

Operationalising bottom-up learning in international NGOs: barriers and alternatives

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Text

What's wrong with this picture?

In 1995, a leading international NGO (INGO) fielded two community organisers in Harare, Zimbabwe, to live and work with residents of two different urban poor areas.¹ In the ensuing months, the organisers unhurriedly tried to encourage 'bottom-up' development: understand the local situation, build on the local people's material resources, creativity, knowledge, and views, strengthen local collective action, and facilitate a process in which the communities propose and pursue ideas that are organic to them. The workers did not put any funding into the communities for over a year. However, funds for the projects had been raised from private sources under the banner of community-based, sustainable development.

In 1996, the organisers were told by their regional programme manager that they were behind schedule in producing results. The programme director stressed that INGO performance criteria required that communities show progress on specific material improvements within one year. Further delays could result in a cut-off of funds, as donors might think the projects were going nowhere.

The organisers, hoping their bosses would come to understand the communities' perspectives and adjust their expectations, resisted pressure from headquarters to spend money. They believed their work would be undermined if the communities realigned their activities to receive outside funds, rather than rallying around a shared vision of a preferred future relying primarily on their own resources. In the end, under pressure to spend the funds and in danger of losing their jobs, the organisers finally relented. The funding tap was turned on, and the INGO reported to donors in 1997 that the projects were reaching their targeted benchmarks.

Do INGOs have a learning disorder?

The Harare case reflects a tendency in INGO operations to resist allowing communities to lead the development process. Given the choice, many of us in the INGO world still are opting for fast results on the ground while only rhetorically embracing community-based self-development. Producing visible results validates the INGO's activities and secures ongoing funding. Facing uncertainty and rapid change, we tend to make decisions that privilege our organisations' self-preservation. However, the emphasis on achieving rapid, visible results often backfires. While we can 'see' development happening, the less photogenic, but ultimately longer lasting aspects of development, such as local initiative, community cohesion, resilience, self-reliance, and resourcefulness – leading ultimately to self-determination – take a back seat. In other words, INGOs tend to set up internal but largely unrecognised barriers to their own values-driven goals. Observers in the early 1990s attributed this problem to a state of confusion among INGOs regarding their purpose, direction, and identity. However, we believe this incongruity of behaviour to be rooted in a failure to translate new knowledge gained from development experience into changed organisational behaviour. As Edwards (1997) notes, INGOs tend to have difficulty with organisational learning because it requires humility, honesty, openness, and the ability to welcome error. Development institutions, like other organisations, have a natural propensity not to dwell on the past (that is, on mistakes) and to move forward without the painful self-scrutiny necessary to learn from experience.

On the other hand, many INGOs have eagerly embraced organisational learning in principle, following the lead of commercial businesses. This appears to be a step in the right direction, but can in fact be problematic. Although many businesses are developing models of learning practice, neither the for-profit environment nor its corporate structures fit well with the environment and organisational forms needed for grassroots development. Have INGOs mimicked a for-profit model of organisation too closely?

INGOs differ from their for-profit counterparts in important ways. One is the values-driven approach to attaining justice, equity, and empowerment for the poor that most international non-profits share (Hailey 2000). Often these goals are accompanied by the promotion of full stakeholder participation, mutual learning, accountability and transparency, local self-governance, long-term sustainability, and,

perhaps above all, a people-centred approach (Korten 1990; Hailey 2000). Much development theory focuses on the benefits of building on these values, and many practitioners develop, test, and share various processes that can be used to promote and further their use.

An alien-hand syndrome

This leads to a second key difference between for-profit and non-profit organisations. From a values-based paradigm, the notion of 'organisation', as borrowed from the for-profit world, can be argued to work against responsiveness to the poor.² In a traditional for-profit organisation, there is a direct link between the customer and the success of the business. In general, the business must be responsive to customer needs, or sales will decline and the company will be in danger of liquidation. INGOs and other non-profits, on the other hand, are usually set up to serve marginalised communities that are generally without voice. Whether or not an INGO adequately understands and responds to their needs seldom has an impact on the solvency of the organisation.

In order to remain solvent, the INGO must be responsive to its *donor base* – a group that is neither receiving the organisation's primary services, nor is generally capable of monitoring and ensuring that the INGO is adequately responding to the needs of the poor. While the for-profit world has built-in accountability structures between customer and company, there is a 'disconnect' between the 'customer' and organisation for most non-profits which is inadequately bridged by the donor community. This is a symptom of the *alien-hand syndrome*, an organisational learning disorder which '... involves a disconnection between organisation intentions and actions ... Organisations may have clear goals and well-defined routines, yet lack adequate incentives to ensure that actions are consistent with intentions' (Snyder and Cummings 1998). An alien-hand syndrome afflicting INGOs has its origins in a model of organisation and learning borrowed from the for-profit world that is inappropriate to the goals and outcomes of development initiatives, but that is nonetheless beneficial to the INGOs' survivability.

What are the practical implications? An INGO may provide inadequate and at times appalling 'service' to marginalised individuals and communities without any repercussions. As long as the donors are satisfied, the organisation can continue not only to operate but also to grow, thrive, and expand. 'Success' in a developmental sense – that is, empowering poor communities, giving them voice, and developing

self-governance skills – may in fact be detrimental to the success of the organisation for two reasons. First, it creates a direct accountability link, which may threaten the organisation’s method of operations, focus, mission, and vision. Once the community has voice, it can question or reject the organisation’s operational choices. In other words, the INGO faces a conflict of interests – succeeding at its mission could threaten its existence. Therefore, most INGOs, from a self-preservation perspective, prefer to keep accountability links solely with donors and perpetuate the status quo, even though this may fail to empower targeted communities.

Second, donors are generally unenthusiastic about supporting a long, iterative, people-centred process because it may not produce an immediately measurable impact, or may not accomplish the original intention of the intervention. Funding agencies tend to prefer short-term, measurable outputs, which demand a high level of control over decisions and the conditions in which projects are implemented.

This is not to imply that INGOs are conspiring to subvert their own values. But they have significant, unrecognised barriers to aligning behaviour with those values, particularly through learning that comes from communities. Perhaps this is because ‘members may see only what the strong culture of the organisation permits them to see’ (Snyder and Cummings 1998). Perhaps there has been no push to look for more appropriate models because the sense of self-preservation is strong in any human system. Few have dared to question the system because those who have the ability to do so benefit from the current structure, and those who suffer most from failures in the system do not have a voice adequate to challenge it. To the degree that a conflict persists between an INGO’s mission and self-preservation, the former is often, unconsciously, sacrificed. The INGO may not recognise negative consequences because it lacks an effective feedback mechanism and accountability link to communities where the effects are felt.

We are not advocating that INGOs close down or that one type of unidirectional accountability replace another. But we believe INGOs can do better in bringing their practices in line with their core values. For this, INGOs must recognise and correct the power asymmetries embedded within them so that both sustainable development *and* organisational sustainability are possible.

Some INGOs, seeking a solution, are institutionalising a corrective kind of organisational practice – bottom-up learning (BUL). This is a

process of comprehensively (re)orienting their operations to the concrete realities of people living in poverty and injustice in vastly diverse local contexts worldwide, and allowing those realities to form the basis for programme designs, fundraising targets and methods, and management policies, plans, and budgets. In a 'bottom-up' approach to learning, organisations strive sensitively to understand people's needs and conditions in each area where they are working, and to allow each community's priorities to determine (not just inform) organisational objectives, methods, timetables, benchmarks, and funding.

Bottom-up organisational learning

Bottom-up organisational learning is a sub-discipline of organisational learning (OL). OL has been defined as a process of developing new knowledge that changes an organisation's behaviour to improve future performance (Garvin 1993).

Such learning is not simply about making better decisions but also about making sense of our perceptions and interpretations of our environment. Organisational learning may be either adaptive (questioning the basic assumptions an organisation holds about itself and the environment) or generative (questioning an organisation's perceptions of both its internal and external relationships) (Barker and Camarata 1998).

The agenda of the 'learning organisation' has likewise been described as a challenge 'to explore ... how we can create organisational structures which are meaningful to people so they can assist, participate and more meaningfully control their own destiny in an unhampered way' (Jones and Hendry 1994:160). In practising bottom-up learning, an organisation makes a moral choice to draw insights and feedback from people at the low end of a socially constructed hierarchy (that is, from those who are most vulnerable in the system). It then refocuses and redefines itself, its operational choices, and its performance measures in light of its accountability to the poor. This is not the only type of learning in which an organisation can, and should, engage, but it provides a counterbalance to other types of learning that may fall short of addressing the alien-hand syndrome. BUL assumes that an organisation sees the most vulnerable part of its constituency as its primary source of legitimacy. A BUL organisation commits itself to work for the liberation of those at the bottom by drawing its own sense of direction and priorities from this group, rather than

‘developing’ them. As those at the bottom are given a voice and enabled to develop themselves on their own terms, most other stakeholders (including donors, managers, and staff) may also find greater freedom, as they no longer need to control development outcomes in an effort to sustain the life of their organisation. They are instead incorporating the massive resource represented in the partner community.

BUL asks organisations to adapt their internal *structure, systems, and culture* to the complex and evolving struggles of those in poverty, including even the choice not to be ‘developed’. INGO operations following BUL are comprehensively recalibrated to let go of the controls in community development. They recognise that they need to adapt themselves to environments that are chaotic, uncertain, fraught with risk, unpredictable, not conducive to being standardised, often hard to fund, and which defy linear, quantifiable models for project planning and evaluation. While BUL organisations’ roles become pliable and versatile, their mission of strengthening the poor and increasing social justice remains at the forefront. They situate their work inside a broader context of serving and advancing the agendas of organised grassroots social movements, and thus work as often as possible in situations where they can work alongside partners. This partnership helps further the struggle of an established, indigenous, local organisation (or network of organisations) that is embarking on social change, based on the wishes of the local people. Over time, new initiatives may be carved out through mutual agreement and increasing trust.

BUL is contrasted with *organisational pragmatism* in which the primary agenda is to ‘adjust’ the poor to fit in (and thus benefit from) standardised INGO programmes, usually through the promise or provision of material assistance. Making constituents adjust to an existing programme suggests that the INGO may not acknowledge the uniqueness of the needs and conditions in each new community, preferring (even with the best intentions) to find an ‘easier fix’, based on time and budget constraints. This is often driven by an overarching premium in INGOs on utilitarian thinking and practice, which states that *‘what is useful is true, and what works is good’*. It is based on the false objectivity of a cost-benefit calculation that, while claiming to benefit the poor, in the end works more to protect the interests of employees who benefit most from maintaining the status quo (Murphy 2000). A decision by the newly selected president of a major

INGO in 1997 to retain child sponsorship as the organisation's primary (and lucrative) funding vehicle for the sake of financial stability, despite emerging evidence that development outcomes implemented under the sponsorship system were not self-sustaining, is a clear example of such pragmatism.

BUL does not romanticise the poor or suggest that their interests can be easily defined or treated as an unfragmented whole. On the contrary, a core strength of BUL is precisely that it is grounded and realistic in approaching the complexities of poverty and development 'from below'. In short, BUL rejects top-down development programmes, and promotes the interests and priorities of marginalised individuals and groups, so that their voices are not only heard, but can exercise a discrete and overriding influence not only on the actions of INGOs on the ground, but in their internal operations as well.

Theoretical underpinnings

BUL is grounded in a convergence of theories within the disciplines of development studies and organisational psychology. From development theory, we draw from the framework of alternative development, or *democratic development*, depicted by Friedmann (1992), among others. Poverty here is understood mainly as *disempowerment*. Development is a process of vision-driven organising, initially at the local level, which 'focuses explicitly on the moral relations of persons and households, and it draws its values from that sphere rather than from any desire to satisfy material wants, important as these may be' (Friedmann 1992:33).

People's active participation in identifying and addressing forces that marginalise them leads to respect for the diversity and complexity of local communities, and is the most effective and lasting way to remove structural constraints on their development at national and global levels.

This perspective moves development out of the realm of charity and into a moral framework of justice and rights. For development workers, an alternative development commends a position of *solidarity* with the poor. Advocacy with the poor in defence of their rights (to land, capital, and other productive assets) can go hand in hand with sensitive, tailored support for local people's self-development, self-reliance, and increased ability to sustain their own desired improvements. The fundamental questions to be answered in any initiative are 'In whose interest? In whose voice?' (Murphy 2000).

Even when we embrace an alternative, democratic development paradigm, we still need further conceptual tools to undertake BUL. In this regard, the theoretical literature on organisational learning in the NGO sector is thin, but initial inroads have been made. Korten (1990), building on people-centred development theory, offers an organisational typology in which young NGOs tend to focus on charity but mature (fourth-generation) NGOs on solidarity. Coopey (1995) and Snell and Chak (1998) build an argument for 'learning empowerment' in organisations through constitutionally protected democratic rights and obligations for all members, coupled with a culture of developmental leadership. In this connection, Srivastva *et al.* (1995:44) look to INGOs to initiate 'the discovery and mobilisation of innovative social/organisational architectures that make possible human cooperation across previously polarising or arbitrary constraining boundaries'. Presumably, organisations advocating such broad participation by societies' members in the face of the 'stark legislative pressure of governments' would themselves be bottom-up learners. Elliott (1999) begins to address this issue by arguing that NGOs themselves are most likely to become effective learners through a broadly authentically participative process of appreciative inquiry, similar to the process now being used to facilitate change in some 'flat' corporations.

The ambitious changes implied by BUL may seem utopian to seasoned INGO workers. However, a movement among some INGOs in this direction (described below) suggests there is interest and the possibility of making real and lasting change. We believe that by recognising and directly addressing the built-in barriers many INGOs have to utilising BUL principles fully, great strides can be made in increasing INGO impact. To this end, we now look at some hopeful alternatives and discuss how barriers can be minimised or eliminated, leading to successful community empowerment.

Signs of mission-centred thinking – and practice

Development practice has come a long way since the 1940s, when many INGOs were first formed. From an initial focus on providing immediate needs, development theory and practice have matured to include such considerations as community empowerment and self-governance, gender equality and opportunity, solidarity and voice, advocacy issues, economic advancement, and political recognition and participation. Most development practitioners express an understanding of and

commitment to the importance of helping communities to self-develop, and they recognise the danger of providing goods and services without some sort of community input or response (note the proliferation of food-for-work or labour-for-development models in the past decade or so). The principles are known and understood, and attempts have been made to put them into practice.

Specifically, research and practice in the sub-fields of community research and evaluation have tended to reflect progressive thinking. The development and wide dissemination of tools used in Participatory Rural Appraisal and Participatory Learning and Action (PRA and PLA) methods show a hunger for appropriate tools and methodologies for engaging local communities in the development process. Programme evaluation increasingly draws on participatory techniques and processes as well, with many organisations reporting positive results. Additionally, new breakthroughs in organisational theory are helping development organisations rethink their internal processes and external delivery systems from top to bottom.

The evolution of theory and practice has been rapid, and many organisations report positive results in using these methods. Yet, despite the practical application of BUL principles, many of the same problems stemming from values conflicts continue to afflict INGOs. Why is this? We argue that good practice at the field level is not sufficient where organisational practice inhibits or retards learning from field outcomes. Organisational structure and practice is seldom in alignment with development principles, but rather adheres to principles which ensure self-preservation and perpetuation, as reflected in policies and procedures, reporting practices, and relationships with communities of need as well as donors and the general public. Development practice is compartmentalised to *field* practice, and is not allowed to permeate the organisation as a whole. Assumptions about what is good for the organisation as an institution lead to stability and self-perpetuation, but also shut out the potential learning and change that adopting BUL principles offers as reward. Not only do these operating principles restrict institutional development, organisational practice at times reaches down and inhibits the implementation of good field practice (as the Harare case illustrates). Often, tools such as PRA or participatory evaluation methods may be employed but are not allowed to inform fully what occurs in the community, or else community members are given the promise of self-determination, only to have it pulled away when their outcomes conflict with organisational

priorities. The following section will briefly outline areas where barriers tend to exist, and some suggestions for removing or minimising them.

Barriers and alternatives

Community interaction

Barrier: most INGO interactions with community groups can be defined by a single input: money. While there are often attempts to build a more holistic partnership, once funds are introduced the relationship becomes one of power held by the INGO with the community often forced to respond ‘appropriately’ to INGO’s real or perceived wishes in order to secure the elusive funds. Some INGOs have sought to mitigate this effect by working through local community organisations or local NGOs. However, the unequal power relationship generally is transferred to this relationship as well. Ashman (2000) observes that formal agreements as written by INGOs (a) almost always ensure upward (rather than mutual) accountability; (b) are bounded by timelines too short for effective development (usually three years); and (c) suffer from a lack of mutual agreement on the terms for ending funding (tending to be INGO driven).

Potential alternatives: it is difficult to separate the link between funding and power. One radical but seriously proposed solution is to redirect the attention currently placed on funding towards organisational autonomy. For example, in working directly with communities, more INGOs are providing training in the skills required for self-governance. The aim is to enable communities to use appropriate methods to self-assess their current situation, develop a vision for their desired future, develop a plan *for themselves* (and not reliant on an external agency) and move towards that vision, self-monitor progress, and finally evaluate the results and adjust future plans as necessary. In this scenario, the power lies not in the funds but in the skills and self-knowledge that are developed *and remain* in the community, including appropriate methods for guiding and directing action and reflection.

If an INGO’s primary input to communities is the ability to govern the process of self-development, an implication is that the INGO also changes *as an organisation*, including administration, fundraising, and management. In practice, INGOs might still introduce funding, but mainly to promote communities’ self-development plans by linking them to other organisations or perhaps offering small grants

or low-interest loans to finance planned activities. Other concepts that have been tried and have met with success include teaching small business and budgeting skills for locally based enterprises, or providing scholarships for specialised schooling that result in stronger local leadership. These approaches de-emphasise the receipt of a large cheque and instead look at building skills that lead to autonomy and independence.

Because such intensive, hands-on activities often demand a deep sensitivity and familiarity with local needs and conditions, we believe it may be most effective if INGOs go beyond decentralising their operations and *cease being operational* in the field. This can be done by forging ties with autonomous local NGOs that have a proven commitment and track record in handing over controls in the development process to the communities where they are working. To the degree that terms for partnership can be negotiated equitably, the imperative for standardised and impersonal mass reproduction of one strategy, which ironically is often only magnified (rather than adapted) in the process of decentralisation, can be significantly curtailed.

Systems and procedures

Barrier: organisational systems and procedures are too often excused as a ‘necessary evil’ in meeting bureaucratic requirements. We contend that many systems and procedures are inappropriate for attaining the goals of most INGOs and may work to limit their effectiveness and impact. For example, standard INGO accounting and management information systems (MIS) are complex and require individuals in the field who have specialised training to operate them effectively. It can be difficult to find accountants who are adequately trained in computer skills (much less a specific accounting or MIS package), and INGOs often find they spend excessive resources recruiting, training, and then losing these individuals (who once trained are valuable to other INGOs). Additionally, the reporting required for these systems often forces accommodation at all levels of the organisation, reaching to the community level. At times this may require field staff to be hired and trained simply to fill and submit reports to the INGO national office on behalf of the community.

Programme planning and reporting are another key barrier. Instruments now widely used by INGOs, such as the logical framework approach (LogFrame), were originally developed by and for engineers and planners in heavy industry. LogFrame models fit with the way that INGOs and donors typically budget and package projects,

but they are alien to community processes and understanding, and can prevent communities from driving the development process. A few years ago, a staff member from one large INGO sat down with community representatives from a historically nomadic tribe in Botswana to discuss the annual INGO planning and budgeting forms. When she posed the question, ‘What would you like to see accomplished and funded by the end of next year?’ she was met with silence. After several minutes of dialogue in the local dialect, someone responded, ‘How can we plan for the next year when we do not know if we will be alive tomorrow?’. INGO planning and reporting procedures usually cannot accommodate people with such vastly different worldviews, even though these procedures are sometimes claimed to be necessary to empower communities.

Potential alternatives: the goal here is not to require the *programme* to accommodate the systems, but rather the other way around. It is important to build systems and procedures starting from the community’s needs and abilities, rather than expecting communities to conform to organisational or donor requirements. Appropriate methods of accounting, planning, and reporting would allow community groups to self-report back to the INGO. This not only frees valuable staff time, it also puts the responsibility for action where it should be – on the community. As long as staff members are responsible for reporting on the ‘INGO’s projects’, they will remain the INGO’s projects in the eyes of the community. This means that reporting systems and procedures need to be appropriate for community use – ideally that community groups actually use the information and processes for their self-development, and not merely to meet reporting requirements. By developing systems in response to community needs, it probably means that INGOs would need to abandon their high dependency on computer-based reports, graphs, and charts, and replace them with methods and processes that are meaningful to local people in vastly diverse settings. Examples include plans, accounts, and reports developed using pictures, graphics, or narrative stories which are appropriate to communities and to BUL.

Donor and public relations

Barriers: in the late 1970s, as he was about to retire, the founder and president of one large INGO looked back over the organisation’s history. In considering its past and present difficulties, he reflected in a moment of unusual candour that the organisation had erred when it began to believe what it was telling donors about itself. Today, we might add that

INGOs err to the degree they believe what they are telling donors about poverty and development. Educating constituents and donors about the complexity of international development seems largely out of fashion among INGOs. What passes for public education tends to be slanted towards child sponsorship and emergency appeals. Public relations systems rely on a continuous stream of uncomplicated success stories (Edwards 1997) that not only obscure community realities but skip over problems in the performance of the organisations themselves. While there are notable exceptions, the central tendency, with scale, is for INGOs to increase gloss and decrease substance in donor communications. The reason, INGO resource-development personnel argue, is that donors will not fund complexity, process, and ambiguity. Like business investors, they want clear results, now. INGOs give donors what donors are saying they want. As discussed earlier, this creates barriers to development by the poor: first, it unduly restricts the focus of accountability to donor expectations, which do not adequately address the aspirations of marginalised people in distant lands. Second, it may create long-term barriers to complex, messy, but potentially much more long-lasting and far-reaching development efforts.

Potential alternatives: admittedly, it can be difficult for large INGOs to make the time and effort necessary to educate a populace on the complexities of international development. However, some organisations have taken on the task as part of their call to advocacy. One Australian development organisation, for example, employs staff to work with their base of church supporters to provide seminars and workshops to explore difficult development issues, thus providing individuals and the church as an institution with a deeper understanding of and commitment to international work. Fundraising is an opportunity to advocate for people's rights with a particular audience. INGOs using a rights-based framework are able to facilitate a process of mutual transformation (involving both donors and communities) as donors (both institutional and individual) respect communities' discretion over their own future and learn from them as partners on a common journey, rather than 'helping' them meet externally imposed criteria. Ultimately, a donor who is involved in this deeper way will prove more beneficial to communities, and may in turn be more enriched personally, than one who is fed success stories and quantitative data showing community improvement.

In our experience, INGOs' failure to restrain the level of controls on development in order to 'protect' their funds has the effect of further

crippling the poor. Because accountability for genuine self-policing in INGO funding policies is almost totally lacking right now, one alternative is to establish a global funding 'watchdog' organisation modelled on the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) in the USA. The NCRP educates US donor publics on the practices of various funding organisations and related government policies, rating them on the basis of their degree of respect for community self-determination and commitment to empowerment.

Feedback loops

Barriers: perhaps the most challenging aspect of organisational learning is to develop the feedback loops that allow for bottom-up transformation and mutual accountability. Some of the barriers to establishing effective feedback loops have already been mentioned, such as reporting systems. Elsewhere, INGOs will conduct extensive evaluations and collect information from their beneficiaries, only to have the report sit on a shelf with no realistic way to act on the findings. The beneficiaries themselves are sometimes blamed for their unhappiness with the programme, often linked to their 'unwillingness' to conform to programme requirements. Field staff are generally the best conduit of information and impressions from the beneficiaries to upper management levels – but they may carry biases of their own, selectively hearing and interpreting what is communicated from the communities. This information may or may not be passed back up the chain, or it may be misrepresented in some way. Without a direct link to the beneficiaries, impressions and informal reports of this kind are seldom triangulated and verified but often have a powerful impact on organisational attitude and practice. Even where field staff have excellent relations with communities, field positions are often considered 'entry level', and good fieldworkers are quickly promoted up the ladder and away from direct contact with the local population. The ultimate barrier is the lack of direct contact or practical formal feedback flows from the communities to the INGO (although, interestingly, communication is often solid in the other direction). This barrier is just as serious for non-operational INGOs, who may not bother to investigate directly the realities they are seeking to address and are wary of offending their local NGO partners if they appear to be 'going around' them.

Potential alternatives: if an organisation truly is embracing BUL as a critical foundation of good development practice, it must find viable

ways as an *organisation* to listen and respond to the concerns and perceptions of its host communities. Recent breakthroughs in organisational theory are helping INGOs rethink their internal processes and external delivery systems from top to bottom. A key example may be the tools of appreciative inquiry, which in some cases can lead INGOs to make radical, organisation-wide changes based on a participatory process. All stakeholder groups are invited to consider the possibilities of strategic change based on both a desired future and a 'positive present'.

Some INGOs are experimenting with governance structures that include formal feedback loops. For example, representatives of the INGO's target population are elected to a General Assembly which meets once yearly at the Annual General Meeting. During this time, they confirm and retire board members, hear a report on the organisation's activities over the past year, review budget-to-actual information, and confirm the coming year's plan and budget. This builds a direct accountability structure between the beneficiaries and the organisation's activities and expenditures, while also modelling and providing experience in genuine self-governance. Does a model of this nature complicate things for the organisation? Most certainly! But it also seeks to model principles of development *throughout the entire organisation* which are more consistent with its mission than a more pragmatic approach.

The way forward

The alien-hand syndrome in INGOs raises uncomfortable questions. Whose needs (and interests) have we privileged in the past, and why? How can those at the bottom of society gain a decisive voice in INGO planning and operations? How do strategies for re-tooling operations for downward accountability become adopted by an entire organisation, rather than a small group of thoughtful individuals within it – especially in an organisation as departmentally fragmented as most INGOs are? How can we find courage to face our collective and unconscious resistance to change? What is blocking us from respectfully engaging the community in a partnership of negotiation that leads to *mutual* use of pertinent information – collection, analysis, and interpretation – and to decisions that are made jointly, implemented jointly, and evaluated and adjusted jointly?

We have proposed BUL as a normative framework for INGOs as they confront an alien-hand syndrome in their operations, replacing

systems of control with tools for facilitating mutual learning and community-based sustainable development that can have an impact throughout the entire organisation. Our discussion of INGO barriers to learning, and of current experiments in institutionalising BUL, presupposes the existence of a *process of learning* in organisations that is understood, accepted, and accessible. In reality, our understanding of how organisations learn is still in its infancy. Recent studies on this subject in the government and business sectors may be helpful to INGOs, as they work through the questions posed above. In addition, we believe two process-related steps may be helpful as INGOs begin to put BUL into practice.

First, INGOs might begin by engaging in *second-order learning*, or *learning how they learn*. Here, INGOs focus on their inward process of developing and spreading new understandings across their departments and programme sites. They also might consider ways in which they may be resisting change that is needed in order to align their practices with their core values. Is it possible that INGOs do not want to know about some hidden dimension of themselves, or might have to un-learn something, or change what they are doing even to the point of reducing budgets or losing employment? Is it possible that communities we have tried to help have in fact been harmed because we chose not to assess critically the outcomes of our actions? Will we have to redirect ourselves radically? Are we allowing our fear of the implications of such learning to make us block needed change?

Second, INGOs in this process will need to face up to the political implications of becoming downwardly accountable. This could mean opening more space for equal exchange with local partner organisations and grassroots communities in their operations. Internal champions of such steps may not be enough. BUL may only come about if INGOs move towards adopting flatter, more democratic structures and dramatically revamping administrative, fundraising, and staffing systems and policies to let communities take control of their own development. In addition, BUL promotes partnerships with local NGOs that are autonomous, or without any dependent linkages to an INGO. In short, INGOs will need to move towards truly participatory management in an open system, tying sustainability of their operations to authentic sustainable development on the ground (Johnson and Wilson 1999). In this regard, the meanings, processes, and output of development become a matter to be negotiated between equals, with no predetermined outcomes, and involving INGOs, local

partner organisations, and their constituent communities.

In the short term, BUL organisations may find it necessary to make some painful changes, and possibly shrink their operations as they redirect and retool themselves for less controlling and fewer hands-on roles in development. However, it is noteworthy that those INGOs already putting the interests of poor communities ahead of other interests, with a clear commitment to downward accountability, are increasingly able to operate with moral and structural integrity, gain deeper respect and trust with the communities where they work, and see those communities empowered. *These invisible assets are the surest indicators of their viability and effectiveness, whatever their other stakeholders' interests may be.*

Notes

- 1 We define international NGO (INGO) as a non-profit development agency with global operations whose mission is (among other things) to assist the poor through community development. Examples include CARE, Oxfam, Save the Children, World Vision, and other similar groups. The names of INGOs have been omitted from our examples to avoid unfairly singling out specific organisations that are facing problems or challenges endemic to the INGO sector as a whole.
- 2 It is difficult to find a phrase that adequately captures the intended target population of most INGOs without sounding over-simplistic. We use the term 'poverty' to indicate disempowerment, and the term 'poor' to indicate lack of choice and marginalisation from formal political and social institutions. Many within this population also fall within the lower fortieth percentile of the GNP within their respective countries. Having said this, we realise the terms used here do not adequately to reflect the diversity in terms of gender, urban versus rural settings, working

poor versus the unemployed, issues of stigma, and vast socio-cultural differences found throughout the world.

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