Three Sides to the Story:

Lessons from Africa on the New Role of NGOs in Basic Education

The goal to provide quality education for all is tough for struggling African governments to realize efficiently and effectively alone. Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have become active in education in Africa to help meet this goal, and donors have increased their funding of NGO education activities along with their government support.

But the relationships between governments, NGOs, and donors are sometimes tense. **Different experiences, organizational cultures, external pressures, and other factors can create conflicting agendas.** Understanding and respecting the differences—instead of ignoring or discounting other groups' points of view—will not magically dissolve the tensions, but can lead to more constructive working relationships.

The role of NGOs in education is a lens through which to see these different perspectives, as the Support for Analysis and Research (SARA) Project learned in a study in Ethiopia, Guinea, Malawi, and Mali that was funded by the USAID Bureau for Africa.* The study did not recommend whether NGOs "should" or "should not" play a role in the education sector. Rather, through literature reviews, field visits, and interviews with NGO, government, donor, and civil society representatives, it answers a more pragmatic question: **given that NGOs *do* play a role, what factors need to be considered to ensure that they contribute most effectively to education development in Africa?**

Significant variation exists among the four countries and, by extension, throughout the continent. It is not the intent to say that because something is happening in Mali, for example, it will or should take place elsewhere. Instead, **by looking at these four countries,** policy makers, donors, NGO representatives, and others can consider how these issues play out in their own countries or regions.

The study looked at four main areas:

Interactions between governments and NGOs concluding that tensions are inevitable but can be managed productively.

The role that NGOs play in the policy arena concluding that NGOs do affect education policy (though not always the process), but it takes time and resources.

Relations between NGOs and donors concluding that NGOs and donors should consider the strengths and needs that each brings to the table.

The role that NGOs play in civil society concluding that work remains to be done in linking communities and local NGOs upward and outward to others to truly strengthen civil society.

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* The full study, with examples and findings from the four countries, is available from the SARA Project, Academy for Educational Development, http://sara.aed.org

Context of NGOs in Education in Africa

NGO education programs in Ethiopia, Guinea, Mali, and Malawi share some commonalities. In all, NGOs work at the community level to mobilize parents and other nongovernment actors to improve school conditions and accountability. International and local NGOs operate, and donors fund some of their activities. A brief look at the environment for NGOs shows many differences specific to each country's circumstances:

Ethiopia: In 1991, a new government reorganized the country into nine regions, each with some autonomy. The number of NGOs has grown rapidly in the past few years (from almost none to about 250), but the state still has significant control over them.

Guinea: Since the mid-1980s, donor and international NGO resources have been mobilized to build the education system. Beginning with school construction, outside funding helped fuel the growth of local NGOs.

Malawi: In 1994, a new government won on a platform of free primary education, and access has increased. Religious NGOs have long been involved in education, and others are just starting to get involved.

Mali: NGOs have an established role in politics and society in Mali. The growth of NGO-supported community schools, as an alternative to government education, has gained much recognition globally.

NGOs and Governments

When NGOs enter the education arena, government officials often react with concern and suspicion. This is not to say that government officials should or should not be concerned—or that NGOs should or should not step in where they see a need. Rather, it is helpful to examine three sets of perceptions and realize they underlie NGO-government relations.

Government and NGOs hold different assumptions about each other's rights and responsibilities in the education sector.

Government officials believe that the state is the principal actor in education, and, thus, that what NGOs do in the education sector is an affair of government. Because they see NGOs involved in an area of government responsibility, they feel they must regulate NGO interventions and scope of activity through such means as licensing NGOs, determining where they can work geographically, and setting standards.

In contrast, NGOs enter the education arena after they identify a development need that they see the government has neglected or not been able to solve, and then mobilize resources to meet this need. This usually translates into activity in the most disadvantaged areas in a country, and at the community level.

The interaction of these two perspectives defines government-NGO relations along a continuum. In the least collaborative cases, the government responds to NGOs as an affront to its legitimacy; in contrast, NGOs see the government as an obstacle to ignore or

avoid. In more collaborative cases, the government welcomes NGOs in areas where it cannot intervene, and NGOs encourage the government to participate and even guide their activities.

Case in Point

During the first few years of the World Learning Project in Ethiopia, regional government staff would show up unannounced at schools were the NGO was operating. They found that things were going well. That, combined with including government staff in workshops and other events, changed the relationship between the government and the NGO. Other NGOs in Ethiopia reported a similar evolution from suspicion to support as they involved the government in their activities.

NGO-government relations tend to resemble the least collaborative in the early stages of the relationship and evolve to a more collaborative point along the continuum.

Government and NGOs hold different notions about each other's capacity to provide adequate education services.

Governments hire people with prescribed training and experience (for example, a teaching certificate), and consider these qualifications necessary to a legitimate education sector. NGOs train staff to perform specific tasks, such as teaching or curriculum development, on a more ad hoc basis.

As a consequence, government officials tend to judge the quality of NGO staff against the official qualifications, and may insist on monitoring and evaluating NGO staff based on this alone. In contrast, NGOs judge their job performance and that of the government on whether development objectives are met. NGOs operate under the belief that any intervention, no matter how modest, is better than none, while government says that citizens should have access to officially recognized services. NGOs may say support to community schools is a pragmatic response to a lack of services, but the government might respond that community schools do not meet their standards and are not acceptable.

Government and NGOs hold different perceptions about what motivates and limits the education activities that each undertakes.

Government and NGOs hold contrasting beliefs about what motivates their own behavior and what motivates the other.

Government officials perceive NGOs as suspect because they are not answerable to the public as the government is, and potentially opportunistic since they must seek outside resources to function. They view their own actions as dictated by the state and motivated by citizens' interests.

NGOs view governments as conservative and cautious, fearing innovation as a challenge to vested interests. They view their own interventions as innovative and unshackled by excess bureaucracy.

These characterizations are rarely informed by true knowledge of the "other side." In fact, exposure usually creates familiarity and softens suspicions. At local levels, where NGOs and government officials interact more frequently, collaboration and less suspicion is more likely to take place.

Consider This

NGOs must involve the government to be effective. Trying to "cut out" the government creates an unnecessary antagonism that eventually undermines the impact of NGO interventions.

Familiarity has a positive impact. Ironically, when governments distrust NGOs and set up greater controls, increased communication and collaboration evolves and leads to a more productive relationship.

NGOs in the Policy Arena

In the four countries studied, international and national NGOs became involved in changing policy to help implement their programs. In addition, some NGOs (primarily international) seek to change the policy process to involve more or different stakeholders. In most cases, NGOs first try to change a specific policy. As they get more involved, they see what they define as weaknesses in the policy process itself.

Different stakeholders accept, oppose, or are unaware of NGO policy work.

The study found that different groups generally view NGO involvement in education policy differently:

Government officials accept it to different degrees, but are not overly enthusiastic about the growing influence of NGOs in education policy. Most were not aware of efforts to change the policy process, only specific policies.

Donors welcome it if they agree with the NGO's policy agenda. In fact, if donors and NGOs are aligned to change a specific policy, they constitute a formidable alliance

Local stakeholders, in most cases, are unaware of NGO policy efforts on their behalf, particularly at the national level. This lack of involvement is problematic as they are supposed to be the beneficiaries of the policy change.

Stakeholders who are ignored can constitute a threat to NGO strategies to change policy. Unions, political parties, religious institutions, and others are potential allies or foes.

NGOs draw from seven advocacy strategies to influence policy.

- Policy dialogue
- Coalition building
- Using donors to leverage policy
- Using resources to leverage policy change
- Evidence of NGO program effectiveness
- Partnerships
- Public opinion campaigns

Case in Point

In Malawi, several international NGOs worked to create a coalition of NGOs and other civil society groups to advocate for education quality and access. They took a confrontational stance through such means as critical articles in the media. Subsequently, a second group formed that preferred a less confrontational stance. Called the Alliance, it includes NGOs, donors, and the government.

There is no one strategy that is more effective than others, but in general, **successful approaches have four elements in common**. They have **well-defined goals;** they **include key stakeholders**, but are not too large to be unwieldy; they have **adequate**

resources; and they **are unique to a situation,** and not a carbon copy from someplace else.

Consider This

NGOs are finding that **changing policies and the policy process is probably the most effective way** to ensure the success and sustainability of NGO interventions. NGO projects need a policy component as part of their implementation strategy.

Policy change requires **effort to nurture relationships** with different stakeholders. Alliances are usually more effective than confrontation.

NGOs, like other groups, **have not yet been successful in engaging the public** to see the importance of involvement in the policy process, yet, to achieve lasting change, they must continue to try.

NGOs and Donors

Over the last 10 years, donors have increased the resources they allocate through NGOs to implement education programs. Donor-NGO arrangements emerge from a competitive bidding process, a one-on-one contract or agreement, or an unsolicited submission by an NGO for funding. The arrangement used and how much an NGO depends on a particular donor for its funding affect the relationship between the two entities.

Donors cite NGOs' efficiency and ties with communities as reasons for funding.

Although donors also fund government services, they say that they turn to NGOs because NGOs have achieved more measurable results than governments at lower costs and because of NGOs' capacity to work with communities.

However, this study raises some caveats about relying too heavily on NGOs. By framing the role of NGOs as doing or not doing certain activities, **donors have perhaps limited the potential growth of NGOs and of the government in the long term.**

More formal relations have marked a larger role for NGOs. Donors often define what they want to accomplish and select the NGO they think can most effectively carry it out. However, this clarity may carry an unintended consequence as **an NGO becomes less innovative and experimental to satisfy the donor's pre-determined expectations about results and approaches.**
Many reporting and other management requirements are now in place. While these requirements are important for accountability, the reality is that smaller NGOs do not have the resources to fulfill them. Thus, donors often rely on intermediaries (such as large NGOs) to work with the smaller groups. In some cases, donors then lose touch with more grassroots groups and communities.

Case in Point

NGO programs financed by donors and those that receive funding elsewhere often operate differently. For example, Plan International and *Aide et Action* in Guinea, and Action Aid in Ethiopia and Malawi are not donor-financed. Their field offices report more flexibility and autonomy, with regular changes in objectives and strategies. They also say they are more process-oriented, rather than results-oriented.

Negotiations between donors and NGOs revolve around three basic issues: scope (where the intervention takes place and its extent), cost, and agenda. NGOs and donors often have different perspectives. For example, a donor may envision results within a fixed time, while an NGO sees a longer term, process-oriented relationship in the community. As noted, the diversity and extent of an NGO's funding sources may determine its ability to ensure that its needs are not subsumed by the donor's. (In fact, many NGOs finance some or most of their operations with non-donor funding.)

Consider This

Although donors and NGOs share larger objectives, they **may have different strategies and intermediate objectives**.

NGOs and donors have **an unequal relationship based on money**. NGOs with a diverse donor base can absorb these differences. NGOs that rely on one donor must align themselves more narrowly with that donor's agenda.

NGOs and donors must value the other's strengths and needs. If an NGO wants to pursue donor funds, it must be professional and accountable. Donors must not let the push for results and cost-effectiveness overshadow the innovation and other benefits that NGOs bring to the education sector.

NGOs and Civil Society

NGOs, donors, and governments want to strengthen civil society. However, this study found that they often have different views of what this means and the benefits to the country overall:

International NGOs see empowerment as the result of a stronger civil society, as people achieve human rights and exert demands on the state.

Donors assume democratization is linked to civil society, because the nature of democratic systems calls for broad-based participation.

Governments aim for modernization, as people take more responsibility for improving their own lives and thus reduce the burden on the state.

NGOs work to change local attitudes, create local expectations for better education, and build local organization.

This translates into such efforts as mobilizing communities to send children to school (changing attitudes), demand access to quality education (creating expectations), and create school committees (building organization).

Yet NGOs must address whether their attempts strengthen civil society or just mobilize communities to attain a specific goal. This latter instance, while important, may not have the long-term benefits that NGOs assume will occur.

NGOs tend to work with communities as isolated entities, rather than help them create links upward and outward.

NGOs have contributed much to build and strengthen community-level civil society, but few have gone a next step—to assist communities to strengthen links upward and outward to other groups. Where they have, donors and NGOs note that greater sustainability results. But

these **expanded links will also help build civil society from the bottom up**.

Donors and international NGOs also support local NGOs as a way to improve education and civil society, either by hiring them as contractors or funding their ongoing activities. But **just as strengthening communities in isolation may not promote civil society, strengthening local NGOs without building linkages is inadequate to strengthen civil society.**

Case in Point

In Mali, most of NGOs' efforts to strengthen civil society takes place at the community level, yet there has been little deliberate effort to strengthen local NGOs as components of civil society. But the sheer force of the number of community schools has changed expectations, which have turned communities into a powerful means for demanding services from the government.

That said, these linkages only thrive with a *raison d'être*: to advocate for issues of mutual concern or to work toward common goals.

Consider This

Community participation alone is insufficient to build civil society without focusing on links between communities and other civil society actors.

Strengthening local institutions requires **concrete activities that lead to tangible results**. Building an organization merely to serve as a unit of civil society does not work. NGO networks have become strong when they are based on specific issues around which to advocate.

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