

# **DSA NGOs in Development Study Group at the DSA Conference, 7-8 September 2015**

## **Meeting notes, 7 September**

### **Panel and panellists' notes, 8 September**

#### **Pre-conference Study Group business meeting, Monday 7 September 2015**

We had a well-attended pre-conference meeting, with around 15 people able to attend and many more expressing an interest but unable to make it.

The group had a discussion around 3 questions:

1. What are we all currently working on?
2. What topics would we like the SG to cover/look at?
3. Through what mechanisms could we progress these in the SG?

#### **1. Our current work**

Becky Schaaf, Bath Spa University: ideas around impact of partnerships (education sector); it is possible to develop a tool for assessing partnerships?

Kate Newman, Christian Aid: on partnerships (transactional versus transformational). What does a sustainable financing model look like? Organisation as eco-system with different relationships at national level; what does power-sharing look like. Rise of digital – how we connect beneficiaries with supporters and beneficiary feedback mechanisms; role of INGOs as intermediaries.

Tigist Grieve, University of Bristol: 'impact acceleration' in NGO-academic partnerships

Susannah Pickering- Saqqa, University of East London: How and why large INGOs work domestically.

Niko Humalisto, Uni Turku: How INGOs agree their fundraising objectives in a context of austerity. Impact of funding cuts on fundraising – scarce research on how FR techniques, like street fundraising, work. Ideological shift about support for NGOs at European level

Jessica Greenhalf, BOND: Working Group on public fundraising – demand for learning on public fundraising (media pressure); becoming more difficult to raise funds from general public (OK for big appeals).

Jonathan Glennie, Save the Children UK: Future of aid and international public finance; aid effectiveness; aid narrative in the UK and NGOs - need to update the narrative; break some grails and taboos e.g. should we spend money on refugees at home?

Lata Narayanaswamy, University of Leeds: theorising around the knowledge and power of development and how to apply this.

Oliver Walton, University of Bath: INGO legitimacy from different disciplinary perspectives. Inter-disciplinary discourse around legitimacy in light of current environment. Series of seminars in future.

Sam Mardell, LIDC: How to share Phd research with NGOs?

Rachel Hayman, INTRAC: sustainability of CSOs; changing NGO policies amongst bilateral donors across Europe.

Daniel Stevens, World Vision: good practice in design and use of beneficiary feedback mechanisms

Laura Camfield, UEA: student internships with NGOs

## 2. Possible future topics for SG to explore

Topics can be loosely clustered....

- a) Fundraising and relations with public:
  - **Aid narrative with the public** and how choose projects and stories to use in encounters with public for fundraising. Links with Media and Development group?
  - **NGO fundraising** techniques and impact of competition
  
- b) Evaluation, research, learning and NGOs
  - **Impact of aid-effectiveness PBR agenda** (who is shut out?)
  - **Disconnect between evaluation and research** – what is the role of NGOs in this? Use of language, which can be off-putting to some audiences.
  - **Role of leadership** - Roles of leaders in creating space for engaging, learning, etc. How to move research to policy, engaging with Boards, Ken Caldwell doing research on impact and fundraising
  - **How academics and consultants can work around useful qualitative research and evaluation**
  - **Institutional learning and knowledge** – how/if INGOs access their archive material
  
- c) Practical links between research institutions and NGOs
  - **Student internships in NGOs** - how to make them meaningful: skills they bring and what they can learn.
  
- d) Aid policy
  - **DFID-fund manager relations**
  
- e) Accountability

- **INGO accountability** – how/ if feedback is used. Beneficiaries don't make distinction between service providers (state or NGOs or donors). State-NGO relationships. Donors within that and their theories of change?
- f) Changing aid environment and NGOs
- **Sustainability of Civil Society in the South and MICs**
  - **Evaluating non-intervention and exit strategies** – see Ben Jones research on Katine project
  - **Legitimacy** relative to future roles of NGOs (Future Fit)

### 3. How SG could take these ideas forward

- Distribution of PhD research to NGOs; formats for research synthesis; peer-review
- Collaborative research via clusters of above research areas that sub-groups could take on?
- Thinking forward to DSA conference Sept 2016 (Oxford): longer Study Group session with more practitioners involved?
- Bond-Study Group session from time to time, e.g. is there an avenue for academics to feed into Bond 'Future Fit' work? Particular questions:
  - IDEAS seminar on research-evidence
  - General on the Futures dimension
  - Funding mechanisms
- Discussion of some of above issues via webinar, e.g. sharing experiences and ideas on internships

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### **NGOs in Development Study Group Roundtable, Tuesday 8 September 2015**

*We had a very animated round-table session at the DSA Conference, with around 35 people participating from academic institutions, NGOs and independent consultants. The debate was lively and many individuals expressed an interest in the work of the group.*

*All panellists have kindly agreed to share their notes from this session, which will shortly be available on the DSA web site in the NGO Study Group section.*

Chair: Rachel Hayman

Participants:

Lata Narayanaswamy, University of Leeds

Kate Newman, Christian Aid

Martin Walsh, Oxfam GB

Teresa Hanley, Independent Consultant

Tigist Grieve, University of Bristol and Founder/Trustee, For Ethiopia

*These notes are a summary of discussions and questions emerging from participant interventions and questions from the floor.*

**Question 1: How are INGOs addressing knowledge and evidence challenges? What relationships and collaborations are happening? What is changing?**

Kate Newman began the discussion by setting the context in which INGOs are currently addressing these challenges. Christian Aid, for example, is considering a new organizational structure or “eco-system” in which it sees itself as translating context-specific information and taking it to a global level. INGOs need to add to the conversation and “package knowledge” in this process. The issue of what is rigour and robust evidence is very real although INGOs need to acknowledge that they are by definition biased in favour of the poor and not impartial. This means they should not attempt to “mimic” academic methods. However, there is a need to work in partnership with academics so that this type of work is possible. Informal opportunities and spaces for academic-INGO encounters are often the most effective.

Recommendation:

- More informal opportunities and spaces for academics and INGOs to meet

**Question 2: Who determines the nature of knowledge and expertise?**

Martin Walsh traced the origins of the “participatory movement” in the 1970s as an assertion of the significance of local co-produced knowledge in development interventions. But he detected a retreat from this trend in the recent donor pressure for greater methodological rigour with randomized control trials still perceived as the “gold standard”. The role of the private sector and impact evaluation entrenches this retreat from the ethos of participation further. This has financial resource and capacity implications. However, there is still experimentation with mixed methods research. Cash transfer approaches also imply the privileging of local knowledge. Is the ultimate emancipatory act to enable people to produce their own knowledge? Oxfam GB effectiveness reviews are being driven by accountability pressures from donors.

**Question 3: What role, if any, do INGOs have in creating conditions for greater participation and inclusion of those groups whose knowledge is likely to be marginalised, due to politics, technological and/or language barriers, from dominant knowledge systems?**

Tigist Grieve reflected on her experience working with For Ethiopia applying for membership of the CCRDA network, funded by INGOs. This reveals that power exists all the way along the aid chain, specifically between INGOs and local NGOs and grassroots organisations (GROs). There are, for example, limits to the ability of local NGOs and GROs to get involved with INGOs if they cannot become members of national networks, such as CCRDA. This raises the issue of the privileged spaces of networks and capital cities and the distance of many NGOs from agenda-making and sources of funds. How can INGOs create an enabling environment in which local knowledge counts?

Recommendations:

- More research on how INGOs can create enabling environment for local knowledge to count
- INGOs to find ways to share their knowledge and acknowledge the knowledge of local NGOs and GROs outside privileged spaces.

**Question 4: What skills do INGOs and NGOs need to be knowledge hubs and brokers of expertise? How do they update and develop these skills at different levels within organisations and partners?**

Teresa Hanley set her response to this question in the context of humanitarian response in which crises now typically have a longer life-span. Vital capacities in this scenario are problem identification, experimentation with different intervention approaches, documentation and research. This evidence and knowledge needs to be used in advocacy and shared with local partners. Networks such as ALNAP and CALP facilitate this process. However, INGOs need to be credible and have legitimacy for this to be meaningful.

Recommendations:

- INGOs need to grow their capacity to manage their knowledge
- There needs to be more research into the tension between INGO agendas and the perceived impartiality required to be knowledge brokers.

**Question 5: Beyond sharing and transfer of knowledge, how can we measure the effective processing and use of new knowledge and learning to address paradigmatic shifts in development?**

Lata Narayanaswamy noted the high volumes of information available to INGOs and asked how they should use this and for what purpose. There is an underlying managerialism to many of the purposes for which INGOs currently use their information – e.g. reporting to donors. This needs to be challenged to ensure that there is an uptake of knowledge that leads to action and incorporation into policy. INGOs often operate in a “supply and broadcast” mode when using their knowledge. Is “brokering” the appropriate terminology to use when considering the relationship between INGOs and knowledge when the word

has so many commercial applications? Likewise, questions were raised about whether the focus on the “knowledge hub” role was another distraction from development as politics and systemic change. Discussions considered the significance of different knowledge frameworks and for INGOs to consider their own knowledge frameworks.

Recommendations:

- INGOs need to think more carefully about how they listen in order to understand what people know.
- Need to consider the issue of knowledge within the framework of social justice.

Susannah Pickering-Saqqa and Rachel Hayman

14<sup>th</sup> September 2015

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**NOTES PROVIDED BY PANELLISTS**

*Please note that all panellists kindly agreed to share their personal notes prepared for the panel. These should not be quoted.*

**Dr Kate Newman, Christian Aid**

***Personal Notes for the panel***

**'How are INGOs addressing knowledge and evidence challenges? What relationships and collaborations are happening? What is changing?**

*What does good evidence look like?*

*What skills do we have/need?*

*How to balance local and 'academic' knowledge and the role of INGOs in this*

*Integrating knowledge/evidence debates with programme monitoring, learning and understanding*

*Finding time to think, learn and share*

*Knowing what is important about what we don't know*

*Relevance of this within the changing world for INGOs*

## **Intro:**

Share my reflections as someone who has been working in the sector for 20 years, with a particular focus on participatory development, on how to enable the voices and perspectives of those living in poverty to design (and own) the development programmes they are part of, but equally to inform wider debates on development policy. So in thinking about NGOs as Knowledge Hubs/Brokers of Expertise I am concerned with questions of whose knowledge, whose expertise, and for whom.

## **Firstly, where are INGOs today:**

BOND fast forward report claims 'a golden triangle – from Cambridge, Brighton and Bristol, encompassing London and Oxford and including largest clustering of academic institutes, INGOs, social enterprises and private consulting firms focussed on

poverty reduction and humanitarian response outside key UN centres like New York or Geneva. Almost 40,000 people work, study, research devt. in the UK (about half in INGOs) - this clustering of people and organisations produces ideas, thought-leaders and most importantly learning and innovation on a scale that would not exist without it. (quote from report)

*The report lists the range of important contributions INGOs make – from channelling money to humanitarian causes, solidarity work, advocacy, bringing issues such as climate, HR onto the agenda, and then describes 7 'megatrends' that INGOs need to respond to to be 'fit for the future' – including shift in global power relations, climate change, urbanisation, inequality – and suggests that INGOs will change – becoming:*

*More niche/specialist, more focus on accompaniment and capacity building, continued work in connecting with UK communities/publics, advocacy work in the UK, develop and share expertise. All these roles suggest a continued role and profile for UK INGOs, and do not suggest any significant shift/trend in decreasing the golden triangle, reducing the nos of people working in the sector in the UK, or of real transfer of power (there is some talk of power sharing, but all premised on INGO continuing to occupy an important space/role.*

As INGOs we **connect with lots of different people** in different places – who have different expectations of our role and expertise – spanning NNGOs, SNGOs, CBO, Social Movements, alliances and networks, other CSOs, public/media, private sector, academics, donors, governments etc. **All have different expectations of our role generally – and the types of knowledge or expertise we might share or broker.**

So in asking the question it is important to reflect on what knowledge needs and expectations there are, and how INGOs currently do, or could act in this space.

Research (eg Ripples, but also other stuff on context – such as Big Push Forward) suggested that internally (in the UK offices) we were not learning from and valuing the insights and learnings that come out of our community level practice; that we struggle to move from insights gained locally

And the BOND figures give a good suggestion for why this is – if we are 40,000 here then plenty of people to talk and listen to/share insights with – makes it harder to connect and learn from local practices.

So what does this mean in terms of how we are addressing evidence gaps and challenges. I'm involved in a range of processes – internal to CA, in a small group in the sector, and in an INGO-academic network. All have in common the fact that we are dominated by UK staff, who however participatory, empowering /conscious of power we might be have our biases and audiences that we are thinking of/understand best.

So how do we really shift the power- whose knowledge and expertise counts – what would it mean to be a convenor

### **SO what's new?**

In 2011 I presented at the DSA based on a process I had led called how wide are the ripples – We were trying to find out how and where participatory knowledge flowed through any one INGO, ie how wide the ripples of local participatory practice were.

What we found was that individual INGOs faced many challenges in learning from the participatory processes they funded or supported indirectly. For example:

- there were the **practical challenges** –how can information that is generated at the grassroots, be moved across national and cultural borders, and interpreted outside its original context?
- These discussions inevitably gave rise to **ethical issues** – whether these concerned the dynamics between an empowering participatory process, and the output/product of that process; or how can sense be made across multiple different experiences all of which are deeply context specific, concerning real people and their lives
- But there were also **organisational issues** concerning culture, structure accountability and power – not just a question of whose voices can be heard, but of whose knowledge and opinion counted.

I think that these issues are still as present (if not more present) than ever, some of the other panellists will look at these.

### *Rethinking research partnerships (note increasing emphasis on partnerships across the sector)*

Started 'rethinking research partnerships' because 'we were concerned that these partnerships were becoming more common and yet those involved weren't critically engaging with the nature of the partnerships, the power dynamics involved, and what this meant for the types of evidence that was



valued in partnership, the frameworks or methodologies that were used, and the types of knowledge produced. We felt that such partnerships were often contributing to further 'expert' knowledge, and further distancing NGOs from the communities that they exist to support.

Experience at LIDC 'open-mic' night – where NGOs bid for academics to come and use their data, and academics bid for NGOs to give them access so that they could use the latest research tool they'd thought of – rethinking research partnerships responds to this – trying to look at how academic-NGO collaborations can be created for 'co-creation' – give insights from 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> workshop – different institutional tensions/motivations/expectations, how we talk about and understand knowledge/research literacies, the divide between research and evaluation – is this helpful or problematic, how does this relate to knowledge and evidence.

Many different types of partnership – although usually between 1 academic and the whole NGO – but partnership for policy research, partnership for understanding organisational dimensions, partnerships in development practice all have different drivers and different challenges.

In the initial workshop we looked at what do we really mean by 'evidence' – where and how is it produced and collected? Who controls it, how is it valued and accessed, who defines what good evidence is? And what should good evidence look like? Asking participants to produce 'evidence trees'

- the nature of the evidence trees said a lot about how academics and practitioners approach problems (lots of post-it, concrete stuff on the NGO ones, academics produced twisted, tortured trees all bound up in theory) - conceptual form of the tree and based on analytical statements about the nature and politics of evidence. This divergent starting point illustrates some of the challenges, both in terms of making these partnerships work, but also as we think about how NGOs conceive of evidence, what does this mean in terms of their role as experts and brokers?

*AA/Oxfam/CA research community of practice (to counter the way the evidence agenda is going, looking for empowering research – process of research and type of knowledge produced)*

Exchanging ideas of what NGO research is /should be, what makes is possible (or not) in our institutions, and what we understand by rigour in different contexts. Because for NGOs to be participating actively in the evidence and knowledge arena we need to be confident in what we bring to this – that we are not academics, that it is not only about local knowledge, but how these different types of knowledge integrate, complement, exist in tension, and the role of an NGO within this to challenge, explore, probe the validity, framing, legitimacy etc. of the evidence that is shared

Link back to the overall question of INGO as knowledge hubs and brokers in tomorrow's world – got a way to go to get there!

(additional notes: relationships with partners in the global south – how to accompany, expand, build capacity in a partnership – mutual and power sharing, what does this mean, how to different types of knowledge come into this, and the role of digital – what potential does this offer – digital data gathering – more or less inclusive etc.).

### **Reflections on skills needed to be knowledge brokers**

I want to start with a brief reflection on something that happened today/last week.... I was on a recruitment panel, recruiting for a 'Research, monitoring, evaluation and learning advisor' the first post Christian Aid has recruited for with the word 'research' in its job title. We had 51 applicants which seemed like lots to choose from, but on closer inspection none were quite right for the type of person we envisaged for the job - we interviewed 4, and unfortunately no one was appointable. So why was this? Were our expectations too high, are we looking for the type of person that doesn't exist, or was it just a bad advert, jd, bad luck?

Thinking a bit more about it, there were various reasons

The first candidate had excellent research experience but was very locked into one particular paradigm, rejecting any need for quantitative approaches, and critiquing the use of numbers to describe people living in poverty. In many ways he could be described as too academic...From an ideological perspective I agreed with much of what he said, but working in an INGO today you can't simply reject the desire for quantitative measures and numbers. So what to do about it – part of what we in CA are trying to do is build confidence among staff members to critically engage with research approaches, to understand what a certain approach offers, and what it doesn't, and why it might be appropriate in one context but not another, but this takes a certain level of understanding of methodology – to be confident in critically engaging.

The next candidate was deeply committed to working in INGOs, and had 'grown up' in the HQ of various different INGOs. He had the theoretical understanding of M&E, was clearly committed to participation, to the ethics and challenges in knowledge production, and had a deep knowledge of theory based methodologies – theory of change, contribution analysis, process tracing etc. However, his knowledge was technical – and while it spoke the language of evaluative practice, it had little 'academic rigour'. He had attempted to make up for this by attending a 2 week course on impact evaluation, RCTs and experimental research methods. I guess there were 2 challenges – how seriously would one of our programme staff take someone who was going to challenge them on their research framing, when he had such limited practical experience, and had he got enough critical engagement with research methods from a 2 week course...

The third candidate had grown up through programme work, with over 10 years of experience in humanitarian response, followed by some time as a MEL advisor in the HQ of an INGO. She clearly

understood the realities of programme practice, of the need to be realistic in terms of the time and space programme staff have to reflect on their practice (and therefore to move from experience to learning to knowledge to an ability to share knowledge), she knew that we tend to collect too much data without knowing why or how we are going to use it, she understood that M&E is often considered as a luxury, an add on and wanted to work with staff to enable them to integrate MEL into their work. But when asked a question about research she drew a blank, she could say that good evidence is useful evidence, but hadn't had the exposure to research methods etc.

When asked a question about research methods the final candidate shared her experience in desk reviews and literature searches, and how to use evidence within policy debates, and clearly had a very different interpretation of both the process and the use of research, than we had envisaged in this role.

So why am I sharing all this. Well, I think it illustrates well the contexts that CA, and many other NGOs find themselves in today.

We have increasing expectations on us, from donors/funders/the UK public, and in terms of our whole approach and understanding of development (with increasing emphasis on technocratic solutions, results-based mgmt. etc) which mean we have higher need for evidence – because of our external accountability, and because we want to improve our practice. And yet the skills we have currently do not meet the expectations we have of ourselves, and we are not really sure what we are looking for anyway.

Equally though, it is not as simple as recruiting someone with academic experience into the organisation, as the real life world of INGOs is complex, messy and research is imperfect.

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**Martin Walsh, Oxfam GB**

**Who determines the nature of knowledge and expertise?**

### **Introduction**

I'm going to focus on the challenges posed by the pressure for greater methodological rigour in the production of knowledge for development, and its implications in particular for relations between INGOs in the North and NGOs in the South, and between these and the people who are their intended beneficiaries.

### **Background**

First a quick reminder of where we've come from:

- BP (Before Participation) top-down development shaped by northern technical expertise; dominant discourses and extractive research;
- Participatory approaches; bottom-up development shaped by local and co-produced knowledge and collaborative action, and informed by GAD (Gender & Development); Limitations to participation: participation routinized, captured (participation as tyranny and manipulation), and circumscribed (largely ignored by many agencies and development actors)

### **The demand for methodological rigour**

Its political and economic origins in the 'Audit Culture' (variously characterised). The correlates and consequences of this for development practice:

- The changing institutional landscape and political ecology of development (including the role of donors and the private sector);
- The growing importance of impact evaluation and particular constructions of rigour (privileging experimental research designs / the gold standard of RCTs and systematic reviews)

Examples of this (the role of 3ie, Oxfam's effectiveness reviews, others).

The challenges this poses at different scales for INGOs and NGOs in the North and South in terms of resources and capacity. The methodological and moral challenges: Is this a return to the extractive past (BP), a retreat from participation and engagement?

### **What are the alternatives?**

Some directions:

- Critical debate: *The Big Push Forward* and other initiatives;
- Changing practices: methodological compromises and methodological innovation (with examples of both);

Where are we heading next? Can the South strike back? How do we make people's own knowledge count?

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**Lata Narayanaswamy, DSA Panel on Knowledge and INGOs, 8 September 2015**

**Beyond sharing and transfer of knowledge, how can we measure the effective *processing and use* of new knowledge and learning to address paradigmatic shifts in development?'**

- Consecutive rounds of discussion, captured in the panel's ensuing discussions here, highlight a number of important issues around the nature of knowledge, who has the power to decide what is and isn't important, the opportunities and challenges faced by INGOs striving to use knowledge (and evidence) in their own work and what role, if any, the range of civil society 2 implicated in both reproducing and challenging N-S relations have in facilitating spaces and

opportunities for engagement with marginalized and/or subaltern voices.

- These are incredibly important and valuable discussions to be having, and in my 7 minutes I would like to extend our collective reflection exercise to consider what I feel to be a determined and persistent silence around how knowledge is actualized as a driver of development
- Put very simply, what are individuals and organisations supposed to do with all of this information/knowledge? How do we identify, support and ultimately facilitate processes of turning knowledge uptake into action?
- This question of identifying, let alone measuring, effective processing and use of new knowledge and learning to support progressive development processes raises some fundamental and seemingly intractable concerns
- Which knowledge? For what purpose? Whose development? The challenge begins when we try to assign meanings or purpose to terminologies, as Rachel and I are finding as part of our shared edited book project *Negotiating Knowledge: Evidence and Experience in Development NGOs*
- The production and dissemination of information may be undertaken for a multitude of purposes
  - It could be a donor/funder requirement in terms of reporting and/or M&E
    - Here we have concerns related to a proliferation of managerialism that tends to pervade all of our work; tick-box exercises which, ironically given the emphasis on knowledge uptake, are exercises that produce valuable lessons and insights and yet may not result in uptake nor action on the part of a donor/funder
  - Knowledge for social change/building a knowledge society
    - Models of social change that rely, as I have found in my own work looking at the theory and practice of knowledge-for-development, on actualizing knowledge as a key driver of development presume a neoliberal relationship where rational actors act on the best available information to empower and develop themselves. The result is very often that knowledge-based initiatives, and the associated elitism and expertise that they frequently connote, operate in supply-side/broadcast mode with little consideration of the context into which information is entering, where the responsibility for processing, uptake and use are transferred to the individual
- BUT if we are to truly build a more inclusive knowledge society, then the starting point in ‘measurement’ of ‘processing’ and ‘use’ to promote development (which in itself is problematic of course) has to be about *listening* – what do people want to know, what might they need to know, and how can we address the barriers to knowledge use and/or create the conditions for ‘effective action’?
- Having identified the landscape into which information is entering or in which knowledge is being (co-) created, we might then consider how, or even whether, INGOs/NGOs are best-placed to ensure that any knowledge-creation process represents ‘the capacity for effective action’ (Senge, 1990 – the learning organisation)
- What, if anything, is unique about the capacities of INGOs, their networks, their operations, that might make them suited to consider ‘information environments’ and how best to facilitate more inclusive processing and use of information/knowledge?

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**Tigist Grieve, University of Bristol and Founder/Trustee, For Ethiopia**

**What role, if any, do INGOs have in creating conditions for greater participation and inclusion of those groups whose knowledge is likely to be marginalised, due to technological, and/or language, political barriers, from dominant knowledge systems?**

The underlying issues are about the relationship between power, influence and money along the aid chain. There is uneven distribution of influences and power between INGOs and their southern partners in various ways but also around knowledge generation and its application.

For INGOs involved in many regions one of the difficulties is trying to understand the dynamic context and challenges for grassroots, NGOs and CSOs with view of creating an enabling environment and balancing that with other demands the sector is facing. Understanding the context entails 'putting the last first' particularly if the INGOs are aspiring to become a knowledge hub – whether that is possible is another question.

In relation to this I would like to make few points that touches upon power relations, partnership and legitimacy

#### **First, on creation of enabling environment**

Conditions that create greater participation may require fundamental changes in the mind-set of the INGOs and locals themselves reflecting on: How specific knowledge's are valued, who has the expertise on what & what a genuine equal partnership could look like.

Not entirely but generally – even though there are desires, efforts and claims made by INGOs in seeking to embrace the notion of partnership in practice there are several challenges.

From the grassroots perspective the existing picture reflect limited participation, unequal power relations, and inconsistent engagement (e.g. legitimately exercised exclusive practices – that are membership based) or in worst cases token gestures for their inclusion in knowledge production without proper feedback process to evidence that engagement had actually produced anything whether in influencing INGOs policy, approaches....this is tricky to criticise because on the surface there is evidence of engagement – such as running workshops... Indirect to the Q. but, the feedback problem is not limited to NGOs but also noted in the case of local level institutions enacting policies such as the MDGs.

Related to this – the idea that local NGOs are less educated or the knowledge they hold is to be regarded less valuable needs to be tackled. This is not to claim there is an imposition from north to south but about the general mind-set across board – donor, donor publics, experts, local staff, locals. So it is asking why do the ideas that emanate from North always stick?

Similarly of course the local partners have a question to answer on power relations because they too often fail to relate to the people they seek to serve sometimes for same reasons of the INGOs but also they are often the elite that are socially embedded and respond in culturally expected ways often that is grounded in highly gendered and hierarchical forms of relations.

Of course there are different types of NGOs, CBO,CSOs,FBOs etc...different types face different challenges

In general grassroots are closer to the local even if we cant claim they can give voice they can at least facilitate a hearing for them more than INGOs or government officials could. Looking at these issues more seriously we can begin to address issues of legitimacy.

**Second** point I would like to raise is

Not all grassroots have an equal standing before the INGOs this is a more serious problem for grassroots. There are several reasons why this is the case depending on context in which they operate, the political environment and selection at the country level (partners, funding, training)

- In states where there is challenging environment for CSOs/NGOs – we need to think differently how INGOs can create to reach certain NGOs and CSOs – so this is about making the idea of partnership more inclusive
- INGOs are keener to work with large scale organisations based in the capital whose forms mirror their own. E.g. only those under specific organisation’s umbrella have access to resources not just in funding but capacity building, training etc however joining the umbrella organisation’s has its own challenges and it is exclusive (this challenge for small NGOs exists in the UK as in other places).
- The INGOs themselves are under pressure to show results in a system that is short-termism so the selection process is not surprising
- In an environment where its effectiveness is evidenced why can’t small NGOs, CSOs be seen as good candidate to partner with INGOs? Are there alternatives ways of engagement?
- How do INGOs position grassroots? How do they see their relationship with them in context of INGOs vision of becoming a ‘knowledge hub’?

**Lastly**, critical assessment of opportunities that exist / not in order that CSOs and NGOs have spaces for genuine engagement in knowledge production, agenda setting in all areas of intervention, funding, needs and impact assessment and more

What can INGOs do with regards to grassroots/CSOs?

- Making that space – more than a token gesture (substantive issues) many scholars addressed this already.
- What is their status (fully incorporated to set agenda or as Martin says ‘extractive’)
- building formal mechanisms to create spaces for grassroots/civil society engagement where it doesn’t exist and to expand existing spaces for example by capitalising in their engagement with States particularly in context where there are clear narrowing of spaces for genuine engagement of civil society they can play a role by including those with an alternative views from the mainstream (those operating on rights, indigenous, minorities for example). INGOs may be viewed less threatening in this context by State’s compared to some of the home grown NGOs & CSOs.
- To recognise structural constraints

- To recognise the politics that narrows the spaces for civil society engagement within the state system (and seek a way address the exclusion of specific categories of people/civil society groups)

One other important role for INGOs albeit indirect but highly beneficial and sustainable in bridging the North South divide on power over knowledge production, ownership and enhanced influence would be linking the grassroots and civil society with academia e.g. INGOs perhaps can think of a way for acting as host to forge partnership between academic institutions and NGOs with intention to give the local level knowledge multiple platform. Research and dissemination through publication for example will give the grassroots 'southern voices' an exposure to various audiences and contribution to existing debates. What would be even more effective and fitting the current age of media is to think of a range of way to disseminate knowledge (in addition to publication) through social media.

### **Overall,**

'Local' voices, choices and power are weaker because they are local in the sense of being more distant from centres of language making, agenda setting and the ear of those controlling the money. A key antidote is to create spaces for more equal discussion and debate. The fact is, change and transformation takes a long time and results are uncertain. The difficult challenge is to justify doing this in the face of those seeking more immediate and tangible outputs from their time and money.

*Tigist Grieve, Sep 2015.*

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