Helping People is Difficult: A Contribution to Recognising the Constraints and Releasing the Energies of NGO Staff

Alex Jacobs, 3rd November 2004

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Executive Summary

1. Introduction

Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) handle a significant and increasing amount of resources, including many highly committed staff as well as money. They have important goals of fighting poverty, injustice and suffering. The largest have international influence. But, evidence proves that NGOs' performance in their field work continues to vary: sometimes it is excellent, sometimes indifferent. Credible evidence suggests that at worst it can add to processes of empoverishment.

This paper explores the system-wide factors that make it difficult for NGOs to improve the quality of their field work. NGO staff (and other actors) invest a great deal in trying to improve their performance. An analysis of issues across the entire system that they work in may help improve the chance that these initiatives succeed. Some possible ways of addressing system-wide factors are suggested.

This paper deals in generalisations, basing assertions on the balance of evidence; specific cases are often very different. Many other people are exploring related issues; many exciting initiatives are under way and many NGOs are currently operating with very good practice. These are not all reflected in this paper, which provides a critical review of one set of negative issues: what makes things difficult? It is hoped that exploring these issues can make a constructive contribution to the debate, helping NGOs to help more people more effectively.

2. What is development?

Many NGOs aim to tackle the root causes of poverty and encourage development. Following Amartya Sen and Paulo Freire (as interpreted by many development writers such as Robert Chambers), this paper defines development as a process of empowerment, helping people exert influence over the factors that govern their lives. This is widely recognised as the only solution to the continuing processes of empoverishment; and so as the only long-term solution to poverty. It is inherently political.

Outsiders can only help local people if they strive to understand their realities, which are "local, complex, diverse, dynamic and unpredictable": helping people is difficult. Cycles of action and reflection, based on respectful dialogue between an outside actor and community members provide one proven approach. It is no surprise that evaluations of NGO practice regularly identify that the key factor in a successful intervention has been the skills, commitment and experience of field staff.

3. System-wide factors that make good performance difficult

Four inter-related groups of factors make it difficult for NGOs to improve their performance:

- Conceptual confusion
- Funding pressures
- Internal organisational factors
- External context

3.1 Conceptual confusion

Firstly, there is substantial confusion between ‘development’, ‘service delivery’ and ‘humanitarian response’. The three terms are often used inter-changeably. However, there are basic differences in the principles that govern each type of action. For example, providing healthcare may be extremely valuable; but it does not tackle the problem of empoverishment. Humanitarian response (as defined by many actors) requires political neutrality, which cannot be reconciled to the political nature of the development process.

Secondly, there is the widely recognised problem of using ‘projects’ as the unit for thinking about doing development. A project is a useful concept for any large organisation which has to allocate resources to try to achieve its goals. However, evidence shows that by tightly specifying a project’s aims in advance, the process of development is irreparably distorted. Tight specifications preclude respectful dialogue with the people an NGO is trying to help and reduce the process of development to the process of meeting a project’s pre-defined goals, whether they are useful to people or not.

Thirdly, NGOs tend to have difficulty explaining how they will achieve their missions in practice. They often lack a robust theory of social change which explains how their particular activities contribute to meeting their mission. As a result, it is not clear whether their activities do always contribute to meeting their mission. This has direct practical implications: evidence shows that resource allocation decisions may be taken on a reactive and pragmatic basis.

3.2 Funding pressures

Institutional donors provide a substantial proportion of the funds that NGOs spend. They often require tightly-specified project proposals as a precondition of providing funds. This mechanism worsens the problem of projects, encouraging NGOs to claim that they can deliver more and with certainty, and to focus on upward accountability – all at the expense of the process-based approach required for genuine development. (This situation can recur in large NGOs, where the relationship between head office and field staff may be similar to the relationship between donor and NGO.)

Some current examples of good practice by NGOs and donors suggest interesting ways forward (such as recent negotiations between DfID and Save the Children UK and ActionAid).

Individual donors also give a great deal of money to NGOs. NGOs encourage people to give to them based on their brand, supported by sophisticated marketing techniques. This creates a major pressure to present messages which are simple and grab the attention, rather than which recognise the difficulty and uncertainty of doing development.

3.3 Internal organisational factors

An intervention by Wildlife Fund Thailand in a village in Phuket provides a specific example of good practice. NGO staff supported villagers to organise themselves so as to protect their fishing rights, in opposition to other local interests. ActionAid's "Alps" system provides an example of organisation-wide good practice. The system cuts away centralising bureaucracy and encourages staff and other stakeholders to spend time reflecting on their interventions together.

However, these examples also show some of the problems that NGOs face in their internal organisation. Firstly, managing NGO work is very complicated: many difficult issues have to be considered and balanced against each other. Secondly, evidence shows that NGOs are not tightly managed entities. Senior field staff work with considerable latitude, using their own judgement; policies are not always followed in practice.

Thirdly, the governance structure of a charitable board of trustees tends to exert a centralising and risk-averse influence. Individual board members (who in many countries cannot be paid for their work) may lack time and experience of development processes or NGO management.

Finally, individual NGOs have grown very rapidly over the last few decades. Models of NGO management are still being developed: there are few recognised solutions to the problem of how to organise large amounts of resources effectively for development. With ideas imported from the private sector, this has tended to encourage some NGOs to focus on developing internal systems to handle their growth, rather than to focus on releasing the energies of their field staff.

3.4 External context

There is a weak link between funding and performance. Both institutional and individual donors depend on information from NGOs to make their decisions about whether to give or not. This is inevitably partial and often presents NGO activities in a flattering light. NGOs that can sustain their credibility sustain their funding. Funding mechanisms do not consistently reward good field-level performance.

NGOs operate in a light regulatory environment. Government bodies (for instance the UK Charity Commission) may ensure a level of financial probity and investigate political activity. But there is no regulatory incentive to improve field-level performance.

There is also a weak link between academia and practice. The academic literature is full of examples of good practice and useful tools and approaches. But evidence shows that NGOs frequently repeat yesterday's mistakes. No necessary qualifications (or skills or experience) are enforced so as to ensure that NGO staff build on recognised good practice. (Other professions achieve this through self-regulating professional bodies or institutions.)

4. Possible ways forward

The analysis presented above suggests that it is important to recognise that there are system wide factors. Initiatives that aim to raise performance by focusing only on one particular issue may be swamped by them. Also at the general level, evidence shows that individual leadership has a critical role to play within NGOs. In addition, it may be useful to explore the following ideas further:

4.1 Conceptual clarity

NGO field work would benefit from greater conceptual clarity in the areas of what NGOs are trying to achieve and how they expect to achieve it. This could usefully include clearer recognition of the limits of any NGO's influence: as one factor among many in poor people's lives, they cannot guarantee (or claim) to solve poverty.

4.2 Alternative units for thinking about development

There is an urgent need for alternative practical units to 'projects'. This will need a great deal of reflection. But ideas that may be worth considering are to use loosely-specified projects for service-delivery and to use 'communities' as the unit for development.

From an NGO's point of view, development happens among communities of people who share common interests. By defining an intervention in terms of a 'community', an NGO would recognise that the process of working with people is the centre of development work. It may be a unit which can be used for the necessary bureaucratic process of dividing up money to interventions. It would also remove the focus from short-term, concrete outputs.

4.3 Focus on the quality of the process

When it comes to people-centred development, the process of empowerment is the only recognised solution to empoverishment. So, it may be useful to focus on the quality of an NGO's engagement with that process.

A high quality process would be characterised by respectful dialogue (between outsiders and community members) and cycles of action and self-critical reflection. From the NGO's point of view, this depends on the judgements that field staff make and the way that they interact with the people they are trying to help. In turn, these are governed by the values and experience of individual members of field staff and whether they are encouraged by organisational systems to put those values into practice.

So, as organisations, NGOs could focus on how they can inspire staff to live by certain values; how they can help them to develop appropriate experience; and on how they release the energies of their field staff. This is likely to revolve around values-based leadership (recognising the role of leaders as guardians of values) and individual learning as much as management. It requires decentralisation, which is everything, and explicit trust between senior staff and field staff.

It also has an implication for measuring success. A great deal of energy is currently being expended on measuring outputs and outcomes. Substantial progress has been made on project level monitoring and evaluation. But issues of causality, measurement and comparability have hindered progress at higher levels within organisations. An alternative, complementary approach may be to try to measure the quality of the process. This could be done through a sensitive auditing process – which some NGOs are experimenting with.

It may be more important and more possible for senior decision makers to ask whether NGO development interventions genuinely engage the people they aim to help (as a necessary aspect of empowerment) rather than to ask what those interventions aim to achieve.

4.4 Change the internal context

It is widely acknowledged that it is important to invest in leadership at all levels of NGO work, from the board to the field. At the board level, trustees might consider Chambers' exhortation to give up some aspects of their power, which could be argued to be a necessary first step in creating an organisation which empowers others.

Of course this does not mean giving up their responsibility. The analysis in this paper suggests a number of principles that board members may find it useful to consider, including:

- Is it clear what an NGO is trying to achieve and how it aims to achieve it in practical terms?
- Do plans, reports and publicity material recognise the limits of an NGOs' potential to contribute to solutions to poverty?
- How are staff encouraged to develop a strong connection with the people they are trying to help? (Are staff released from as much bureaucracy as possible?)
- How are staff encouraged to maintain a strong commitment to the values that embody good development practice?
- What evidence demonstrates the presence of a strong connection between staff and the people they aim to help?

4.5 Change the external context

It may be possible to change the external context, so as to create more factors which exert pressure for good practice. Areas currently being considered include donor education (for both individual and institutional donors) and accrediting board members.

It may also be possible to rate NGOs' publicly available literature according to a series of process-related criteria (and not according to results or output). For instance, criteria could include: conceptual clarity; a realistic way of verifying that their interventions contribute to social change; transparency; the appropriateness of fundraising material. This could build on the work of the Global Accountability Project, Guidestar and other initiatives in a new and complementary way.

The idea is fraught with difficulty and will doubtless be contentious. But if a reasonable proportion of donors checked these ratings before giving, then this could (if done constructively) create an effective incentive for good practice in a system that is full of factors which make good practice difficult.

1 Introduction

It is generally recognised that Non Governmental Organisations[1] (NGOs) have an important role to play in helping poor and vulnerable people around the world. They are involved in delivering life-saving humanitarian assistance (for instance, in Darfur at the moment) and in long term processes of development.

But it is also recognised that their performance varies and that they are rarely held to account for that. For example, evidence shows that yesterday's mistakes are liable to be repeated[2].

This paper considers system-wide issues that influence how NGOs determine what they are trying to achieve and how they go about achieving it. It is informed particularly by my understanding of the experience of large UK NGOs and field work concentrated in a few countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. As a result, both humanitarian response work and development work are discussed: while the important conceptual differences between these are recognised, the argument hinges around organisational issues which are relevant for both.

The centre of the argument is that a number of factors have grown up across the entire system of donors, trustees, managers and field-staff that slow the pace and reduce the chance of change. There is an urgent need to move away from inappropriate conceptual units (including 'projects') and organisational arrangements (including central management), as well as to adapt the environment that NGOs work in, so as to protect any gains that may be made. Some preliminary suggestions are made.

The paper is structured in four sections:

(1) How are things now?
(2) What is changing at the moment?
(3) Why is performance improving slowly (if at all)?
(4) Possible ways forward

2 How are things now?

This section attempts to review what NGOs are trying to achieve and how close they come to achieving it in practice.

2.1 What is development?

Since the whole concept of development crystalised in the 1950s (alongside anti-colonial independence around the world) there has been a lot of deep reflection about what development means and how outside actors can contribute to it. More recently, there has been a similar reflection on humanitarian response.

Two of the mountain-peaks in this body of work are Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" first published in 1970 and Amartya Sen's work on development as freedom. Among others, Robert Chambers and Allan Kaplan have brought enormous practical experience and insight to bear in interpreting what their profound analyses mean in terms of "doing development" in practice.

I hope the reader will excuse a simplified re-statement of some of their profound truths. As they often seem to be buried in the avalanche of day-to-day NGO work, it is useful for this paper to restate them right at the beginning.

One of the most important insights that these writers bring is that helping people is difficult. Poor people live in worlds that are every bit as culturally, economically and socially complicated as everybody else's and that are open to many different interpretations. Chambers summarises this by commenting that different people's realities are "local, complex, diverse, dynamic and unpredictable" and that applies to you, me and everybody. He particularly draws attention to the way that one person's way of understanding what is going on in the world is different to another person's. (Chambers, 1997)

Sen bases his idea of development on 'human well-being'. Well-being is broader than just wealth, or meeting people's immediate human needs. It includes personal, political and cultural freedoms. Sen writes:

"Since well-being includes living with substantial freedoms, human development is also integrally connected with enhancing certain capabilities - the range of things a person can do and be in leading a life. We value the freedom of being able to live as we would like and even the opportunity to choose our own fate." (Sen, 2000)

From Sen's point of view, "doing development" means helping people to increase their entitlements. A crucial theme in his work is the importance of people's own agency: what is important is whatever people 'have reason to value' as being important and that includes their ability to make their own choices. (Sen bounds this within the framework of universal human rights.)

Freire elaborates many aspects of a similar philosophy. His work is framed in a Marxist analysis of class struggle, of the oppressed struggling against oppressors. (Some forward looking NGOs are returning to the analysis of oppression more explicitly, recognising the inherently political nature of their work.) Freire's view of development is phrased in terms of empowering the oppressed to recognise their oppression and struggle through political means to overcome it and so become 'more human' as a result.

Based on this analysis, Freire's method is particularly respected in development thinking. He placed enormous emphasis on the need to work *with* not *for* the oppressed (from a position of solidarity, not paternalism). People have to come to understand their own position within an oppressive structure, in their own terms: "from that reflection [on the causes of oppression] will come their necessary engagement in the struggle for their liberation". (Freire, 1970)

Freire argued that respectful dialogue is central, to help different people reflect on their world and how they understand it. Closely associated with this, he developed the central idea of 'praxis', which he described as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it". "This discovery [that the oppressed can struggle effectively for their liberation] cannot be purely intellectual but must involve action; nor can it be limited to mere action, but must include serious reflection …"

Two important and direct implications of these works are: firstly, it is not possible to measure development on a single numerical scale[3]; and secondly, it is impossible to "do development" to people: outsiders may be able to help along the way, if they are sensitive enough to understand the pressures that people face and have some idea of how the people concerned understand their own world.

Kaplan is particularly strong on this second point: "… development interventions are essentially about the development of people and that development cannot be imposed. Ultimately, development is driven from within, so while a development worker must bring specialist knowledge and skill to an intervention, the final outcome of the intervention is determined by the client[4]." (Kaplan, 2000)

He continues to develop the point: "Moreover, development processes take significant periods of time, and their flow – in terms of both time and outcome – cannot be determined beforehand. An effective development practice *accompanies* clients through their developmental changes; one-off interventions and predesigned packages are beside the point."

Chambers builds on these approaches. He argues that the only effective starting point for any development intervention comes when "[outsiders] do not impose their own reality; they encourage and enable local people to express their own." He describes how the methodologies brought together under the label of 'Participatory Rural Appraisal' achieve this. (Chambers, 1997)

None of these insights and definitions of development are seriously disputed by most development NGOs; most of them are embraced in theory. To make an enormous generalisation, development (as defined above – I will also use the term 'empowerment' as short hand) is widely recognised as the only secular, effective solution to the established structures that are creating and reinforcing poverty around the world.

These insights also have the advantage of being in tune with our everyday experience. We all know that helping people – like the next-door neighbour – is difficult.

2.2 What else do NGOs aim to do?

Empowerment is implicitly or explicitly stated as a goal of most large NGOs (particularly if they claim to achieve any kind of 'solution' to poverty or 'long term' impact). But it is not the only thing they do. They also provide services to poor or vulnerable people, advocate for pro-poor change at the national and international level and build the capacity of other civil society organisations.

2.2.1 Service delivery

NGOs dedicate substantial resources to service provision. This might include healthcare, education, access to credit or support for orphans or people living with HIV/AIDS. It involves giving people things (or services), sometimes in return for fees (although this is rare in international NGO work).

Service delivery has a very important role to play in helping improve the well-being of poor and marginalised people. If people lack healthcare, then a qualified health worker can make the difference between life and death, or between crippling hospital fees and quick recovery.

However, service delivery is not a long term solution to poverty. It does not change the basic structures that create and reinforce empoverishment. The saying “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him how to fish and you feed him for life” illustrates the difference.

It is clearly not true. What if the man does not like fishing? Or if he moves away from the sea? Or a commercial fishery opens next door? (Would this be true for you: could an outsider solve your problems by teaching you one thing that would guarantee your income for life?)

When it comes to development, this saying could be re-stated: “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him to fish and you feed him for a month; help him recognise and solve his own problems and he may have more of a chance of feeding himself for life.”[5]

Service delivery projects lead to some important questions, including: do people want these services[6]? do the services meet appropriate quality standards? and: what are the costs to people of being involved in these projects?

It is easy to assume that all gifts of services must be welcome. But if the implementing agency lacks the right technical skills, if they use up people’s time and if they do not address their priorities, then they may be a distraction. More importantly, if they are implemented carelessly, they can reinforce local power structures which in turn serves to worsen empoverishment. There are many examples of this in the literature. Bad service-delivery is not just ‘not development’, it is anti-developmental.

So, some of the principles of good development practice also apply to good service-delivery practice: participation and dialogue, in particular.

Engaging with state structures is also extremely important. The state has responsibility for the welfare needs of its population. If may be perceived to lack the will or the capacity to meet this responsibility. However, it cannot be written out of the picture. Otherwise, the relationship of accountability between government and governed is broken: one or other may focus their attention on external actors. This undermines the central process of development at the national level. Alex De Waal has provided an excoriating analysis of how international famine relief efforts have done exactly this in Africa (Waal, 1997).

2.2.2 Humanitarian response

NGOs dedicate a large proportion of their resources to ‘humanitarian response’, a very specific sub-set of service delivery.

The Humanitarian Charter in the Sphere Handbook (Sphere, 2004) sets out a clear statement of humanitarian principles. These differ substantially from the analysis of development presented above: in this case, the people concerned may well not be in a position to direct efforts that aim to help them. They may need large scale and rapid support, for instance in the provision of shelter, food or water.

Humanitarianism defines itself as being non-political (in direct contrast to development). Purely humanitarian actors (like the International Red Cross) aim to be neutral (between political or warring parties), impartial (aiming to respond only to humanitarian need) and independent (of any external influence).

These are difficult principles to live by in practice, as all humanitarian contexts are inevitably politicised, and NGO interventions frequently straddle development and humanitarian action. It is usually impossible to draw a distinct line between 'humanitarian' and 'development' assistance.

It is important to note the fundamental differences between 'humanitarianism' as it is defined here and 'development'. The different stances on the issue of political engagement cannot be reconciled[7].

However, many NGOs are routinely involved in both humanitarian and development action. Even NGOs that focus on humanitarian response find it very hard to avoid slipping into rehabilitation work which often entails longer term service delivery, during which the humanitarian principles described above may no longer always apply. There is a large literature on 'linking relief, rehabilitation and development'.

NGOs do not always distinguish between humanitarian, longer term service delivery and development work in either their practical responses or in their project management or conceptual frameworks. For these reasons, many useful lessons about current NGO practice can be drawn from evaluations of humanitarian work.

2.2.3 Advocacy and capacity building

NGOs are also involved in other activities, which are not the focus of this paper. For the sake of completion, they are mentioned here.

NGOs often aim to influence high level decision-makers to take account of the interests of the poor (an activity known as "advocacy"). This may include large companies, governments or international organisations. When it is effective, these activities can have an enormous impact. The Jubilee 2000 Drop the Debt campaign is without doubt the most effective recent example.

NGOs also aim to educate the public in rich countries about realities in developing countries and the causes of poverty (an activity known as 'development education'). This is sometimes seen as the most important long term foundation in achieving long term change.

Finally, NGOs invest significant amounts in trying to help local organisations to grow and become stronger so as to support development or deliver services themselves.

Kaplan argues convincingly that the process of organisational development mirrors the process of empowerment described above (Kaplan, 2000). Similar issues of power relationships and the difficulty of supporting long term change come into play. There is a large literature on the subject (Fowler 1997 provides a good starting point).

2.3 How do NGOs fit in the system?

There is ample evidence that NGOs have a significant and growing role to play in development and humanitarian response.

The numbers of NGOs are growing very rapidly, and they are attracting an increasing amount of funding. The largest have annual income of over one billion dollars (World Vision International's 2003 annual report reports total income of $1.26bn and that the organisation is the "largest food aid handler in the world"). Most are very much smaller.

Michael Edwards has described some of the dimensions of the NGO sector:

"The largest ever survey of the non-profit sector in 22 countries found over 1 million such organisations in India by 1997, 210,000 in Brazil, 17,500 in Egypt and 15,000 in Thailand … In Ghana, Zimbabwe and Kenya the sector provides 40% or more of all healthcare and education services delivered." (Edwards, 2004)

Both the number and the size of NGOs continues to grow[8]. Recent research shows that the number of international NGOs domiciled in the USA increased by 27% from 1999 to 2001 (Reid and Kerlin, 2004). In the UK, 13 NGOs spent over £20m on international work in 2001; over the same period, their combined income (for international work) increased from £640m (in 1999) to £758m (in 2001) – a combined growth rate of 18% [9]. The growth rates are likely to be even faster in poor countries.

Growth is fuelled by funds from many sources, including the public, governments, international bodies (such as the UN and the EU), charitable trusts and other NGOs.

However, while a few NGOs are large, they are all small compared to the scale of poverty and other actors, including multi-lateral organisations (particularly the World Bank and the IMF), governments and international companies.

2.4 How well do NGOs perform?

The considered opinion of well-respected commentators is that NGO performance is "variable". Sometimes they do excellent work, helping people move out of poverty or oppression, contributing to pro-poor changes in international structures or providing humanitarian aid. Other times, they fall short of these impressive heights[10].

ALNAP (The Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action) publishes a unique sector-wide synthesis of evaluations of humanitarian interventions carried out by NGOs, international organisations and governments.

ALNAP reviewed 55 evaluation reports received in 2002. Its conclusions include:

"Food aid interventions generally meet their primary objective of feeding the hungry, although there are serious questions concerning whether targeting is appropriate …"

"Water and sanitation interventions were also generally successful in meeting physical targets, but sustainability of facilities is a major problem. Findings on participatory management mechanisms for water facilities in particular point to poor results as well as lack of institutional learning."

"Housing is the most problematic sector, and the results of reports on housing support the findings of *Annual Review 2002* concerning the inability of relief interventions to facilitate sound housing reconstruction." (ALNAP, 2003)

Some commentators are more positive about NGO performance (particularly NGOs' own published material), others less so (for example, Waal, 1997). It is reasonable to conclude that informed opinion revolves around ALNAP's conclusions.

There is no sector-wide equivalent to ALNAP's annual reviews in relation to development, other service provision or advocacy interventions. But the overall picture presented by commentators is similar: success within limits; doubts about wider impact.

As Chambers puts it, "The literature on development errors is neither sparse nor all of it recent (see for example, Wood, 1950; Baldwin, 1957; Hirschman, 1967; Chambers, 1973; Cassen et al, 1986; Hill, 1986, Porter, Allen and Thompson, 1991; Morse and Berger, 1992)." (Chambers, 1997).

"Voices are increasingly being raised that question the levels of performance and accountability that NGOs have long taken for granted." (Lewis & Wallis, 2000)

"Understanding the connection [between relief and development work] is also important because of evidence that emergency assistance can be inappropriate or even dangerous, and that development assistance has in some cases contributed to fuelling and igniting conflict." (Smillie, 2000)

These doubts are not new: "… the impact of NGOs on the lives of poor people is highly localised, and often transitory." (Edwards & Hulme, 1992)

Kaplan (2000) comments "Development theory has undergone many transformations over the years, and today there is a growing body of thought that is beginning to question not only the various theories by the very validity of the development concept itself … Questions abound, *but there is little change in development practice …*" (original emphasis).

These concerns are mirrored by wider concerns about the efficacy of external aid (among many examples, see Chambers, 1997 or Ahmad, 2001). They are articulated most clearly by people with long experience within the NGO sector themselves. NGO staff recognise these issues and spend many hours wrestling with them. But, for cultural and structural reasons discussed further below, NGOs have "real difficulties with being open about their mistakes and trying to learn from them". (Lewis & Wallace, 2000).

Partially resulting from these concerns, a number of excellent practical guides on "how to do NGO work" have been written (alongside a growing body of academic reflection on their work). See Fowler (1997) for a comprehensive example, including extensive additional reading lists.

2.5 Direct causes of success (or failure) in NGO work

NGOs themselves, commentators and academics have reflected on the immediate factors that contribute to the success (or failure) of NGO interventions.

A research project examining these questions in sixteen projects implemented in four countries in 1992 concluded: "Successful project interventions were found to be related to a number of different variables, none of which in isolation was sufficient to achieve project objectives. Three in particular stand out: genuine participation, strong and effective management [at the project level], and skilled and committed staff [at the project level]." (Robinson, 1992)

These findings are continually reinforced by more recent reviews. For example:

"… the key success factor that came across strongly was the existence of dedicated staff in the field, often working within inefficient institutions that hindered their work." (ALNAP, 2002)

"… there is a common understanding that participation [by primary stakeholders] is crucial to the success of development work at all levels of action. There is such a vast amount of writing on this topic that in my view there is little left to be said about the concept …" (Fowler, 1997)

Project failures often centre around inappropriate project design, due to an inadequate understanding of the local context (Smillie, 2000) and to pressures from donors (discussed further below). In addition, NGOs find it difficult to learn from their previous mistakes (Hailey, 2000; ALNAP, 2002).

For the sake of the argument, these factors could be summarised as follows: successful NGO interventions depend on front-line staff making high quality judgements and having the space to put them into practice.

Judgements have to be made about the nature of the issues that the NGO hopes to influence and about what the NGO intends to do about them. Among other things, they depend on an adequate understanding of the local context. When it comes to doing development, the only understanding that is adequate is a profound understanding. As Freire points out, this can only be achieved through dialogue with and vigorous participation by client communities. This is not always achieved in practice.

3 What is changing at the moment?

3.1 Review: where are we in the argument?

So far, this paper has briefly reviewed aspects of the existing literature which:

- discuss what development means and what NGOs aim to achieve;
- note the rapid growth of NGOs;
- conclude that NGOs perform to variable standards;
- find that successful NGO interventions depend on the judgements made by front-line staff (and in particular on participation by client communities).

This has by no means been a comprehensive review of all the literature available in the field. But I hope that it is a reasonable reflection of current analysis. All of these findings also resonate strongly with my own experiences of working in the field with NGOs.

As mentioned above, there is a large amount of active reflection and change in the sector at the moment. Before going on to consider system-wide constraints, it may be useful to review some current initiatives and debates, with a view to going on to consider whether they strike at the root of the problem of variable NGO performance.

3.2 Current debates and initiatives

For at least the last decade, NGOs and commentators have pursued a serious and wide-ranging discussion about how to improve the performance and accountability of NGOs.

Some substantial gains have been made; some ideas have come and gone; other initiatives are currently being piloted. A great deal of reflection has been undertaken. Some of the most significant initiatives are mentioned below. These are only a small sample of what appear to be major advances or initiatives. They do not reflect the breadth and depth of discussion.

However, an important conclusion from the previous section is that NGO performance continues to be variable *today*. While some positive gains have been made, some negative factors have grown stronger. Recent evaluations continue to show instances of the same mistakes being repeated. I will return to this point below.

Some recent advances and current initiatives in development practice include:

- A general shift to a “Rights Based Approach” to development, which recognises that development is about helping people claim diverse rights, rather than simple technology or resource transfer.
- The growth of Participatory Rural Appraisal and Participatory Learning and Action methodologies, as a practical way of discussing development issues with client communities.
- The recognition that NGOs have a duty to be accountable to many different stakeholders; and of the importance of monitoring performance and learning from experience.

- ActionAid's ground-breaking move to a completely new system for planning and learning from development experience (known as Alps). Save the Children UK has recently moved in a similar direction. Very importantly, one of their major institutional donors (the UK government's Department for International Development, DfID) has agreed to accept the outputs of these systems in place of other reporting procedures.
- Accountability has generated considerable enthusiasm (and support) for a new reporting standard for NGO work called Access, currently being developed.

Some recent advances and current initiatives in humanitarian practice include:

- In 1994, eight major humanitarian organisations published a Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief. It sets out ten principles to guide the behaviour of humanitarian actors.
- The Sphere project is coming to the end of a seven year project to develop a humanitarian charter and a set of minimum standards in disaster response. They are widely recognised as embodying good practice by some but not all NGOs.
- The Quality Project which aims to improve the quality of humanitarian action by developing new tools for 'diagnosis, monitoring and evaluation', such as the 'Quality Compas'.
- The Humanitarian Accountability Partnership – International strives 'to make humanitarian accountable to its intended beneficiaries'. It grew out of a failed attempt to establish a humanitarian ombudsman.
- Medair has implemented ISO 9001 as an externally verified quality standard.
- The Good Donorship Initiative, which brought together major humanitarian donors to identify what constitutes 'good donorship' and to commit to a series of principles and good practice measures.

These advances in the humanitarian sector add up to what may be the most systematic foundations for defining NGO performance and enabling accountability in any sector of international NGO work today. They have without doubt contributed to improving the performance of NGOs. But, they have not revolutionised performance (as discussed above). While Sphere and the Red Cross Code set standards, NGOs consistently find it difficult to meet them in practice. No mechanisms exist to enforce them.

4 Why is performance improving slowly (if at all)?

Despite all of these advances, the brief review of NGO performance above showed that NGOs continue to operate to variable standards, regularly falling short in their efforts to help other people. This leads to the critical question: why? Surprisingly, this question does not seem to have been systematically explored, although some individual issues have been analysed on their own.

Like other complex systems, favourable results can only be achieved when the factors encouraging positive change outweigh the factors discouraging positive change. For the sake of this argument, I have organised the factors discouraging positive change into four categories:

- Conceptual confusion,
- Funding pressures,
- Internal organisational factors,
- External context.

Factors in each category are related to aspects of the entire system that NGOs work in, including their various donors, the people they aim to help, regulatory frameworks and the way they go about their work themselves. The categories are closely inter-related, not exclusive.

This paper only presents an initial exploration of the factors that discourage positive change among NGOs, and it may well turn out that this categorisation is not the most appropriate. But it provides an initial framework which I hope is useful in making a start.

4.1 Conceptual confusion

4.1.1 Development or service delivery?

There is a great deal of confusion among donors, NGOs, the media and the public about what is development, what is service delivery and what is humanitarian response. What one organisation refers to as humanitarian work, another labels service delivery and a third development.

As described above, there are fundamental differences between these activities. The principles that guide their implementation cannot be reconciled. It is crucial that donors, managers and field-staff all share the same understanding of what they are trying to achieve. A great deal of current confusion in the debate (and within organisations) stems from mis-understandings at this level.

4.1.2 The problem of projects

It may be possible to deliver services through the framework of a tightly defined project with pre-determined activities, inputs, outputs and outcomes. It is not possible to deliver development assistance (as defined by Freire and Sen) this way. (See Chambers, 1997, Kaplan, 2000, and Wallace, 2000.)

Development is not about the transfer of resources; it is about helping people to understand the factors that make them poor or vulnerable and helping them to tackle them. So, as Kaplan says:

“Development cannot be brought: being driven from within, it is not the prerogative of an outsider. As development practitioners, we can assist the flow of the process, but nothing more.”

“Similarly, intervention specifications that are ‘predetermined’ and that do not respond to accurate and sensitive readings of the particular situation will warp and destroy the development process.”

The problems associated with over-specified projects are well documented, particularly in relation to what many practitioners regard as their most pernicious form: logical framework analysis.

Ebrahim (2003) provides an excellent analysis of the practical impact of logical framework analysis on two well established NGOs in India. He points out that "[Logical Framework Analysis] is a technocratic tool: it organises and reduces complex social and political realities into simplified and discrete components of a "project"."

This is clearly particularly useful for donors or senior managers, who share the responsibility to ensure that funds are used effectively and so want to see evidence of well thought-out plans before committing expenditure. They also have to weigh competing claims for their limited funds, and so need some way of comparing the results of different projects they are considering supporting. (See the section on 'Funding pressures' below.)

However, as Ebrahim continues, ".. by forcing its user to articulate is objectives within a positivist project management framework, [Logical Framework Analysis] actually strips those aims of political, contentious, process-based and ambiguous content. In other words, the logical framework achieves clarity in development planning by de-politicizing development interventions."

But as discussed above, "the 'bottom line of strengthening the poor is clearly political' (Lewis et al, 1988)" quoted in Fowler, which prompts him to describe development projects as "a case of cutting paper with a hammer".

This begs the question: where are the scissors? What would work better?

The debate is noticeably quiet on this point. There is some use of the concept of 'programmes', as a more loosely defined approach to thinking about development. But 'programmes' also have a tendency to attract tight specification, albeit spanning more money or a bigger geographical area.

In lieu of other conceptual units for thinking about how to do development, 'projects' continue to dominate the landscape of NGO action. This is the cause of a great deal of frustration and waste. It inevitably tends to have an influence on how practitioners think about development, over-shadowing the idea of empowerment with the idea of what can be achieved as set out in the project plan.

4.1.3 How NGOs think about achieving their missions

NGOs tend to have difficulty explaining in practical terms how they expect to work towards their missions or visions.

Two examples illustrate this. Firstly, using EveryChild as one example among many, I will comment on NGOs' tendency to have ambitious missions but to lack a clear theory as to how to achieve them. Secondly, a brief review of the recent NGO response in Southern Africa demonstrates the practical impact of the problem.

EveryChild is a mid-sized UK NGO, working in 18 countries around the world. In 2002, it had an annual income of £8m. Its mission statement reads[11]:

"EveryChild's mission is to empower families, communities and their governments to provide the best environment for children to thrive and develop. Together, we advocate for children's rights in line with the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), particularly in health, education and social welfare."

This is a big mission. To achieve it will require substantial change at all levels of society. Of course, EveryChild does not suggest that it can or will achieve this mission on its own. So, it will have to use its limited resources to make a contribution to broader social changes which it believes provide the best chance of these changes coming about.

Their strategy paper elaborates a series of 'development goals' (for example, improving the the quality and availability of and access to basic education for the most marginalised and vulnerable children), 'approaches' (such as striving to ensure that work is sustainable) and 'cross-cutting themes' (like responding to HIV/AIDS issues in all of their work).

These frameworks provide a general description of the particular welfare areas that EveryChild aims to work in and of some aspects of their approach to project implementation. Particular project activities are described in EveryChild's annual report. But there is no explanation of how EveryChild expects that its work contributes to broader social changes that it believes may lead to the fulfillment of its mission.

It is unfair to single out EveryChild like this. Most NGOs lack an articulated theory of social change. It is a critical omission. If NGOs are serious about achieving their important and ambitious missions, then they have to know (or at least have a theory about) what practical steps they can take to contribute to achieving them. Otherwise, there is the real risk that they are responding to symptoms, not treating the causes.

To take the example of intervention in another complex system, this is analogous to a doctor prescribing pain killers for heart disease. Pain relief is an important function that alleviates suffering. But it does not contribute to a long term cure. The doctor cannot claim to be "creating long term or sustainable solutions" unless he can explain the mechanism by which his particular treatments contribute to the patient's ultimate recovery – and this may include some highly counter-intuitive activities, like cutting open the patient's chest.

In sum, if NGOs cannot explain how their actions contribute to realising their missions, then they (and their supporters) cannot be sure that they do in fact contribute to their missions. As the next example shows, this risks creating real confusion about how NGOs help people in practice. It can also reduce missions to the status of broadly defined aspirations which describe common features of an organisation's diverse activities (rather than an unambiguous statement of strategic focus).

In 2002, the UN and international NGOs launched a major response to what was seen to be the serious risk of acute food shortages in seven countries in Southern Africa. Twelve of the largest NGOs spent approximately £260million on this response in a one year period (Cosgrave et al, 2004).

In late 2002, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) carried out an extensive study of the international response, with a particular focus on conceptual issues (Darcy et al, 2003). While external publicity focused on a simple message of crisis, drought and impending starvation, internally agencies recognised that the situation was complex. However, the study found considerable confusion among agencies as to the nature of the crisis they were facing and how they should approach their response.

“The situation in Malawi and Zimbabwe was variously described to the research team as: a humanitarian crisis; an HIV/AIDS crisis; a long-term crisis; a livelihood crisis; a developmental crisis; a governance crisis; a manufactured crisis; and a food security crisis.”

Agencies seemed to lack a conceptual model that could link the symptoms of hunger and poverty to long term causal factors (such as lack of investment in rural communities, exploitative market conditions, limited life choices and political decisions which did not favour the poor).

The report concludes that “[there] is reason to think that the models on which much of the prevailing analysis of the Southern Africa crisis is based are inadequate either to explain, or predict.”

This conceptual confusion had very direct operational implications. Agencies struggled to make decisions about how to assess the situation and what programmes they should launch in response. The report continues:

“Decisions to launch assessments [of need] were not always based on clear or consistent criteria, and objectives of assessments were not solely designed to establish a picture of need…. For some organisations, the decision to assess at all was strikingly haphazard.”

“Decisions to respond to the situation in Southern Africa were shaped by a number of external considerations in addition to formal assessments of need. The study concludes that the decision-making process in agencies and donors alike lacks transparency. The criteria for intervention are unclear – neither articulated explicitly in policy, nor guided by specific triggers or indicators.”

Fowler succinctly summarises the issue discussed in this lengthy section, when he says: “Inconsistency between an NGDO’s vision of the world, what it says it wants to be and what it does is a common source of ineffectiveness.” (Fowler, 1997).

4.2 Funding pressures

4.2.1 Funding from institutions

A large amount of money that NGOs spend is given to them by institutions for specific interventions. Donor institutions include government and UN agencies, the European Commission, charitable trusts and other NGOs.

Many of these donors are large bureaucracies handling substantial budgets. For instance, the European Commission administers the European Development Fund, which amounts to over €13.5 billion for the period 2000-2005. In 2003, the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) signed 824 funding contracts and disbursed over €600million[12].

Handling these quantities of money is no mean feat. Donor institutions have a responsibility to ensure that funds are used reasonably effectively and efficiently. They have to process and approve many applications, as well as often having to manage relationships with *their* donors (EC member states, in the EC's case). In addition, all funds that come through government or inter-government organisations are liable to political influence.

Donors have a tendency to make these complex problems manageable by setting up bureaucratic processes based on the unit of 'the project'. They are keen to understand what the results of the work they are funding are likely to be and to compare different applications for funding. So, there is a tendency to require proposals for tightly-specified projects – often using logical framework analysis to set pre-determined targets. They also require regular progress reports, describing progress compared to targets.

Unfortunately, this is not an appropriate way to describe 'doing development'. In particular, it imposes a false certainty on 'local, complex, diverse, dynamic and unpredictable' local realities and on predicting the effects that certain inputs will have on them.

Among the UK NGO community, there was widespread gloom following DfID's decision in the late 1990s to require logical frameworks for all applications to one of their main funding streams for NGO work[13]. (Wallace, 2003)

Research consistently shows that donors' requirements for proposals and reports exert a major influence on how NGOs go about their work (Hudock, 1995).

"… the information requirements of funders impact NGOs not only by placing demands on their attention but also by promoting positivist and easily quantifiable valuations of success and failure. This is not an intended effect, but a systematic one that emerges from reporting and budgeting protocols that favour "product" data over "process" data." (Ebrahim, 2003)

In particular, 'downward accountability' to the people that NGOs aim to help is often squeezed: there is only so much 'accountability' that any organisation can handle and only so many mechanisms that can be set up to provide it.

Ebrahim continues, noting that "… the monitoring systems linked to the [logical framework analysis] are not well adapted to [NGO staff's] implementation needs, which require simpler and continuous feedback systems." (Ebrahim, 2003)

The attempt to force ‘development’ into project-sized chunks has a number of other implications.

NGOs have to compete for limited funds, which “leads to the mushrooming of claims that NGOs make about what they can do with relatively small amounts of money.” (Wallace, 2003). Waal sees the parallel with Gresham’s law[14]: bad project proposals drive out good ones. Donors are naturally liable to prefer to fund proposals that claim that they can achieve lasting results quickly, rather than uncertain results slowly. It is clearly crazy for NGOs to propose and for donors to consider that lasting social change could be achieved in a few months – but they regularly do.

Tight timescales can add to the pressures. In 2001, the Disasters Emergency Committee raised £19m from the British public on behalf of twelve NGOs, to be spent in assisting the victims of a massive earthquake in Gujarat, India. Working under an initial nine month timeframe, agencies hurried to spend funds as quickly as possible, not spending enough time on planning, participation or partnerships. Several agencies spent large amounts of funds on rehabilitation and service-delivery activities, and as a result buildt houses which were inappropriate for local peoples’ ways of life (see Vaux et al, 2001).

There is evidence that the quality of progress reports that donors receive may in fact routinely be rather low:

“The reports that agencies submitted to the DEC did not provide a transparent account of their activities. It was frequently difficult to understand how each agency had spent DEC funds and what they had achieved as a result.” (Cosgrave et al, 2003)

“The research findings suggest that in fact reports get rewritten as they rise through the aid chain; NGOs in UK want to ensure that reporting meets their understanding of donor requirements. The raw issues of field level experience often disappear within these reporting structures, and there is a focus on successes and achievements.” (Wallace, 2003)

One of the factors which encourages low quality accountability, is that “… NGOs resist funder attempts to structure their behaviour … [This] combination of funder demands for information and NGO resistance to external interference serve to further entrench existing information systems.” (Ebrahim, 2003)

All in all, the situation adds up to “… a lack of openness and trust … between the funded and the funders at each level.” (Wallace, 2003). This is a critical point, which I will discuss further below. Trust is central to the whole process of development.

However, as Ebrahim argues, NGOs and donors depend on each other. NGOs have an important role to play in meeting donors’ organisational needs:

“NGOs … play an important role in *legitimizing* the activities of bilateral funders by giving them greater visibility and a reputation for supporting innovative and grassroots activities.” (Ebrahim, 2003)

A series of structural issues reinforce donors' power, but NGOs are not entirely powerless. Some can negotiate more than others. If they had a realistic, alternative model to project funding then there is every reason to believe that donors would consider it.

A few models are starting to emerge, although they are scarce. One particularly important precedent in the UK is that DfID funds a small number of NGOs through "Programme Partnership Agreements", which are not tied to tightly specified projects. DfID has agreed to accept progress reports in formats defined by some of the recipient NGOs[15], not using logical framework analysis. This suggests a way of tackling some entrenched systematic problems, which I will return to below.

Some donors also recognise these limitations. For example, the Good Donorship Initiative[16] has the potential to contribute to progressive change on a major scale. Individual donors like International Development Exchange and Zurich Financial Services Community Trust are taking steps in the same direction[17]. (King, 2003; Hobson 2003)

But the donor community is as diverse and as independent as NGOs. There is little evidence of a systematic change of practice across it.

One final and very important point to make in this section is that international NGOs face the same problems as donors, and tend to come up with the same compromised solutions. They have the same bureaucratic problem of how to parcel up their money and spend it so as to achieve 'development' – whether they are deciding to fund their own projects or other organisations.

This reinforces the impression that there is not much alternative to 'projects' on the table at the moment. I will develop this point in the section below.

4.2.2 Funding from the public

If institutional funding tends to lead to tightly-specified projects and attendant problems of low quality upward accountability, undermining local management and corroding trust between funders, then funding from individual members of the public brings other pressures.

NGOs receive significant amounts of funding through modest sized donations direct from individuals. This may be in response to a particular appeal (typically for a humanitarian response) or completely unrestricted funds, that NGOs can use however they choose.

For example, in 2004 Oxfam GB received £76million in direct donations from individuals and £40m in grants from institutions. They spent £19m on fundraising costs, to generate this income. Over 550,000 individuals (mostly members of the British public) make a regular donation of a few pounds to Oxfam GB every month[18].

Oxfam is the biggest of all the UK NGOs and no other UK NGO has this many individual supporters. But it demonstrates the size of the prize available from raising funds from individuals: financial security.

NGOs compete for donations from individuals. But they do not submit project proposals; they compete on brand. NGOs invest in sophisticated marketing operations to encourage people to give them money. They use the entire gamut of modern mass communications techniques, including hiring specialist agencies, piloting marketing concepts through different media, diligent market segmentation, and commercial comparisons of the efficacy of different fundraising 'products' – or vehicles for giving.

This is not a bad thing. It provides a mechanism for concerned people to give and brings in substantial funds for NGO work. But it creates a relentless pressure within NGOs to simplify and sensationalize their media messages, so as to win more attention and more money.

For example, twelve major NGOs combined their fundraising appeal for the Southern Africa response, mentioned above. One of their combined press releases, published on July 25th 2002, read:

"14.5 million people risk starvation in Southern Africa as the region's food aid crisis deepens. … We can stop this crisis if we act now and we have a good opportunity to do so …"[19]

This emotionally charged mis-presentation of the crisis and 'their' ability to stop it was accompanied by a picture of an emaciated African child. In this case, the NGOs chose to lean towards the media pressures of fundraising rather than a balanced description of local realities.

More dangerously, brand-driven fundraising from individuals creates a rod for NGOs' backs: having set up expectations among their donors, they are bound by them – otherwise they risk losing their support. So emotive public messages reinforce the view that millions of Africans are only kept alive by periodic bouts of Western generosity: this is a long way from the effective theory of social change that NGOs need to achieve their missions.

Finally, brand requires an unequivocal assertion of what NGOs can achieve which is diametrically opposed to the humility needed for doing development[20].

This approach to fundraising also means that NGOs are careful to protect their brand: the goose that lays the golden eggs. A great deal of attention is paid to maintaining their image as effective and efficient development and humanitarian actors. So for instance, news about projects that do not achieve their stated objectives is buried. This is a powerful incentive against full transparency. A number of commentators note that the World Bank is substantially more open about its failures than most NGOs, regularly publishing critical evaluations of its work.

The One World Trust recently analysed the accountability of a selection of major NGOs, companies and international organisations. Its report found

"… international NGOs come close to the bottom in the access to information dimension. … [They] often fail to provide information that is likely to be of significant use to stakeholders, for example, how they are spending their money and how well they have been achieving their aims. … The provision of evaluation material about the projects and programmes of international NGOs is also inconsistent.” (Global Accountability Project, 2003)

In sum, all efforts to win funds from donors tend to encourage NGOs to present development as something that can be achieved with more certainty and more quickly and with the necessary intervention of outsiders than it can. It provides a strong incentive to limit the release of any bad news, and so acts to reduce transparency and accountability. Sometimes NGOs resist these pressures; sometimes they do not.

4.3 Internal organisational factors

4.3.1 Two examples of good practice

NGOs bring together resources and people to contribute to development. I noted above that successful interventions depend on front-line staff making high quality judgements and having the space to put them into practice. So, this should be a priority for NGOs.

For a change, this section starts with two case studies showing how this has been achieved in practice: Craig Johnson’s description of Wildlife Fund Thailand’s successful work with a village on the island of Phuket and a brief review of ActionAid’s new organisational system, Alps.

Protecting a fishery in *Baan Ao Lom*[21] village, Phuket

Johnson (2001) describes how Wildlife Fund Thailand [WFT] supported villagers to establish an institutional arrangement in which they cooperated to protect their local fishery by excluding vessels which used banned technologies from a conversation zone. “Enforcement of the conservation zone was exclusively dependent upon collective action from within the village community.”

“Recognising the risks of engaging in armed confrontation, villagers pursued a [second] strategy of communicating their position to the offending parties. This would generally entail villagers from *Baan Ao Lom* meeting push netters at sea or in their home villages, to emphasise the point that they were ready and willing to defend the bay. Intimidation and communication it seems, produced credible deterrents. Push net operators from surrounding villages reported they were aware of and respected the conservation zone in *Ao Lom*.” This successfully protected the villagers’ coastal fishing, an important contributor to local livelihoods.

“WFT appears to have been involved throughout the process [of establishing and maintaining the exclusion zone]. According to villagers, WFT’s impact on village attitudes and activities was profound. First, it encouraged villagers that protecting the fishery was a worthwhile pursuit. Second, it connected villagers with a wider circle of allies with whom they could mount a more effective political lobby. Third, it compensated the expenses of villagers who traveled to rallies and meetings in support of small-scale fishermen in and around Phuket. Finally, it encouraged villagers to escalate their political demands [and negotiate successfully with local political authorities].”

Johnson continues to review the factors which led to the success of the project. The first he notes is that villagers were starting to be involved in collective political activity before WFT’s. In addition, “WFT’s access and influence in *Baan Ao Lom* was highly contingent upon an ability to recognise and meet the needs of important actors within the village community. In other words, WFT’s influence in the village was somewhat less than theorists of NGO-managed development would lead us to believe.”

Secondly, he discusses the question from the point of view of WFT’s field staff, who “offered three explanations for their relatively successful experience in *Baan Ao Lom*. First, they argued that they were more ‘in tune’ with the needs and aspirations of the local people. This they felt was because they spent more time in the community and were willing to listen to what villagers had to say. Second, they asserted that their vision of development differed substantially from the conventional development programs that emanated from Bangkok. Specifically, they supported a range of activities (the conservation scheme, the community bank, resistance to the shrimp farms) designed to improve political and economic ability within the village. A final (and crucial) factor, was that four out of the five project staff were Muslims from Phuket. As such they shared an important religious and cultural affiliation with villagers, which improved both their relations and their standing in the village community.”

Thirdly, Johnson comments on relationships between WFT, its donors (WWF and Novib) and *Baan Ao Lom’s* residents: “… WWF and Novib had instituted funding procedures that required WFT to consult with villagers and donor representatives on a regular basis. Second, villagers knew about this. Finally, donor priorities were defined with sufficient ambiguity to allow considerable room for manoeuvre. All of these factors, it is argued, created strong conditions for accountability [to villagers] and influence [by villagers].”

How much did WFT’s intervention cost? “… the Phuket office of WFT was a relatively small operation. Project funding provided enough money to support four full-time staff, a rental truck and a small budget for travel and discretionary spending.” Development is not only about transferring resources.

Johnson closes his paper with a note of caution on the limits of NGO influence: “To suggest that NGOs can, or should, try to influence … enduring patterns of power, may overstate the power they have at their disposal and understate the resilience of local (and potentially unequal) institutions.”

In concrete terms, what WFT brought to the villagers (and particularly the village elite) was committed field staff who understood the local context, had time to talk to villagers, helped to explore their situation and worked with them to identify an appropriate way of defending their interests. Freire would be proud.

ActionAid’s Accountability Learning & Planning System (Alps)

It is relatively easy to understand how a Freirien approach can be implemented in one project at the community level. But it is altogether harder to work out how to put it into practice on a larger scale. ActionAid's recent experience provides part of the answer to this problem: how does one organisation go about working sensitively and effectively in many different locations at the same time?

In 2000, after over a decade of almost continuous organisational change (and growth), ActionAid introduced a new system that they called their Accountability Learning and Planning System (Alps). It replaced other systems which the organisation had used to plan its operational objectives, allocated resources and monitor progress (and expenditure) and which were widely seen as bureaucratic, time-consuming and often obstructive.

Rather than being a detailed manual which sets out procedures for assessment, project definition, budgeting, reporting and so on, Alps is primarily a set of principles. Secondly, it provides a framework which describes how the organisation expects staff to put those principles into practice (ActionAid, 2000).

The first principle is: Alps strengthens ActionAid's main accountability, which is to the poor and marginalised women, men, boys and girls and our partners with whom we, and they, work. Seven more follow, before the statement: "Procedures are important but so is discretion, sensibly exercised and properly and openly communicated."

This is elaborated in the next section, which describes attitudes and behaviours. The first is: "Behaving in a way that is not domineering or patronising but that genuinely shares power with others rather than keeps it for oneself." It emphasises ActionAid's primary accountability is to the people it aims to help.

Finally, Alps sets out a very light framework of appraisals, strategies, reviews and reports. For example, the procedures for developing a country strategy are:

Purpose: to set out clear objectives and strategies that are relevant to the country in realising ActionAid's global and regional strategies.

Process: country directors will lead the process in consultation with country staff, Alliance and other funding partners, and all other relevant stakeholders. Linkages must be ensured to the ActionAid, regional and relevant functional strategies. Where possible, a trustee will be involved in the process.

Time to complete:	about three months.
Length:	about 20 pages.
Frequency:	at least once every five years.
Approval:	regional director.

These are supported by a page setting out the kinds of questions that ActionAid expects a Country Strategy to cover.

However, within this framework there is one other requirement, as important as it is innovative for a major NGO: Annual Participatory Review and Reflections.

ActionAid asks that every unit carries out a participatory review and reflection of their work with stakeholder groups. The aim is to learn together from their experience and help poor people take control of, and lead, their development. No reports are required from the process.

Alps puts participation and reflection on action at the heart of ActionAid's organisational systems. It creates the space that staff need to put Freire's principles into practice. One of the ways it does this is by explicitly cutting away bureaucracy that aims to serve the needs of senior managers and trustees rather than field staff. It is based on trust, built around shared values.

It is important to understand Alps within the specific context of ActionAid's recent development. Some of its key components include:

- The shift in 1999 to a clearly articulated and inspiring new rights-based strategy, which "refocused the organisation's work from delivering services to addressing the fundamental causes of social injustice and poverty."
- A financial model based on child-sponsorship which provides stable funding for specific communities for 5 – 10 years, but which is not tied to any specific project activities.
- A continuing and seriously implemented process of decentralisation.
- An overall internal audit team which employs over twice as many audit staff as any other UK International NGO (most based at the national level rather than centrally).

ActionAid's staff are proud of Alps and see it as central to their success. A recent global review found that it is having an enormous (and positive) effect in defining how staff think about their work and their relationship with ActionAid[22].

Some other NGOs are following a similar path. For instance, Save the Children UK started implementing their "Global Impact Monitoring" process in 2001. This also provides a framework for monitoring impact by creating space for critical reflections on performance by multiple stakeholders. It explicitly relies on the judgements of local managers (Starling, 2004).

4.3.2 NGO operations are complicated

However, ActionAid's on-going experience of implementing Alps has not all been plain sailing. It illustrates some important points about the nature of the management relationship between an NGO's head office and its field staff[23].

First of all, it is important to recognise that NGOs face a very difficult management job. A whole series of factors make managers' lives complicated, including:

- Cross cultural teams (who may not always even speak the same language);
- Distance management (sometimes in places where infrastructure and communications are poor);
- The overwhelming significance of complex local context and external factors (including politics, other development actors etc);
- Different activities covering different technical areas;
- Multiple stakeholders operating in a web of relationships and making competing demands on the organisation (including client communities,

donors, partner organisations, government departments, peer organisations, staff, board members and others).

This is just a small sample from a long list. None of them are trivial problems.

4.3.3 NGOs are not tightly managed entities

Partly as a result of these complexities, NGOs are not tightly managed. Senior field staff work with considerable latitude, using their judgement to work through these issues, often with limited oversight from their direct managers. It could not be different: more senior managers cannot possibly have the time to understand all the details of each different project location.

So, it is neither a surprise nor a criticism when Ahmad (2001) concludes: “A major finding of [my] research is that donors and Northern NGOs know very little about the reality in the South and their clients.”

NGOs rely on their senior field staff to make critical judgements every day. Senior field staff tend to take the same approach to implementing NGOs’ internal policies.

ActionAid’s experience of implementing Alps provides a good example. The new approach was developed and formally adopted in 2000. But implementation is another matter. Each field unit considered and re-interpreted the approach within the context of their priorities. As a result, it has still not been fully implemented today. David and Mancini (2004) comment that “the culture of some country programmes was (and, in some cases, remains) quite at odds with both ALPS and *Fighting poverty together*.”

This graphically shows how big NGOs cannot tell their field staff what to do. Lindenbeg and Bryant comment: “One of the most important barriers to change in NGOs is the strong individualistic and independent style of staff.” (Lindenberg and Bryant, 2001)

To take another example, a few years ago I was speaking to a central humanitarian co-ordinator in Oxfam. Part of his job was to approve project proposals. He commented that he read the paperwork, thought about the background and then picked up the phone to talk to someone he knew in the field and ask them what was really going on. He would make the decision based on his confidence in the person in the field.

As Fowler puts it, “[a] basic fallacy lies in the idea that the documents can ever describe the situation or its dynamics sufficiently to pass judgment without *a leap of faith*.” (Fowler, 1997; emphasis added). Senior managers rely on field staff. Field staff are the main source of information about any project (and its context). They operate with enormous latitude and are not tightly overseen[24]. To a great extent, senior managers have to trust their field staff. Lindenberg and Bryant provide some fascinating and candid interviews by senior NGO staff on precisely this point. (Lindenberg and Bryant, 2001)

This can become a problem when it is overlooked and when it is assumed that senior staff are (or should be) involved in the details of programme implementation.

4.3.4 Governance structures

In the UK and many other countries, most NGOs are legally structured as charities. That means that they are governed by boards of voluntary trustees (who, by law, cannot be paid for their service to the organisation).

The board is responsible for the use of all the NGO's resources, so as to meet its primary objectives as set out in the NGO's founding document. These are normally rather general, along the lines of "the relief of poverty and suffering". Meeting a few times a year, they exercise their responsibility by recruiting a chief executive to run the NGO, setting (or approving) policies and strategy, and overseeing performance.

If funds are mis-used, then board members can be sued personally (if they can be proved to have been negligent). While this very rarely happens, it provides a strong incentive for board members to limit risks.

While organisations can set up any arrangement they want for the election of trustees, new board members are generally selected by the existing board. It is always hard to find good people, with appropriate experience and enough time to join a board. As a result, compromises are made. Particularly in large NGOs, board members tend to lack recent field experience. It is even more rare that they are drawn from the communities that NGOs' strive to help.

The conclusion of research into NGOs in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda also applies to the UK: "The effectiveness of Boards differs from very active ones to those that hardly perform any functions and are mostly used as a rubber stamp for the management." (Centre for African Studies, 2001)

This structure has two important implications: boards tend to be rather distant from field operations; boards can tend to exert a centralising influence.

Trustees rely on their senior managers for information about an NGO's performance. This creates an unavoidable conflict of interest: managers are expected to report both good and bad performance to the people holding them to account. Writing as an NGO chief executive myself, senior staff would not be human if bad news was not sometimes reported in softened terms. Trustees generally lack the time to understand an NGO's operations in more detail and they may not always have much field experience of their own. They also may be surrounded by a sea of positive publicity, churned out by NGOs to support fundraising efforts.[25]

Unavoidably, boards are a central authority and have central responsibility. This has led them, in some cases, to try to ensure that operations are controlled down through the management chain – which is directly opposed to the conditions necessary for good development practice, as outlined above.

For example, in 1992, Billis and MacKeith reported on research on large UK NGOs. They found that "[typically], senior managers perceived themselves to be working within a hierarchy in which authority had been delegated to them by the governing body … [Subordinate] staff, on the other hand, felt the organisation should be organised in a democratic manner, and that they should be full and equal participants in decisions affecting their work … that agencies should practise what they preached." (Billis and MacKeith, 1992).

They interviewed "directors, senior managers, chairs and other governing body members in ten of Britain's largest development NGOs", and reported that "Interviewees in seven out of ten agencies mentioned governance as an area in which their organisation needed to re-evaluate and make changes. Overwhelmingly, the issues that seemed most pressing was the question of the skills and expertise of governing body members to fulfil the tasks required of them."

Good development practice requires those with power to give it up, and to be led by those without it[26]. Centralised boards do not encourage this[27]. It is hard to conclude that the model of a charitable board of trustees is the most appropriate for governing a large NGO.

4.3.5 Growth

As if things were not hard enough already, many NGOs have been growing like Jack's beanstalk. Not only are they tackling difficult management problems today, but like many organisations, they have frequently found that their systems have been outstripped by the size of the organisation tomorrow.

As mentioned above, growth rates have been rapid. NGOs have found themselves running complex operations in many different countries. Systems are required for all operations (such as defining projects, handling the accounts, recruiting staff). Generally, organisations have struggled to put these systems in place after growth, not before. After all, NGOs raise funds to help people, rather than invest in their own organisation. At the same time, over the past three decades, the dominant approach to doing development has changed. Lindenberg and Bryant provide an excellent insight into how these issues have played out in six major families of international relief and development NGOs (Lindenberg and Bryant, 2001).

In many cases, this has led to continual processes of organisational change within NGOs. Trustees and senior managers have had their attention taken up on these issues, often concentrating on one system at a time rather than the entire organisation.

Systems have 'often [been] borrowed uncritically from the corporate sector' (Edwards, Hulme and Wallace, 2000). This has brought much needed discipline in some areas. But, without a clearly articulated strategy or sense of methodology, these systems have at times ridden rough-shod over the process of development. They have tried to standardise, at the cost of the ability to respond to realities which are local, complex, diverse, dynamic and unpredictable.

In 1992, Billis and MacKeith found "Of the issues and challenges facing NGOs in the study reported earlier, at least four have one important aspect in common – they can be traced back to the rapid growth these NGOs have recently experienced." Growth continued for most NGOs over the last ten years.

ActionAid has presented a candid account of the difficulties that these changes created (Scott-Villiers, 2002).

“Between 1990 and 1998 ActionAid’s budget more than doubled, from £20 million to £50 million, as the organisation expanded to new countries, new activities and took on more staff. It became increasingly unworkable for Trustees to absorb all the information and make decisions on small matters at local level. In 1995, moves were made towards decentralisation … In some cases, decentralisation allowed country directors to put their own ambitions before the organisation and in others they moved so far ahead conceptually that they left their staff behind.”

“Meanwhile the reporting and other procedures remained essentially the same, so staff found themselves spending time “*satisfying bureaucratic demands for reports with irrelevant information, while carrying out programme work based on the needs and situations on the ground”*. In general there was a tendency for much to be written by fieldworkers that was not used, many decisions to be made by management that were avoided in the field and much energy expended which might have been better spent.”

One of the results of this bureaucratic approach was to corrode trust between field staff and central managers – and between client communities and field staff.

Just to re-assert the dangers of this, it is worth returning to Freire: “Any situation in which some individuals prevent others from engaging in the process of inquiry is one of violence. The means used are not important; to alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects.” (Freire, 1970)

Lack of trust prevents people engaging in the process of inquiry: no trust, no development.

4.3.6 Summary

This section describes some examples of good practice and then outlines some of the internal factors which have made it difficult for NGOs to achieve it.

The key point to emphasise is that when it comes to field-level development, the central organisation exists to support field staff. The organisation is not in itself important; practitioners are. Of course, the organisation has a critical role in helping (or sometimes hindering) practitioners; it can also carry out higher level analysis or action in relation to issues that have to tacked above the local level.

But many commentators (as well as managers) discuss NGOs as though they function as coherent, managed entities and as though the organisation itself is the most important vehicle for action. Too often NGOs fall in to the trap of valuing the organisation of itself and confusing the idea of “what’s good for the NGO” with “what’s good for development”. The issue of brand tends to make this worse.

As the Centre for African Studies’ analysis concludes: “Many NGOs have not created enabling environments within which programme staff can perform optimally…. Well-trained professionals can only perform fully when delegated adequate authority to run their programmes and when given an opportunity to fully participate in the decision-making process.” (Centre for African Studies, 2001)

It may be more useful, when considering field operations, to recognise the centrality of individual practitioners, working as a network of professionals under the umbrella of a specific organisation.

4.4 External context

I would like to touch on three issues in this section: the link between performance and funding, regulation, and the link between academia and practice.

4.4.1 The link between performance and funding

The link between performance and funding is often tenuous. Both institutional and individual donors depend on unverified information from NGOs to make their decisions to give. This information is always imperfect, as discussed above, and is liable to distortion.

NGOs that can sustain credibility with donors sustain their revenue: this is achieved through a combination of brand, personal relationships, historical reputation, size, and performance.

Individual donors have almost no external source of information to check whether an NGO's claims are correct. Institutional donors rarely do much better. As previously mentioned, project reports often show short-term success without discussing the wider impact of an intervention. In addition, institutional donors rely on NGOs for implementation so that they in turn can claim success (and meet their targets).

Funding is often equated to organisational success. In these terms, success can be divorced from the impact of an NGO's work on the ground. There is no over-riding financial incentive for NGOs to improve their performance[28].

4.4.2 Regulation

NGOs operate in a lightly regulated environment. Anyone who can raise funds can set up a new organisation and start operations. While allowing enormous freedom of action, this also means that there is little independent check on the NGO sector.

In the UK (and many other countries), most NGOs are registered charities and so are regulated by the UK Charity Commission. The Commission has to approve their governing documents (including charitable objectives). Then, charities have to submit short annual returns to the Commission and larger charities are required to have a financial audit. In addition, the Commission investigates suspected instances of mis-practice and provides advice to trustees.

This provides a basic check on the probity of an organisation's accounts. But it does not provide any regulation of the quality of their operations. The Charity Commission is not in a position to distinguish between NGO fieldwork that is excellent, indifferent or harmful[29].

NGOs are generally required to register with the state in every country they work in. But, regulation rarely extends to the quality of their work or the qualifications of their staff. NGOs resist this: as political agents, regulation may be liable to abuse, as a way of controlling their activities. This is a real risk. The Greenbelt movement in Kenya provides a good case study.

There are some moves towards self-regulation (for instance, through the Sphere standards or the Philippine Council for NGO Certification). These are still in the process of being put into action. It is unclear what level of impact they will have.

It is safe to conclude that at the moment there is very little regulatory incentive for NGOs to improve their performance.

4.4.3 The link between academia and practice

There is a rich literature of reflection on NGO practice. There are case-studies, evaluations, academic reviews, journals, conference papers, and all sorts of written papers. Some are widely known; some themes have, over a number of years, contributed to fundamental shifts in how NGOs think about and do their work. Others continue to re-invent old truths. Insights from twenty or thirty years ago remain valid, but are not put into practice.

Maybe this is the case for every field of academic study. But it is particularly striking that the link is so weak in NGO work. While some of the most recent, forward-thinking research suggests that NGOs should re-invent themselves as exemplars of the kind of just society they want to create[30], NGO managers continue to make mistakes that have been documented and analysed years ago. This could be seen as analogous to medical doctors not benefiting from the development of new cures for old diseases.

One mechanism that creates this link in other fields of endeavour is: professional qualifications. No mandatory qualifications are required (or enforced) for practice in the NGO sector, which is worrying because the work is so important and can – in the extreme case – involve life-saving decisions.

5 Possible ways forward

This paper noted that NGO performance continues to vary. I have tried to describe some of the system-wide factors and pressures which make it harder for NGOs to improve their performance. Based on this analysis, it is possible to set out some preliminary thoughts about how to release NGO staff from these constraints.

Before plunging in to this, it is important to note that the sector is young, having really only taken off in the 1970s. It has grown rapidly to prominence. It is still working through how it can best organise itself to meet minimum standards and achieve its goals.

NGO staff commit a great deal of time to serious reflection on these issues – more than any other group of concerned people. At the moment, the issues of accountability, quality, impact and legitimacy are particularly vigorously debated. I hope that the issues raised in this paper may have a contribution to make to these debates, suggesting some further avenues for exploration.

Perhaps the most important point is to recognise that there are systematic problems. Changing one component is no more likely to solve them than changing one wheel will fix a struggling car. Furthermore, system-wide change is likely to go against the short term interests of some actors (either within or between organisations). This is a particular problem due to the highly consensual nature of NGO debate. It may be necessary to find an entry-point which will lead to further change.

A second starting point is to study the successes and identify the key drivers of change, that overcame these system-wide issues.

ActionAid has documented its experience and concludes that the drive, vision and commitment of a small group of trustees and the organisation's most senior managers, including the Chief Executive were critical. One of the trustees was Robert Chambers. Not every NGO is so lucky to have such experienced advisors. This group set out to discard their old systems, take "a leap of faith" and create something entirely new. Their trail-blazing may make it easier for others to go through a similar process.

This leadership role fits with the analysis set out above. As the system currently stands, very few external factors can influence NGO performance for the better. Most of the drive for improvement has to come from within. It can be hard to take on the system-wide issues from this position.

Having said that, external factors are not irrelevant. The case study from Wildlife Fund Thailand shows that they can tip the balance. In this instance, good practice depended on two factors: the donors' insistence on participation, and the field-staff's commitment and ability to put this into practice. At the moment, not all donors are as far sighted. This clearly suggests one entry point in trying to change the balance of factors in the system. Donors exert leverage on NGOs; their requirements encourage or inhibit good practice. Unfortunately at the moment a substantial proportion (probably the majority) of donors inhibit good practice.

The rest of this section outlines some areas that may be worth further exploration.

5.1 Greater conceptual clarity

The confusion between development, service delivery and humanitarian action muddies the water. Service-delivery projects are regularly described as 'long-term solutions'. It would be useful to distinguish between these different types of intervention much more clearly, at the conceptual level. Inevitably, they overlap in practice. But if the differences are recognised in theory, then there would be a better chance of managing the tensions between them on the ground.

At least two other areas would benefit from much greater conceptual clarity. One is the missions that NGOs set themselves and the implied theories of social change that follow from them. Both internal and external actors may reasonably assume that an organisation knows how it aims to achieve or to contribute to its mission. By stating missions that are aspirational, NGOs risk setting false expectations among all actors about the limits of their impact.

This is a very important issue. NGOs must recognise the limits of what they can achieve (see Johnson, 2001); that there are no quick fixes to poverty and rein in their publicity and fundraising material accordingly. Otherwise inappropriate expectations are fueled and continue their corrosive effects.

These effects can be seen in many areas. The measurement of impact provides one good example. If NGOs are just one influence among many in people's lives (which are as complex as ours are) and if NGOs are rarely a major influence, then looking for evidence of NGO effectiveness in wide-ranging quality-of-life indicators is like trying to measure the impact of a water company in terms of increased life-expectancy, or the impact of a single school in terms of rising incomes. These measures are not on a scale that is appropriate to the modest nature of the intervention[31].

Secondly, there is a great deal of confusion around the issues of attribution and working with or through other organisations. Many NGOs (and donors) pursue their objectives by funding other organisations. However, a lot of work is still claimed as though it is carried out by the funder. Working with or through partner organisations not only calls for a clear explanation of the way of working, it also calls for very different skills than direct implementation. Evaluations show that these differences are not always recognised in the field.

This suggests an area that may be of interest to NGO board members: pushing senior managers on the conceptual clarity of their strategic planning, and on recognising the limits of what NGOs can achieve in practice[32].

5.2 Alternative units to 'projects'

The literature is loud in its condemnation of 'projects', but quiet in proposing alternatives. This is a critical area for further reflection. The sums of money that are handled by NGOs and their donors require bureaucratic systems. If projects choke sensitive implementation, then what other unit can organisations use to think about and fund development?

I would suggest two possible approaches. For service delivery, loosely specified projects work well: block budgets, general descriptions of the activities proposed, but all presented in such a way as to allow necessary flexibility at the local level.

When it comes to long term solutions to poverty, that means empowerment and an appropriate unit for empowerment may be the community (loosely defined as any group of people with shared interests). NGOs could (and often already do) define interventions in terms of communities. This would mean that instead of making a commitment to deliver a project, they could make a commitment to work with a community on their development for a minimum of three to five years. In practical terms, their intervention would probably include cycles of action and reflection. This may include projects, but any project would be a sub-unit of the on-going, community process of empowerment. It would not be an end in itself.

This would have a number of advantages. It would remove the focus on concrete, short-term outputs (and the temptation to define them away from the field) and recognise the centrality of the process.

It would make it clear that it is dangerous and probably unhelpful to have multiple uncoordinated development interventions in the same place at the same time. But it would also provide a framework for different external actors to contribute to one community's development, so long as they do co-ordinate their efforts. (In fact, it is unlikely that any one external agency has the entire range of skills or experience that may be useful to a community over a five to ten year period of their development.)

In short, using "communities" as the conceptual unit for thinking about doing development may help align bureaucratic systems with the reality of good development practice.

5.3 Focus on the quality of the process

When it comes to people-centred development, the process of empowerment is the recognised long term solution to poverty. The process is the cure: so any organisation aiming to deliver empowerment could usefully focus on the quality of the process, rather than on its results (such as indicators of improved well-being).

A lot of effort is currently being put into trying to measure results (for instance, including approaches to quantify the return on social investment, or to set ever more precise targets in advance of implementation and monitor actual impact in comparison to them). But impact is extremely difficult to pin down and to attribute to specific causal factors. It is also contingent on the circumstances of each particular intervention, precluding comparison and aggregation across projects.

It is important for the development practitioner on the ground to set and strive for specific results in dialogue with the people they aim to help. It is also important for them to reflect on their actions together. This is praxis. It is important to bear in mind that the process lasts much longer than one project-based intervention, including cycles of action and reflection.

However, it is not necessarily important or useful for any other staff or managers within an NGO (or donors) to know the details of what exactly specific interventions aim to achieve. What is important is that they have confidence that respectful dialogue (embodied in authentic participation), appropriate actions and self-critical reflection are taking place.

Of course, it may be useful to understand operational details for the purposes of learning and cross-fertilisation. But it is important to recognise the limitations of documenting experience for wider learning. Donors also have a legitimate right to an explanation of what has been achieved with their funds. But it is important to recognise the distorting influence of detailed demands for project-level results (as proved by the evidence discussed above: see Ebrahim, 2003; Hudock 1995; Wallace 2003). The functions of learning and upward accountability could usefully be separated from the function of monitoring.

The analysis set out above suggests that NGOs could most usefully focus their energies on releasing the energies of field staff and creating an environment which encourages them to make good judgements in the first place, and learn from their experience in the second. (Rather than have other people – such as evaluators – learn the most from their experience.)

There are two keys to creating respectful dialogue and self-critical reflection: firstly, the individual practitioner's values and secondly, organisational systems that provide the space and encourage the practice of this kind of intervention.

ActionAid's model is ground-breaking in this regard. It would almost certainly be constructive to share it further with other NGOs. One interesting idea that is currently being considered is to make finance staff responsible for financial transparency to client communities. This could provide a useful balance to field-staff, splitting some of the responsibilities for implementation and transparency. As money is power made concrete, this initiative would have a unique empowering effect, substantially strengthening client communities' knowledge and negotiating position when it comes to discussing programme implementation with field-staff[33].

It may be possible to take it further and *measure* the quality of the process. This is already partially being done – but curiously, normally only in relation to financial probity, through internal and external financial audits. It is perfectly feasible to imagine that NGOs could audit the quality of participatory processes, of learning from cycles of action and reflection. Sensitively done, this need not be overly intrusive. It would provide the only important quality control mechanism that NGOs need to do development and provide assurance that interventions really are meeting local people's needs[34].

One practical implication of focusing on the quality of the process is to define a key question for everyone concerned with the effectiveness of interventions (including donors, board members and senior managers): *what mechanisms does an NGO have to foster a strong connection between staff and the people they are trying to help, and how can staff* prove *that they have a strong connection with the people they are trying to help?*

This connection is the root of much of NGOs' credibility and the foundation of their effectiveness. It is one of the most important areas for trustees to probe.

This approach may not be so appropriate for service-delivery and humanitarian action, although it may still have some value to add to monitoring the quality and generating an indicator of the impact on this work.

Focusing on the quality of the intervention would not provide any direct guidance as to how resources should be allocated at the macro level. (Although it would provide indirect guidance: it may be appropriate to make more resources available to projects or organisational units that can demonstrate higher quality process.) This is a very difficult area for NGOs.

Recent studies have shown that NGOs tend to allocate resources between interventions on a pragmatic and reactive basis, rather than according to any more objective criteria (Darcy et al, 2003; Cosgrave et al, 2003). This is not surprising given the lack of theories of social change and the fact that comparing relative suffering is next to impossible. It may be possible to do more to compare relative development opportunities – but this is still extremely difficult.

This area seems to call for more research and reflection. If NGOs currently respond to opportunity rather than allocate resources so as to maximise impact, then there is a long way to go before resource allocation becomes more strategic: it may be that the best that NGOs can do is to allocate resources so as to support appropriate freedom of action for effective field staff.

5.4 Releasing the energies of practitioners

As described above, NGO work depends on committed field-staff taking high quality judgements and having the space to put them into practice. Individual field-workers' values are the most important factor in creating the conditions for appropriate interventions.

When working with client communities, good judgements depend on behaviours including: respectful dialogue, humility, sensitivity to other people's way of seeing the world, genuine transparency about decision-making; self-critical reflection, a sense of solidarity with the poor and marginalised. If an NGO can strengthen these values in their staff, then their staff will make good decisions about what can be done at the local level.

In fact, there is no other way to do development. Organisation wide systems (for instance in project management) that aim to set out rigid procedures rarely help practitioners. NGOs already rely on their field staff to decide how to interpret and implement their goals and procedures. The best way to make this work is to recognise it explicitly.

This requires trust on the part of the NGO: if staff are to give up power so as to be led by the people they aim to help, then NGOs have to give up power to their staff. It is impossible to ask staff to behave in one way while treating them in another.

One implication of this is to re-affirm the critical importance of recruiting the right staff in the first place, and ensuring that they have appropriate skills and values. Many fields handle these problems through professional self-regulating institutes, an approach which I have previously argued has a lot to offer the NGO sector (Jacobs, 2003).

Another implication of this is to recognise the leadership role of NGO managers: they have a responsibility to act as guardians of values and to inspire staff to follow them. This is challenging and very different to other aspects of management.

Decentralisation is everything. All other bureaucracy must be fought, to limit the distracting systems, forms and paperwork that prevent field-workers dedicating their energies to working with local people for their development. As the research outlined above in this paper proves, additional systems distort the development process, sometimes fatally. While some systems are necessary, their effects must be limited.

5.5 Change the internal context

At a practical level, it is clearly appropriate to invest in leadership at all levels within NGOs (including the board). This is the single most important factor that can trigger change across an organisation, perhaps most critically in the senior management team. It may be useful to provide further opportunities for learning and reflection among senior managers.

The board often does not invest a great deal in its own development. But this is a critical oversight, which can lead to the organisation being held back or confused by board members who do not have the same understanding or insight that staff do. A number of initiatives are currently underway to encourage discussion and learning among board members[35].

The analysis in this paper suggests a number of principles that board members may find it useful to consider, including:

- Is it clear what an NGO is trying to achieve and how it aims to achieve it in practical terms?
- Do plans, reports and publicity material recognise the limits of an NGOs' potential to contribute to solutions to poverty?
- How are staff encouraged to develop a strong connection with the people they are trying to help? (Are staff released from as much bureaucracy as possible?)
- How are staff encouraged to maintain a strong commitment to the values that embody good development practice?
- What evidence demonstrates the presence of a strong connection between staff and the people they aim to help?

Many other important areas are not discussed in this paper, such as overseeing fundraising, advocacy, and financial control.

It may also be interesting to explore ways for staff to hold leaders to account – after all, the leadership exists to empower and direct staff. Staff know better than most the impact of leadership decisions. Transparency at the board and senior management levels can help (although may not always be politically possible). It may be possible to build on models of internal democracy.

5.6 Change the external context

An obvious question to explore is: what could be done to change the external context so as to remove factors that inhibit good practice and create more factors that encourage good practice. Is it unlikely that regulation is the answer here; but donors may hold a key.

Some donors have a sophisticated understanding of what it means to do development; others do not. There is an enormous job of donor education to be undertaken. Everybody involved in NGO work has a shared responsibility in this.

Institutional donors have to take this on themselves, and recognise their influential position and the responsibilities that come with it. Asking for additional detail is never a minor request in the context of the power relationships between funder and funded.

NGOs have a responsibility to provide institutional donors with realistic descriptions of the issues that they face on the ground, and of the harmful implications of over-specified project planning and reporting. This may be painful and it may be unrealistic to expect NGOs to act in ways that may dent their funding. But honesty and transparency as well as system-wide improvement demand it.

It would be particularly useful to ditch the one widely used and highly inappropriate efficiency measure: the percentage of funds spent on ‘administration’ or ‘sent to the field’. This provides no indication whatsoever as to the quality of work carried out and simply serves to encourage creativity among NGOs’ financial staff. By continuing to re-use this measure, NGOs reinforce a fundamentally wrong understanding of what it means to do development among donors and the public.

But these ideas may not add up to much. As NGOs know, there is never much point in an outsider saying “I think you should do things differently”. So how about this:

The Global Accountability Project rated aspects of NGOs’ accountability. It led to some changes in practice (for instance, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) increased the amount of information available on its website) because the GAP report created a reputational risk to WWF’s brand[36].

The principle could be extended. I have argued that to achieve their goals, NGOs need: a credible theory of social change, conceptual clarity, a realistic way of verifying that their interventions contribute to social change, commitment to a set of values including appropriate modesty and transparency (as demonstrated in publicly available reports and material).

Would it be possible to rate NGOs on these factors based on publicly available material (and most definitely not on impact); to make this information available to the donating public and the media through an easy-to-use website; and to encourage individual donors to check it before giving? This could build on the work of Guidestar and other organisations involved in reviewing and supporting NGO practice in a new and complementary way.

Well, it is just an idea and there are all sorts of problems associated with it (not least its own funding). It is probably enough to lose me any clients I still have among NGOs by this point in the paper. But it could possibly change the external context so as to provide a factor which encourages more good practice.

6 Conclusion

This paper has tried to recognise the key constraints that hold back NGO staff and propose some ideas for responding to them. It has taken a system-wide view, identifying factors that exist in the relationships between as well as within organisations.

It can be concluded that the system of funders, implementing agencies and client communities has grown up in an unplanned way, that has created structural impediments to good development practice.

The fundamentals of good development practice have been over-shadowed by bureaucratic concerns; the pressure of raising funds; and a loss of conceptual clarity. With no regulation to rectify the situation, NGO performance continues to vary, swinging between the excellent and the indifferent, occasionally reaching the harmful.

Primarily within NGOs, an enormous amount of effort is currently expended on how to improve their performance. But this is unlikely to be fully effective without recognising the system-wide factors that inhibit good performance.

In presenting this analysis and making some suggestions for change within NGOs, donors and the sector at large, I hope to have contributed to the debate. The impetus for improving performance lies within NGOs themselves: they are undergoing their process of development, just like the people they are trying to help.

I hope that more reflection at the system-wide level may lead to more ideas and more action. Field-level practitioners may be in a uniquely well informed position to take the debate forwards.

Freire wrote that “This, then, is the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.” Helping people is difficult. But more can be done to work with people towards freedom.

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8 Notes

[1] There is an on-going debate about the precise definition of an NGO. Fowler (1997) provides an overview. This paper is concerned with non-profit organisations working in developing countries.

[2] For example, see ALNAP's Annual Review 2002: "Box 1.1 [Housing Provision Following Natural Disasters in Bangladesh] provides an example of how successive evaluations of similar operations in the same country, undertaken over a 13-year period by the same bilateral donor, identify similar problems." (ALNAP, 2002)

[3] UNDP's Human Development Index uses Sen's concepts to bring together a series of development indicators. There is a whole body of work which describes the flaws associated with trying to measure poverty or development on one scale (such as GDP). See for example, Chambers (1997).

[4] Kaplan uses the term 'client' to describe the people that development practitioners try to help. Fowler (1997) uses 'primary stakeholder'; others 'principle stakeholder', 'beneficiary' or 'community'. The confusion around terminology results from conceptual confusion; none of these words are perfect. But 'client' has the great advantage of making it clear in whose interests actions should be taken.

[5] This is often an important difference between field staff and people working away from the field: the first group cannot avoid the complexity of local people's lives; the second may find it easier to believe in simple solutions.

[6] Chambers (1997) provides some excellent examples of inappropriate service delivery – for instance, the millions invested in multi-purpose wheeled tool carriers, which in fact no farmers anywhere ever decided to use.

[7] Political neutrality is the foundation of humanitarian aid workers' access to people in need and personal safety when they are delivering assistance in conflict situations, as they often do.

[8] The scale and growth of the NGO sector is not known precisely. Some of the best available estimates are summarised in several of Edwards' and Edwards & Hulme's books.

[9] Source: BOND directory, charities' annual accounts and the UK Charity Commission. The 13 NGOs were (in order of size of income associated with international work in 2001): Oxfam GB, Save the Children UK, British Red Cross Society; ActionAid; International Planned Parenthood Foundation; Christian Aid; Care UK; Tearfund; Voluntary Service Overseas; UNICEF – UK; World Vision UK; CAFOD; PLAN – UK. Figures have been adjusted to include only income associated with international work.

[10] The most comprehensive review of humanitarian action undertaken was the Joint Evaluation of Emergency Assistance to Rwanda, in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide. It concluded: "Whilst many NGOs performed impressively, providing a high quality of care and services, a number performed in an unprofessional and irresponsible manner that resulted not only in duplication and wasted resources but may also have contributed to an unnecessary loss of life. The need for NGOs to improve their performance is now widely recognized." This evaluation led to massive reflection within the sector and to a number of substantial new initiatives.

[11] Source: http://www.everychild.org.uk, October 2004.

[12] Source: http://europa.eu.int/, October 2004. These funds were not by any means all spent through NGOs: but the problem of organising their disbursement remains.

[13] An irony of DfID's relationship with NGOs is that, unlike many of the NGOs that were criticising its approach to funding, DfID does have a theory of social change, based on Poverty Reduction Strategy Plans operating at the national level.

[14] "Bad currency drives out good."

[15] ActionAid and Save the Children UK. See David and Mancini, 2004 and Starling et al, 2004.

[16] See Harmer, Cotterell and Stoddard, *From Stockholm to Ottawa: A progress review of the Good Humanitarian Donorship Initiative*, Humanitarian Policy Group, Research Briefing #18, ODI, 2004 for more details (available from www.odi.org.uk/hpg).

[17] More examples of good practice (and their importance) are mentioned in the case study below, about intervention in a Thai village.

[18] Source: Oxfam's Annual Accounts for the year ending 30th April 2004, available from www.oxfam.org.uk, including the section on Legitimacy for a note of the number of individual donors. These income figures do not include an additional £66m gross income from Oxfam's trading operations.

[19] Source: Disasters Emergency Appeal press release, 25th July 2002.

[20] An extreme examples of this is the button on World Vision UK's home page (www.worldvision.org.uk) which says "click here to eradicate world poverty" (October 2004). I clicked it; poverty remains.

[21] This is a pseudonym for the name of the village.

[22] As a member of the review team, I had the privilege of seeing this at first hand in the field. It was strikingly different to the way that NGO field staff generally refer to their relationship with head office.

[23] See Wallace and Kaplan, 2003 for an insightful description of the practical difficulties of implementing organisational change in ActionAid Uganda.

[24] Chambers provides a crystal clear analysis of how short field visits by senior staff amount to 'development tourism', where what they see is controlled by the field team they visit.

[25] As the most powerful people within an NGO, they are the most prone to deception, as described by Chambers in the chapter "All Power Deceives" in "Whose Reality Counts?" (Chambers, 1997).

[26] Chambers provides a compelling analysis of this in "Whose Reality Counts?" (Chambers, 1997).

[27] Some large NGOs such as World Vision International and PLAN International have developed internationalised approaches to governance, where different national organisations are locally registered as independent legal entities. Of course, legal form is not the only factor determining relationships between national representative entities.

[28] There is no equivalent to the commercial mergers & acquisitions market, by which shareholders can decide to replace the governing boards and management of under-performing firms.

[29] The UK Charity Commission is also responsible for ensuring that charities' activities are not 'political'. This points to a central tension in the regulatory framework, as NGOs' work is inherently 'political', though not often in relation to the domestic UK environment. Oxfam GB has had to tread a careful line at times, when its work has been seen by the Charity Commission as too political. However, this issue seldom has as much impact for field operations as it does for advocacy work.

[30] See Edwards and Sen, 2002.

[31] This may be less true for major humanitarian interventions, when there may be a very limited range of other actors and service providers supporting displaced populations. However, this is the exception for NGO practice, not the rule.

[32] As discussed further below, self-critical reflection and modesty are fundamental values for good development practice.

[33] For example, some ActionAid country programmes have successfully trialled this approach. www.littlefish.com.au also provides a practical example of how this can be done in practice, using graphical presentation of financial information..

[34] Some NGOs are already experimenting with this: in particular ActionAid and Medair, which has implemented Quality Standard ISO9001, specifically to strengthen their learning.

[35] A number of current initiatives underway in many countries aim to tackle this issue, including providing training and guidance to board members and discussion of the concept of accrediting board members as a way of identifying whether individuals have the appropriate skills and experience.

[36] Source: lecture by Robert Napier, Chief Executive of WWF, Oxford, 2004.