

LOCAL RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

Building the capacity

Simon Collings

In recent issues of *Alliance*, the problem of how civil society organizations can expand their resource base, and ideally achieve financial sustainability, has been a recurrent theme. Resource Alliance has been working in this field for almost 25 years, running workshops, offering bespoke training programmes, providing information and support in most parts of the world, and, with a network of partners, training NGO personnel in resourcing issues. In that time, the needs have changed and they have grown. What have we learned from our experience and how are we adapting to these new needs?



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Resource Alliance started life as the International Fundraising Workshop, an annual gathering in the Netherlands of fundraisers from various parts of the world. The international programme of workshops was launched 12 years ago as a result of the interest stimulated by the Netherlands workshop, with a group of international NGOs providing seed funding.

In the early days, the workshops were about stimulating interest in fundraising in the South based on techniques developed in the North, and there are many examples of the successful adaptation of such fundraising methods in various parts of the world by both international and national non-profits. But there are also locally grown methods, and today the majority of presenters at the workshops are local and sessions are based on local case studies and experiences, some of which draw on indigenous traditions of community self-help and philanthropy.

Understanding resource mobilization

Our programme of education isn't all about technique though. Technique on its own doesn't mobilize resources. Understanding that resource mobilization has to be planned and sustained if it is to succeed is a key insight for many people. Even more important is the understanding that fundraising has to start from the mission of the organization, and from a programme plan and strategy. Many people start by looking for sources of money rather than working out what they want to do and how much they need to do it.

In research we recently carried out in East Africa with support from the Ford Foundation, we found NGOs

changing programme direction year by year, depending on what they had managed to get funding for. Such grant dependency can undermine an organization's ability to sustain focus and build expertise in a chosen programme area. While foreign grant funding will remain a vital source of support to civil society in many parts of the world, we believe grant-makers should be more active in helping grant recipients to secure local funding and reduce their overall reliance on grants. Some are doing this.

Local resources may be scarce, but most organizations can begin to generate at least part of their annual budget through membership, appeals to individuals, events, corporate partnerships, and/or earning income in some way. We believe there is much under-exploited potential.

A controversial issue

For some, this is still a controversial issue. Some southern NGOs are suspicious of the whole agenda of 'local resource mobilization' and its perceived links to declining aid from the rich North. Moreover, many find they are increasingly competing for local funding with international NGOs which have far greater resources and expertise at their disposal. Resource Alliance is sometimes accused of exacerbating these tensions by providing training to the staff of international NGOs. It is certainly true that international NGOs are often in a more powerful position when bidding for resources. At the same time, their investment in local resource mobilization can create opportunities for a wider pool of actors and provide models and examples that others can copy. The majority of delegates to our events come from national NGOs and our aim is to help a wide range of organizations, not just the fundraising elite. We use our events to foster debates between national and international NGOs around these issues.

A related issue here is that of fees. Because we have to cover our costs, most of our events involve some level of fee. We make no apologies for this. The only way that training can be provided to civil society organizations on a sustainable basis in the long run is through creating a market where organizations pay. Obviously the costs have to be affordable, and working with locally based trainers and partners in the organization of events helps in this respect. We also aim to make training as accessible as possible by trying to secure bursary funding from donors to support participation by organizations which otherwise could not pay. ▸