

SELF IMPACT ASSESSMENT: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DEVELOPMENT AND HUMAN RIGHTS NON GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

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In the last few years, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have accepted the responsibility of assessing their own impact to determine what actions and policies positively affect people's lives. Many organizations have developed tools and good practices in this regard. NGOs in the field of international development began this journey several years ago, however, human rights groups have been slower in the task. For example, Amnesty International formally adopted in 2008 the same impact assessment methodology *Dimensions of Change* that Save the Children has been working with since at least 2003.

This paper follows the comparative method of 'Most Similar Systems Design' (MSSD). It compares different outcomes across similar units. The paper begins with a short presentation of the debate regarding the necessary conditions for a successful NGO and impact assessment as a matter of accountability. The paper will also present the progressive intersections between development and human Rights NGOs, and, finally, it will explain why development organizations have advanced more than human rights organizations in the assessment of their own impact.

This essay focuses on common patterns observed among development and human rights NGOs, with less emphasis on the differences.

Introduction: Two Observations good. Sociological surveys in
There is a common assumption this field, with extremely rare
in society: NGOs are inherently exception, show that the public

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largely believes that NGOs act for the betterment of society. The *Edelman Trust Barometer* of 2009¹ reports that the only institutions that more than 50% of “informed publics” (engaged audience groups) trust are NGOs. Interestingly, despite the relatively high levels of trust they receive, NGOs are not held primarily responsible for finding solutions to critical issues such as the financial credit crisis, energy costs, global warming, and access to affordable health care. The responsibility to find these solutions falls on governments. Nonetheless, the broad reliance on NGOs has likely made them feel comfortable enough to make decisions, develop plans, and carry out actions with reasonable freedom (as much freedom as donors, of course, have allowed). But how does the public know if NGOs serve a good purpose, and what is the impact of these organizations’ work on people’s lives?

The relevance of this query is highlighted by a second observation: NGOs have scarce resources to tackle a potentially unlimited number of violations of human rights. For example, in August 2001, Amnesty International (AI) adopted the new mission of working on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ESCR).² The organization also decided that it

would start a new global campaign on issues related to these rights by 2006. However, on September 11th, 2001, just a few weeks after Amnesty International’s decision, a dark period of retrogression on human rights began: the so-called War on Terror. Guantánamo, United States (U.S.) Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) ghost flights over Europe, wars and invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq, restrictions to the freedoms of assembly or expression, and justification for the practice of torture all over the world forced Amnesty International to instead spend more time and resources on these problems, at the expense of ESCR.

Impact Assessment as a Matter of Accountability

Generally, NGOs are held in high esteem by scholars and analysts worldwide. NGOs provoke and energize: “Decentralized and diverse, NGOs proceed with a speed, decisiveness and range of concerns impossible to imagine in relation to most of the work of bureaucratic and politically constrained intergovernmental organizations”.³ NGOs are supposed to be “the conscience of the citizenry, the defender of the interests of civilian populations against impermissible encroachment by officialdom”.⁴ These organizations also “validate

the perspectives and identities of those oppressed by particular relations and structures of power".⁵ Despite the role NGOs play, relatively little is known about the necessary conditions for the organizations to achieve greater success in their missions. Although the relevant literature includes many case studies of successful transnational campaigns, the public knows much less about failed campaigns.⁶

A handful of scholars have developed several theories that attempt to explain why and under what conditions NGOs' networks and campaigns impact policies and improve lives. The most relevant attempts are the 'boomerang effect',⁷ the 'spiral model',⁸ the 'marketing of rebellion',⁹ and the 'outside-in' and 'dual-target' forms.¹⁰ These theoretical propositions are based on comparative analyses that explain why advocacy may do well in one context and fail in another. However, these approaches focus more on how NGOs intend to change policies and practices than on how the organizations succeed in that mission.¹¹ While several authors including, Keck, Risse, Ropp, Sikkink, Bob and Hertel employ criteria and factors that may be useful to determine the success of an attempt to raise international concern for a particular cause, there

is not always a direct link between global concern about an issue and a real positive impact on people's lives.¹²

Oscar Vilhena and Scott DuPree have stated that flexibility, diversity, and volunteerism constitute both strengths and weaknesses of NGOs.¹³ The presence of a plurality of actors makes it more difficult to attribute success or failure to one particular strategy. Moreover, the challenge of reconstructing the causal dynamics underlying particular public decisions compounds the aforementioned difficulties.¹⁴ To judge which NGO strategy is the best in a given context often brings about several problems. Information available to determine cost-effectiveness is incomplete and judgments regarding the long-term impact of alternative projects are highly speculative.¹⁵ Despite challenges to assessment, it is essential to the effectiveness and credibility of NGOs.

In September 2000, an article entitled "Angry and Effective" in *The Economist* stated:

"The increasing clout of NGOs, respectable and not so respectable, raises an important question: who elected Oxfam, or, for that matter, the League for a Revolutionary Communist

International? Bodies such as these are, to varying degrees, extorting admissions of fault from law-abiding companies and changes in policy from democratically elected governments. They may claim to be acting in the interests of the people—but then so do the objects of their criticism, governments and the despised international institutions. In the West, governments and their agencies are, in the end, accountable to voters. Who holds the activists accountable?”¹⁶

Until quite recently, NGOs have been able to claim their good intentions as a sufficient basis for accountability, but increasingly such claims are brought into question. This growing skepticism is not only a response to the growing recognition of NGOs as key actors in the governance of social and economic affairs, but is also a response to challenges NGOs have mounted against the accountability and legitimacy of governments and the corporate sector.¹⁷

The London-based think tank One World Trust has found that although international NGOs have better structures in place for preventing minority control, they are generally less transparent than both intergovernmental organizations

and transnational corporations. NGOs provide considerably less on-line information,¹⁸ and until recently, accountability was interpreted as the “means by which individuals and organizations report to a recognized authority, or authorities, and are held responsible for their actions”.¹⁹ This understanding, however, is limited as it only affords those with formal authority over an organization the right to hold it accountable. In contrast, the “stakeholder view”²⁰ of accountability transfers the right of determination from exclusively those that have authority over an organization to anyone that has been affected by the organization’s policies and actions. The stakeholder view complements, but does not substitute accountability to donors, media, or even organization membership.

Apart from the constitutive value of transparency as a principle, accountability has an instrumental value as well. NGOs’ accountability to their constituents (beneficiaries or rights-holders at risk) is vital to the organization’s effectiveness as empowerment agents, as it determines the distribution of power between the NGO and its constituency.²¹ Bearing the stakeholder view in mind, NGO accountability may be defined as “the process by which an NGO

holds itself openly responsible for what it believes, what it does and what it does not do in a way which shows it involving all concerned parties and actively responding to what it learns".²²

In recent years, self-regulation has become an emerging trend among NGOs. There are currently several initiatives that reflect the interest of NGOs to hold themselves publicly accountable.²³ The 2006 International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGO) Accountability Charter is a key example, and a diverse group of organizations including Action Aid, Amnesty International, Greenpeace, Oxfam, Save the Children, Survival and Transparency International, are founding signatories.²⁴ The Charter declares that International NGOs "should be held responsible for (their) actions and achievements (...) by ensuring that (their) programmes achieve outcomes that are consistent with (their) mission; and by reporting on these outcomes in an open and accurate manner". This paragraph highlights that several of the most prominent international NGOs consider impact assessment as a matter of accountability. As stated by Fernande Raine, impact assessment acts as a tool for creating accountability to those people in whose name and interest

organizations advocate for social change.²⁵

The Growing Intersection between Development and Human Rights NGOs

Globalization has had a clear impact on the proliferation and internationalization of NGOs and other social movements.²⁶ Authors have coined this phenomenon as "transnational social movement organizations",²⁷ "transnational advocacy networks",²⁸ or "transnational civil society".²⁹

This internationalization has been a common feature of what experts refer to as 'new social movements'. This term refers to movements and organizations that -- particularly since 1980s -- deal primarily with issues of identity and meaning, in contrast to traditional class-based organizations, such as trade unions or political parties. In that sense, these organizations are concerned with post-material goals such as creating shared meanings around collective identities and alternative lifestyles.³⁰

Several academics, however, have doubted the novelty of current, social movements. Steven Buechler considers that by virtue of its focus on the 'why' of movement emergence, new social movement theories have said relatively little about the 'how' of

ongoing movement processes.³¹ The focus on identities and collective meanings has not been particularly helpful in understanding the ‘when’ or ‘where’ of intermittent social movement formation across structurally similar societies.³² Additionally, Charles Tilly indicates that when new political actors appear on the social movement scene, assertions of identity become crucial to the actors’ impact; identity influences constituencies, competitors, potential allies, and the objects of their program or standing claims, which can result in the disappearance of the distinction between ‘identity’ and ‘interest’ movements.³³

While internal characteristics of organizations are clearly important factors in mobilization,³⁴ it is also important to look at the interaction between those internal characteristics and the external political context of an organization. In that sense, the social movement literature has turned its attention away from grievances and resources and toward such issues as political opportunities and framing structures.³⁵

Over recent years, a human rights-development convergence has taken place between NGOs. This convergence has been based, in Nelson and Dorsey’s words, upon the acknowledgment of their

own “frustrations”:

For development agencies, the challenge and frustration are obvious: decades of concerted work have produced flashes of local success but a worsening global pattern of poverty, deepening inequalities, marginalization, and indignity. For many human rights activists, the failure to directly and meaningfully address the human rights dimensions of poverty became unjustifiable in the face of such suffering.³⁶

In the 1990s, rapid globalization of trade and finance, expanding powers of transnational corporations, growth of new forms of international mobilization among social movements, reduction in official development assistance, and shifts in aid allocation toward geopolitical hot spots affected this transition.³⁷ Shifts in global systems produced new trends within the NGO operating environment, yet affected development and human rights NGOs differently and provoked a variety of strategic responses.

In addition to these external elements, several internal factors also changed the approach of NGOs. Amartya Sen (*Poverty and Famines*, 1981) and Henry Shue (*Basic Rights*, 1980), along with several initiatives led by the Office

of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, developed ideas that led to the emergence of NGO cooperation.³⁸ The rapid growth of mostly local and small NGOs of the Global South in the late 1980s and early 1990s also had a crucial impact on the methods and outlooks of international NGOs, both in development and human rights.³⁹

Over the last two decades, NGOs have 'discovered' a group of rights that they deem worthy and possible to defend with their advocacy: ESCR. In fact, during the past twenty years, NGOs experienced a shift towards ESCR from two distant perspectives: Civil and Political Rights (or just Human Rights at that time) and Development.

The new ESCR advocacy of traditional human rights NGOs allows them to address both the root causes of civil and political rights violations while also targeting economic actors and changes in the global economy. ESCR advocacy entails a fundamentally new understanding of accountability for the failure to meet human rights standards, so long as it continues to monitor states and scrutinize international financial institutions, transnational corporations, and trade regimes. For development NGOs, the focus

on ESCR constitutes a potential paradigm change, a reorientation that embraces the international legal and moral framework of human rights as a new kind of ethical and operational guide for development practice.⁴⁰

Historically, development NGOs have focused primarily, if not exclusively, on service delivery, but this pattern has recently changed. The advocacy work of development NGOs has moved beyond simply implementing programs to help those in need, to actually taking up and defending the causes of others and speaking out to the public on another's behalf.⁴¹ Chapman and Fisher have identified four main reasons for the trend of development NGOs towards advocacy on issues related to social justice. First, the need of northern NGOs to find new roles as southern NGOs take over project work; second, the recognition that projects will have limited effects without structural changes; third, the increasing call by southern organizations for northern NGOs to conduct more campaigns and policy work; and fourth, the desire among NGOs for a public profile.⁴²

The advocacy on ESCR has diverged into three related trends. First, traditional human rights organizations have adopted new missions that go beyond

the organization's historic civil and political rights mandates to integrate ESCR in their actions and strategies.⁴³ Second, existing development groups, such as Oxfam or Action Aid, are adopting rights-based approaches to development. Finally, there exists a growth in the establishment of new movements and organizations that explicitly link human needs issues to social and economic rights standards. In this last group, Food Information and Action Center (FIAN) and the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) are worth mentioning.

Paul Gready argues that approaches that reframe development as an entitlement, and provide tools to make human rights operational in the economic sphere at the same time, add to the value of rights-based approaches to development, and affect the practices of both development and human rights NGOs. He warns, however, that, "one word of caution is necessary: the re-shaping of the debate is still in its infancy, and contested by powerful constituencies within development and human rights. In short, its success is far from assured, or necessarily deserved".⁴⁴

Self Impact Assessment: Why Development NGOs Started Earlier Than Human Rights NGOs

Human rights and development NGOs have found common fields of work -- economic, social and cultural rights -- and strategic viewpoints -- advocacy on poverty issues and the rights-based approaches to development. Over the past decade, however, both governmental agencies and private non-profit groups in the field of development have conducted internal monitoring studies to evaluate their advocacy, while many human rights groups are still unfamiliar with the meaning of impact assessment. For instance, Oxfam Community Aid Abroad began an "impact project" in 2000 to develop a framework and process for the ongoing measurement of the impact of the organization's work.⁴⁵ Similarly, Action Aid came up with its *Monitoring and Evaluating Advocacy: A Scoping Study* in 2001, and Save the Children issued *Closing the Circle: From measuring policy change to assessing policies in practice –An overview of advocacy impact assessment* in 2003 and *Global Impact Monitoring: Save the Children UK's Experience of Impact Assessment* in 2004. Human rights organizations can learn a great deal from the work of development groups whose practices are largely applicable to human rights groups in impact assessment; this is the

case, for instance, with *Dimensions of Change*, initially used by Save the Children and other development groups,⁴⁶ and now employed by Amnesty International in its own tested framework for measurement.⁴⁷

There are three main reasons that explain why development NGOs identified the need to assess their own impact, earlier than human rights counterparts. The first important factor is that the pressure exercised by public and private donors has affected development NGOs relatively more than human rights NGOs. This dynamic does not necessarily mean that donors have put more pressure on the former group than on the latter, but that this pressure has had a different effect on the financial situation of these two types of organizations. The different effect is to a great extent due to the relatively high amount of money needed to carry out development projects, in contrast to less expensive human rights advocacy.

The UK Interagency Group on Human Rights Based Approaches issued a report in December 2007 to examine the impact of rights-based and non-rights based approaches to development. The study selected three countries: Bangladesh, Malawi, and Peru, and conducted seven case studies, which included

six NGOs including Save the Children and CARE, along with their local partners. The aim was to cover a wide geographical, social, political, and cultural spread to assess whether successes in particular circumstances were also replicated across a wide range of rights-based approach and non-rights based approach work.

The US Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimated that federal spending through non-profits amounted to US\$317 billion in fiscal year 2004, and hundreds of billions more come from state and local governments.⁴⁸ As Donald Kettl observes, “some non-profits are fully dependent on a single government agency for all of their funds, but many receive funds from different sources, and the multiple funding sources multiply the number of funders who expect results –and the kinds of results they expect”.⁴⁹ Consequently, as Thomas Parks points out regarding the impact of donor funding to advocacy NGOs in South East Asia, “local NGOs increasingly need to compete for less and less funding, while donors make increasing demands for quantifiable short-term impact. The usual result is that many NGOs will close, and those that remain will be much more closely aligned with donor priorities and interests”.⁵⁰

The second reason for the delay in the assessment of human rights projects is the extended idea that development is a process that requires a progressive realization. In contrast, human rights would not need a progressive advancement, but rather the adoption of specific measures that from the very first moment would protect human rights for all. Accordingly, it would be easier to assess progress in development than progress in human rights terms; however, this premise is challenged as a misconception by human rights scholars and experts through human rights indicators and benchmarks. In 2004, Todd Landman and Meghna Abraham conducted an evaluation and assessment of human rights NGOs. Landman and Abraham's research suggests that even in the absence of discrete time-series data, qualitative forms of human rights impact assessment are still possible. The aims and objectives of programs are linked to key indicators that demonstrate the tangible benefits of a set of activities for a selected group of beneficiaries.⁵¹

The changes that NGOs pursue are predominantly on the macro level. Evaluating the impact of human rights organizations on target governments and non-state actors requires relatively objective

information about the human rights practices of those agents over an extended period of time.⁵² To understand to what extent they contribute to those changes, NGOs must incorporate indicators and benchmarks to monitor the compliance of duty-bearers with human rights standards.

The last fifteen years have seen an improved conceptualization of ESCR to which numerous actors have contributed: the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, UN Special Rapporteurs, NGOs and scholars. At the same time, there has also been a growing recognition of the value of using indicators for human rights monitoring. Moreover, organizations such as Social Watch are advancing in the application of methodologies to assess the respect, protection and fulfillment of ESCR.

Finally, the reason for the distinction between development and human rights NGOs is the overwhelming notion of the "age of rights".⁵³ During the second half of the twentieth century, there was a "particular construction of right and wrong in international relations" that has become increasingly articulated through an appeal to human rights.⁵⁴ At the same time, the development of international human rights law has

articulated a justice paradigm that, while offering NGOs the powerful argument of the law, has also expanded the dangerous idea that the goodness of any action based on human rights is self-evident.

Despite a strong foundation, human rights strategies must be critically examined. Resources of human rights NGOs are scarce and the number and type of violations these organizations attempt to deal with are potentially boundless. It is necessary to draw a line between the convictions about the inherent rights of every person and the strategies of advocating for those rights.

Human rights activists share the belief that their work has a positive impact on people's lives. This is precisely one of the key reasons why the global human rights movement has grown with significant success. However, human rights activists require more than a belief: they need evidence that their tireless work is effective and worthwhile.

Conclusion

This paper worked towards an answer to the following question: In assessing their own impact, why

did development NGOs start earlier than human rights NGOs? After presenting impact assessment as a matter of accountability, the essay initially pointed out the common features and processes that both types of NGOs have experienced in recent years., which include internationalization and the 'new rights advocacy' increasing work on economic, social and cultural rights and rights-based approaches to development. Explanations for the advancement of development NGOs in the performance of their assessment in comparison with human rights groups looked at the different financial constraints from donors, the misreading that human rights simply cannot be assessed, and the side effects of the age of rights.

The structured context in which NGOs are situated, and several assumptions about the supposed strength of the human rights discourse, help to explain why development NGOs began to assess their impact on people's lives before human rights organizations. As Joseph Carens notes, NGOs face "the problem of doing good in a world that isn't".⁵⁵

¹ <http://www.edelman.com/trust/2009/>

² See a historic review of the evolution of Amnesty International at: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/who-we-are/history>

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Find out more at the database of civil society self-regulatory initiatives of One World Trust: <http://www.oneworldtrust.org/csoproject/>
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⁴² Jennifer Chapman and Thomas Fisher, The effectiveness of NGO campaigning, *Development in Practice*, 10 (2000).

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