountable – in sum, a more reliable recipient of aid funds' (AHA 2002). Such capacity building is focused on training packages to improve the performance of individuals within their jobs and aims to ensure that African NGOs can fulfil their prescribed role within the aid regime: 'reproducing the same ways of doing things' (Juma 2003).

However, African NGOs expressed a broader concern for organisational capacity building that can enhance their planning and strategic management, quality of leadership and basic organisational strength to enable them to reach some level of autonomy. 'Pre-packaged' capacity building programmes developed from the north fail to respond to the needs and realities of the situation facing African NGOs (James 2001). Their dependence on funding from the external partners to fund their capacity building severely constrains their extent to which they can genuinely set the direction for the development of their organisational capacity.



### **5.7. Limited Analysis of Power**

All these constraints on the development of co-operation between African NGOs and external partners are rooted in the discrepancy in power and resources. However far donors and Northern NGOs attempt to reach out for genuine equal partnerships where both sides have equal voice, as long as the funds flow in one direction, the power will flow the same way. There is no clear solution to this but it is an important factor to bear in mind in any discussion on co-operation.

Development and humanitarian aid is still presented as a set of techniques. We focus on applying a set of well-established 'tools' and 'methods', following appropriate 'guidelines' to achieve the desired end. Of course, the field of expertise has tended to move from the technical and scientific, into the arena of social development, but there is still a recognised body of ideas and experience to suggest how it is done. This is positive as it builds on experience, but it can result in an inappropriate focus on these techniques and an inadequate analysis of the power relations involved. The dominant discourse of 'good development/humanitarian practice' emerges which incorporates the unequal power relations. African NGOs face a continual struggle in the face of the overwhelming power of donors and Northern NGOs and their only option is to join the dominant discourse in order gain a voice and some representation (*De Coninck 2004*).

The move by donors and Northern NGOs towards funding mechanisms such as umbrella funding has moved some power around but has not changed the fundamental relationships. Donors have not taken account of the power they have devolved to Northern NGOs managing umbrella funds. The autonomy to determine the allocation of funds has not been passed through to African NGOs at the end of the chain. Where African NGOs have been contracted to manage such umbrella funds, the evidence from Uganda suggests that the problems of power and dependency are replicated between these larger NGOs based in the capital and the smaller local NGOs (*De Coninck 2004*).

## **6. CONCLUSION: WAYS FORWARD IN AFRICAN NGO – NORTHERN CO-OPERATION**

The current aid regime positions African NGOs in a weak position with respect to donors and Northern NGOs. Although there are significant levels of co-operation, with few exceptions, the relationships are dominated by the more powerful northern actors, who set the agenda. Institutional co-operation with external partners, therefore, appears to have limited scope for building the capacity of African NGOs and is failing to improve their access to institutional funds required to build their own capacity. The interests of Northern NGOs – especially in maintaining their control of humanitarian aid funding that subsidises their own core costs – and the power relations suggest that this situation will continue.

A major and ongoing complaint about external aid intervention in Africa has been that it fails to listen and respond to the priorities of the poorest. As a result it is often inappropriate and serves to reinforce structures of inequality. Many African NGOs, in particular the small minority that have developed links into the world of international funding, have grown as part of the aid regime and have adopted its discourse as a survival mechanism. They will face a constant struggle to improve the quality of interventions (perhaps measured by the impact on the lives of the poorest) as long as the underlying models of development and change remain those imposed by the 'developed nations' of the North.

The challenge they face is how to identify African approaches to development and humanitarian aid within the constraints of the existing regime. How can they become autonomous empowered organisations that can determine their own strategic directions and follow them? How can they avoid replicating the unsatisfactory relationships of the aid regime among African NGOs?

Having a clear strategic focus is essential if NGOs are to avoid being caught up in a contract culture, where they take up whatever positions is required to get the next round for funding.

*'Independence is often in the mind! If NGOs are solely driven by responding to whatever contracts are on offer... they will lack the capacity and willingness to engage in critical dialogue. However, NGOs that are proactive in terms of reviewing the needs of the poor and taking the interests of their clients as their driving focus should be able to remain independent whilst completing contracts for donors.'* (Pratt 2002.)

Some African NGOs that choose to take on policy and advocacy roles may step aside from the aid regimes. 'Often true criticism comes from... smaller niche agencies that have rejected the 'contract culture' and are able to comment from outside these frameworks. To adopt this role often involves saying no to growth or, in some cases, accepting a reduction in turnover and an exposure to greater financial risk.' (Pratt 2002).

However, before getting to the stage of developing alternative approaches to development, African NGOs face the major obstacle of funding. They struggle to obtain the resources to maintain their day-to-day operations, let alone put aside funds to develop their own strategies and build their organisational capacity. It is inevitable that African NGOs will continue to rely on a flow of funding from the North. The experience of institutional co-operation described above suggests that they will continue to be constrained by the existing pattern of funding relationships. However, strong the stated desire of Northern NGOs or donors to build the capacity of African NGOs, the discrepancies of power (and money) mean that the former call the tune.

The experience of INTRAC has also shown that organisational capacity building is more empowering when the funding for it is provided at arms length from programme funding.

For African NGOs to make progress towards capacity building that empowers, they need to have alternative channels for funding it. Any NGO must attempt to diversify their funding sources in order to improve their financial stability and reduce dependence on any one donor. An NGO may even be successful in raising funds from one donor exclusively for capacity building. However, they will still need to demonstrate how their organisation will contribute to that donor's strategy.

A way forward is for African NGOs need to increase their collaboration to build up the NGO sector as whole – even while they remain in competition in other aspects of their work. They need to develop a mechanism for exchanging ideas and experience and work out some common African approaches to development. If such a mechanism takes an organisational form, it may be able to establish streams of diverse funding. It may also provide a platform for launching capacity building initiatives for African NGOs, which are focused on the needs of the African NGOs rather than the requirements of Northern NGOs and donors.

Another important role for such a forum may be to conduct research into development and humanitarian aid from an African perspective. The limited research available for this paper, suggests that there has been very little research into the effects of donor policies on African NGOs - what effects do official donor and Northern NGO funding regimes have on the capacity of African NGOs as organisations and as a sector? This may start to reveal some more models of good practice in institutional co-operation, which have proved sadly elusive to date. It may also contribute to the building of an African framework for development aid and humanitarian action, which can demonstrate what African NGOs can achieve.

**APPENDIX: IMPROVING CO-OPERATION BETWEEN AFRICAN NGOS AND NORTHERN PARTNERS**

The following is a summary of some of the lessons distilled from INTRAC's recent research into North-South partnerships (in particular, *Brehm 2004*). It is anticipated that these points may be debated and expanded upon during the Symposium in Addis Ababa to establish more concrete proposals for African NGOs, Northern NGOs and donors.

- ***Diversify funding sources***

To avoid dependence on any one donor, African NGOs must diversify their funding from different multilateral, bilateral, Northern NGO and private sources. As far as possible, they should mobilise local resources, especially from the private sector, including African businesses and regional offices of multinational corporations.

For their part, donors must support and facilitate this diversification of funding: for example by co-operating with each other to ensure their requirements for proposals, budgets and reports are consistent. In order to ease the administrative overheads for African NGOs, donors should consider streamlining their procedures and adopting common formats for such documents. In particular, during humanitarian crises, donors should develop shortcut avenues for rapid funding of humanitarian action by African NGOs.

- ***Establish relationships beyond project or programme funding***

African and Northern NGOs and donors should explore the possibilities for partnerships which extend beyond the funding and implementation of projects and programmes. For example, this may include mutual support and exchange of information around areas of advocacy and policy dialogue. Northern NGOs must be willing to be more responsive to the agenda of African NGOs in such partnerships and avoid imposing externally formulated frameworks.

In any such relationships, the contribution of African NGOs should be recognised and valued by all parties. In practice, this means that northern actors should be prepared to pay for the expertise and time of African NGOs, to ensure that the latter's involvement in partnerships is not eating into their core costs.

- ***Ensure clarity of organisational mission and strategy***

African NGOs need to have a clear, public organisational mission and strategy which underlie their policy and practice. Once an NGO's missions and strategy are in place, the NGO should have the conviction to turn down funding opportunities that detract from them or where funding is offered in such a way as to compromise the organisation's principles.

On their part, donor and Northern NGOs should find out about the mission and strategy of potential African NGO partners and respect them: for example, by adapting their own operational priorities to fit the African NGOs strategy rather than expecting the latter to change round donors' fixed policies.

- ***Develop relationships with a longer-term perspective***

Northern NGOs and donors need to adopt a longer-term perspective to funding African NGOs, which incorporates the development of the capacity of the organisation as a whole. Funding needs to be based on realistic time frames and donors need to show commitment and consistency over a sustained period. From the beginning of any partnerships, both donors and African NGOs need to consider capacity building for autonomy and sustainability. African NGOs need to develop strategies for resource mobilisation and diversification. Northern NGOs and donors need to be willing to fund such plans.

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