



NGOs making a shift -- or not ?

By David J. Abbott

Non-governmental organisations [NGO] operating in Kenya [numbering more than 6,000] range from the extraordinary, those who have won the Nobel Peace Prize like the French *Medicins Sans Frontiers* [Doctors without borders] through to the ordinary, those that were formed last week by two well meaning individuals. Heart of the matter for NGOs is to answer the question, what results must it deliver to be successful? Somehow one has to take the [often vague] broad mission statement and translate that into more narrowly defined goals to both attract support from donors, and detailed enough to decide what resources to allocate where.

One has to ask what are the intended outcomes that the NGO wants to have by drawing up an ingenuous impact statement that likely revolves around, for instance, improving a target group's health or education status, or changing behaviour. Once one has defined: here is what we want to achieve, with who and when, then one can know what it will do. And, most importantly, what it will not do with the limited resources available. This gets emotionally tricky because what it won't do undoubtedly involves a needy and worthy cause. In all of this, it is not as though one can be bean counter hard headed analytical and clearly draw the lines – it is often that there are no clear cut “right answers”.

In business, the data for decision making is generally quite clear, for instance, sales and even profitability per product line, or by business unit. In NGO work there is often not the clear cut quantitative indicators so that one can clearly compare programmes and the work of peer NGOs. Yes, if you are running an emergency feeding programme for children in an MCH clinic in the dusty and hot settlements for the displaced in the desert on the edges of Khartoum, gains in infants' weight and height are easily measured, but most NGO work is tougher to evaluate.

What works and what doesn't work? Thankfully today just sitting in a café with a WiFi connection and a laptop one can Google and the world of information, including more academic research pops up on one's screen. Why reinvent the wheel? A wise NGO leadership looks for proof. What elements of programmes have shown effective results – creating real impact? Formal mid term and end of project evaluations are often costly. Thankfully, with a search engine a decision maker can access a wide body of research on just about any topic under the sun. [But funny how with all this universe of information one does not feel any smarter?]

Despite the reports and research, boards and staff of NGOs are often constantly pulled in all sorts of directions trying to serve many interests, including satisfying latest donor funding “flavour of the month” whim. Paradoxically, an NGO's success in an area may give the donor a reason not to fund them. An all over the map ‘scatter gun’ way of doing things is often how the NGO sector is organised and how many non profits operate.

In a company the market demands set the direction – in the NGO world leadership and consensus building is required to address the questioning of fundamental assumptions and tough questions described here. In the crowded back streets of the NGO community the issue is not so much where the organisation is now, but more whether is it moving in the direction of clearly defined results it can be accountable for. For Kenyan NGOs the writing is on the wall: be explicit and detailed about the results to be delivered, then design the approach and organisation around that.

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