The rise of INGO families: perspectives, issues, and experiences

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To celebrate solidarity with women worldwide, Oxfam-Solidarite and numerous other organisations took the streets in Brussels on International Women's Day, 2012.

Amongst the current trends in development one stands out – the expansion of NGOs coming together to create large international organisations or 'families'. While many regard this as positive, others see it in a more negative light. It certainly raises a number of important issues – some reconcilable, others potentially intractable. There is a wide diversity of perspectives and approaches towards the development of large INGO families, with different families adopting different structures: some have highly centralised single management models with national offices answerable to an international HQ (such as Plan International and Save the Children International); some seem to share little more than a common origin or shared values (some church groups such as the ACT Alliance); others are constructed to help members compete with other families (such as Alliance 2015); whilst others are single organisations proactively seeking to expand globally (such as World Vision).

What is behind this growth of interlinked families of international NGOs? There seems to be several levels of debate:

1. At the operational level, many INGO families argue that it is more efficient to have a single office in a developing country rather than several small offices each run by a separate national affiliate. With improved coherence and scales of operation, they can cut back on duplication and local costs. This means that they can also work in more countries by dividing up regions between the constituent members of the family. Local NGOs though don't necessarily see it that way, and often bemoan the loss of diversity between donors and a reduction in the choice of donors. They also feel that by scaling up, INGOs are in direct competition with local groups as they poach their best staff, use their funds for their own programmes rather than fund the

activities of local partners, and dominate local and national advocacy debates. Whilst proponents argue that they can have a better impact through scale and coherence, there is a debate as to whether this helps or hinders longer term partnerships with local civil society.

2. There are also gains and losses at the meso level. The gains often seem to do with marketing and an ability to use recognisable brand names for fundraising. Shared values can be reinforced by close working relationships. Another is increased organisational efficiency. The losses are around diversity; we see families where the inevitable outcome will be a compromise between the more radical and the more conservative members of the family, as for example they struggle to find a mid-way between rights-based and welfare approaches. It is also not proven that there is a financial gain in efficiency overall, as more time may be absorbed in coordination, trying to establish joint procedures, and so on. Many staff in newer families relate stories of the high proportion of their time spent in such internal business meetings rather than being engaged in their core business.

3. At the macro level, it is clear that the big families have the resources to be major actors in many international debates: the size and breadth of programming often brings with it a seat at the table of global meetings on important developmental and environmental fora. They grab the headlines, comment on world affairs, and are present in any new humanitarian emergency. Whether it is the case that size maters in international advocacy has still to be seen, especially as many are now arguing that real change must first come from the national level. Most research on advocacy has concluded that being embedded in local societies and polities is what really assists change in local and national level government policies and programmes, not the size of the INGO.[1]

One group less certain about this trend are many bilateral donors. On the one hand they like the fact that they can contract a large INGO to deliver a development or humanitarian programme for them. On the other hand they are also concerned about their own branding and public image. Thus they have often had internal debates around whether or not they should permit INGOs to access their NGO funding within developing countries, or in some cases whether to continue to fund local branches of these families. Whereas previously, bilateral donor funding of their domestic NGOs would carry a strong national image or way of working, including through the use of volunteers and other staff from the donor country, this may no longer be the case when working with increasingly homogenous INGO families. Furthermore filtering bilateral donor contributions through such families makes it more difficult to attribute impact to particular funding streams. At a time when donors are under pressure to show how their funds contribute to national development goals, any constraint on being able to attribute positive change to their funding is politically challenging.

In a recent INTRAC seminar we also discussed whether the form and functions of INGO families were always well aligned to achieve the best impact for poor people. Thus we could see that a more centralised management structure might be the best for large-scale delivery of humanitarian or basic services, whereas an alliance of local diverse groups (across class, ethnic, and other interests) is more likely to impact local government policy than a campaign led by one or two large INGOs. There is an argument that a demand-led INGO based around shared values could bring together a global force for advocacy purposes, assuming that they are able to respond to local issues and not just espouse more general, globally agreed lobbying messages. It seems that some successful advocacy groups do not necessarily have large incomes, whereas some INGOs have tried to be both large-scale deliverers of humanitarian aid and other services, and international advocates.

Perhaps it is this uneasy balance which makes it difficult for them to be consistent in their advocacy work, unlike those who focus primarily on advocacy (such as Friends of the Earth and Greenpeace). Finally, we discussed whether INGO families are possibly not best set up to support the development of local civil society as they can crowd out smaller, less well-resourced groups, and can attract local talent away from supporting the sustainable growth of a local civil society.

Our work has raised a number of important questions that remain unanswered. Are these international families strengthening global civil society or are they turning civil society into a part of the competitive market? When many issues and challenges are global, does it help that we now have global NGOs who can act on behalf of civil society? Or does that size reduce the natural strength in diversity of civil society? Are the large families in competition with local groups?

There have also been families in the past which have risen and then fallen. Regardless of the forms they take, for now INGO families are major players in aided NGO development. Whether they contribute a net gain is something further research and experience will tell.

Brian Pratt
Executive Director, INTRAC
bpratt@intrac.org

[1] Crook, R. 2012. "The influence of transnational non-governmental public actors on policy processes and policy outcomes." in J. Howell (ed.) *Global Matters for Non-Governmental Public Action*, 93-115. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillian; Atkinson J., and M. Scurrah. 2009. *Globalizing Social Justice: The Role of Non-Governmental Organisations in Bringing About Social Change*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.