Managing Performance in NGOs: A 10 Point Agenda

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Summary

An NGO's ***performance*** is defined as how well it contributes to other people's efforts to improve their lives and societies.

Planning performance

1. Setting strategy. NGOs' strategies should set out what they will do to make the biggest contribution to other people's efforts to improve their lives and societies.

2. Planning activities. NGOs should develop activity plans in discussion with local people and other collaborators, identifying who would have to do what to achieve specific goals.

Measuring performance

3. Feedback & scope. NGOs should measure how well they are contributing to other people's efforts using a combination of feedback and scope indicators.

4. Managing relationships. NGOs should systematically build and monitor relationships with local people and other collaborators, and ensure they meet appropriate standards.

5. Technical quality. NGOs should systematically monitor the technical quality of their work and ensure it meets appropriate standards.

Managing performance

6. Frontline staff. NGOs' first priority should be to support and encourage frontline staff to contribute effectively to other people's efforts.

7. Continual improvement. NGOs should create organisational cultures of continual improvement.

Communicating performance

8. Transparency. NGOs should operate open information policies, based on the presumption of disclosure, and make information easily accessible to relevant collaborators.

9. Ethical fundraising. NGOs should systematically check that fundraising claims are ambitious but realistic, within the limits of what they can achieve.

10. Sector learning. NGOs should collaborate in a collective effort to continually improve performance and use resources as effectively as possible across the sector.

Full paper and website

Section 1: Performance

An NGO's performance is how well it contributes to other people's efforts to improve their lives and societies.

NGOs can make a big contribution to people's own efforts. But each NGO normally only has a small influence on long term social change. Other factors are normally more important, like government, politics, economic opportunities, friends and family, culture or even the weather. Ultimately, people make their own choices about their lives. NGOs aim to nurture and respect that autonomy, in what they do and how they do it.

This website argues that NGOs can achieve most by managing and measuring their own performance, rather than poor people's long term social change.

The approach focuses on factors that are within NGOs' control and reinforces respect for other people's autonomy. It is about *helping people help themselves*.

It passes the acid test that it provides help to other people in the same way that most people – including those who work in NGOs – would like to receive help.

The approach is different to focusing on 'impact', defined as long term social change. This website argues that 'impact' is not a reliable guide for maximising NGOs' results. Some comments about 'impact' are made in boxes on other pages.

- The approach has major implications for managing NGOs.
- It is based on well respected literature.
- Examples show how well it can work in practice.

"The international humanitarian community needs a fundamental reorientation from supplying aid to supporting and facilitating communities' own relief and recovery priorities." *Tsunami Evaluation Coalition, Recommendation 1, 2006*

"… the success of development as a process depends on the role of people as agents rather than just as patients." *Amartya Sen, 2000*

"Development agencies do not do development; at best they do development assistance." *David Ellerman, 2005*

"…. to help does not mean to be a sovereign but to be a servant …" *Soren Kierkegaard, quoted in Ellerman 2005*

Section 2: Management agenda

This 10 point agenda sets out how NGOs can create a management framework that encourages and supports staff to contribute effectively to other people's efforts.

It applies development principles to NGOs' internal systems as well as their external projects, meeting the needs of managers as well as operational staff.

I hope managers may find it a useful and coherent way of tackling some of the major issues they face. It focuses on managing performance, rather than other areas of organisational management. It is not an inflexible or exhaustive blueprint.

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1. Setting strategy

NGOs' strategies should set out what they will do to make the biggest contribution to other people's efforts to improve their lives and societies.

Factors that determine how much NGOs can contribute to other people's efforts include each NGO's:

- credibility with key collaborators, the 'other people',
- understanding of their context,
- technical skills,
- networks,
- funding,
- management capacity.

NGOs should also naturally consider where people's needs are greatest in relation to other sources of support. But this should not over-ride the other factors listed above. Even the biggest NGOs cannot tackle all the problems of poverty and injustice. NGOs should aim to provide as much high quality assistance as they can, within practical management constraints, not just as much assistance as they can.

"… forms of help that override or undercut people's capacity to help themselves are … *unhelpful help*." *David Ellerman, 2005*

This approach leads to NGOs specialising in the areas where they can add most value. For instance, NGOs may specialise in terms of location, relationships with specific people or technical areas.

Specialisation can help an organisation make a better contribution to collective efforts, develop expertise and maintain quality. It helps use funds more effectively at the sector level and assists collaboration as everyone knows what the NGO offers.

Resources should be allocated on the same basis: the ability to make the biggest contribution to other people's efforts, on the basis of the factors outlined above, excluding 'funding'.

Focusing on 'impact' encourages NGOs to allocate resources solely on the basis of recipients' needs. This can overstate NGOs' influence and pull them in directions outside their experience, undermining the quality of work. It is also never ending.

2. Planning activities

NGOs should develop activity plans in discussion with local people and other collaborators, identifying who would have to do what to achieve specific goals.

In order to contribute to other people's efforts, NGOs' activities and operational goals have to respond to their priorities. Activity plans are only as good as the dialogue and insight that generate them.

Plans should identify who has a significant influence on achieving goals, both allies and opponents, and what they are expected to do to achieve them. Various planning tools provide practical ways of doing this. They all focus on people, relationships and behaviours.

The tools generate a *theory of change* – describing how the NGO expects that its actions will contribute to other people's efforts. Common theories of change include NGOs:

- providing services that improve welfare,
- building the capacity of organisations to represent people's interests,
- developing technologies that poor people will use to improve welfare,
- lobbying decision makers to implement policies that benefit the poor.

In each case, results depend on what other people, outside the NGO, decide to do. They are 'theories' as people's intentions and interactions cannot be fully predicted. Almost all NGO activities generate unintended results. Plans set out an initial analysis to be reviewed and improved, not taken as definitive.

The main assumptions and links in a theory of change may be supported by existing evidence. NGOs can also generate new evidence to test them, for instance through impact evaluations.

A plan based on analysing *'who does what'* creates a good basis for collaborating with different stakeholders on complicated social issues. It can be used to assess whether stakeholders have the incentives and commitment to support the plan – a crucial factor for success – as well as for on-going analysis and accountability.

Analysing a situation is part of the development process itself, helping people consider the factors that govern their lives and imagine how things could be done differently. Planning may also include identifying compromises between different interest groups, such as women and men, different castes, or people working in different industries.

NGOs also have to develop detailed implementation plans and budgets, setting out how they expect to achieve the goals agreed in dialogue with others. Implementation plans are likely to be adapted during the course of a project in the light of feedback and other new circumstances.

A growing body of research criticises how well 'logical frameworks' work for planning development activities. They focus a lot of attention on long term changes, which are out of an NGO's control, and tend to be aspirational. They tend to discourage analysis of different stakeholders' interests and assume social change is linear and predictable. They have not proved very effective guides for action and collaboration, or good bases for accountability.

Developing a theory of change in collaboration with others can provide an opportunity to build relationships and make decisions together.

The planning tools provide examples of practical tools NGOs are using to work this way.

"Participation is an end, and not simply a means; the central point of development is to enable people to participate in the governance of their own lives." *Allan Kaplan, 2000*

3. Feedback & scope

NGOs should measure how well they are contributing to other people's efforts using a combination of feedback and scope indicators.

The best way to measure how well an NGO is contributing to other people's efforts is to ask them. Feedback systems can generate performance data on many aspects of an NGO's work, such as:

- The quality and number of services received by local people
- The credibility and understanding of the NGO
- Staff attitudes and behaviours
- Changes in people's lives, e.g. income, opportunities or confidence
- Influence in changing policies
- Unintended consequences and people's priorities for the future

"How do we know if [the people] are better off, whether they gain or lose from our projects? The answer is to ask them. They are the experts on their own condition." *Robert Chambers, 2009*

Similar to 'customer satisfaction', these indicators can be quantified and benchmarked. They can be disaggregated by gender or other social group. They are not objective and need to be triangulated and interpreted with care.

Many NGOs are already using feedback systems (see examples). Each one is based on a specific instrument, setting out what to ask respondents and how. The instruments have to be creatively designed for different contexts, in dialogue with respondents, so they are relevant and accessible.

Using feedback puts local people and other collaborators in the driving seat, demonstrating that their opinions matter. It creates incentives for staff to be collaborative, responsive and empowering – not just to complete pre-planned activities.

Like all participatory processes, it is generally not be easy to hear from the poorest and most marginalised people. Care must be taken to avoid the loudest voices dominating. The results need to be carefully interpreted with judgement.

"… the key to ending gender discrimination and structural inequality is accountability. Women must be empowered to hold policy-makers answerable for their promises, and if they fail to deliver, to call for corrective action" *Anne Marie Goetz, 2008*

NGOs should also measure the scope of their activities, such as the quantity of services delivered or the number of people they work with. They should assess technical quality and monitor their financial position along with whether key milestones are achieved.

A small number of indicators should be selected that produce cost-effective data that will actually be used. Indicators should create incentives for staff to focus on what matters most. The costs and benefits of assessment need to be carefully considered for all people involved.

The assessment process also provides an opportunity for people to reflect on achievements and plan priorities for the future.

It is a recipe for disaster to use initial activity plans as the basis for assessing performance, creating incentives that squash flexibility and responsiveness and generating mountains of unhelpful performance data.

See the feedback examples for a variety of practical tools used by NGOs.

Focusing on 'impact' can encourage NGOs to measure their performance through indicators of long term social change, like poverty rates. These take years to emerge, often longer than a project lasts. They are expensive to measure. They are normally influenced by many factors outside an NGOs' control. They have not proved a good basis for managing performance.

4. Managing relationships

NGOs should systematically build and monitor relationships with local people and other collaborators, and ensure they meet appropriate standards.

In order to contribute to other people's efforts, NGOs need to understand their priorities and gain their support. NGOs need to demonstrate that they are worth collaborating with and that they value other people's views. Managers should focus on relationships as much as delivery. This builds on the huge literature on participation.

In particular, NGOs need to develop constructive relationships with the people that they work with directly. Relationships can be managed systematically, by:

A. *Setting appropriate standards*
B. *Supporting staff to meet standards*
C. *Monitoring whether relationships meet standards*

These do not have to be heavy, bureaucratic processes. They can be lightweight, adapted to circumstances and fit with small NGOs' working cultures.

A. Setting standards

A number of initiatives set standards for how NGOs should collaborate with other people. For instance, the HAP standard and Listen First framework can both be used to assess performance. Action Aid's ALPS system sets out behaviours expected from staff and so do the Sphere standards, though they are not designed for assessment.

But, generally, standards in this area remain the exception not the rule. For instance, there is still vigorous debate about what 'participation' or 'partnership' means in different contexts, which creates practical confusion. The quality of relationships tends to depend on the 'grace and favour' of local managers.

Standards need to balance flexibility, so they apply in different contexts, and being specific, to provide guidance for staff. They should encourage staff to analyse social situations and different interest groups and to pay particular attention to the priorities of the poorest and most marginalised people, including women.

Appropriate standards help staff understand what they should do, as well as providing a basis for holding staff to account. Some of the feedback examples use tools that embody standards.

"Alps requires that poor and excluded people take part directly in all processes of local programme appraisal, analysis, research planning, monitoring, implementation, research and reviews, including recruiting and appraising frontline staff. Poor and excluded people have a right to take part in decisions that affect them." *Alps, ActionAid International, 2006*

B. Supporting staff

Across the sector NGOs have a lot of experience of supporting staff to build constructive relationships with different people. For instance, a great deal of training and resource material is available, along with opportunities for staff to reflect and share experience.

Approaches need to be adapted to the local context. NGOs rely on their front line staff to do this. Some commonly used approaches can be built into organisational policies, including:

- Making operational decisions together
- Transparency
- Delivering on expectations and maintaining quality
- Working with credible staff or partners
- Being easy to contact and demonstrably responsive
- Staying in one place for enough time

In almost all cases, NGOs should involve local people and other collaborators in all their major operational decisions, including initial analysis, planning activities, setting indicators and goals, assessing performance and planning improvements.

These decisions should be informed by people's own priorities, so an NGO's work fits into their plans and aspirations – helping people help themselves. A vast array of participatory approaches are available to engage with local people.

NGOs should make it easy for people to contact them and ensure they respond to all legitimate comments. For example, HAP has brought together a wide range of experience on complaints mechanisms.

Annual open meetings can provide an opportunity for different stakeholders to come together, review performance and make plans for the future. For example, regular participatory reviews are a central plank in ActionAid's ALPS system.

"Common Standard 1: Participation. The disaster-affected population actively participates in the assessment, design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the assistance programme." *Sphere Minimum Standards in Disaster Response*

C. Monitoring relationships

The quality of relationships can be systematically monitored using feedback. This should be triangulated with other views and discussed together with staff and relevant collaborators.

Managers can check whether participatory processes are being consistently carried out, for instance through field visits, discussions with collaborators and requiring simple reports. Larger organisations could incorporate these approaches into existing oversight and audit processes.

Staff should be held to account for their performance in managing constructive relationships. However oversight needs to be handled sensitively, as it can directly effect relationships.

"NGOs deliver quality work when their work is based on a sensitive and dynamic understanding of beneficiaries' realities; responds to local priorities in a way that beneficiaries feel is appropriate; and is judged to be useful by beneficiaries."

"The quality of an NGO's work is primarily determined by the quality of its relationships with its intended beneficiaries." *Keystone for Bond, 2006*

5. Technical quality

NGOs should systematically monitor the technical quality of their work and ensure it meets appropriate standards.

Whatever their contribution to other people's efforts, NGOs should ensure that it is high quality and meets appropriate standards. For instance, NGOs' contributions may include:

- Research and policy advice
- Welfare services, such as providing water or health care
- Training and management advice
- Campaigning
- Providing funds

In each case, NGOs should identify or develop standards which can be used to guide and assess their performance. National governments set standards for most areas of welfare provision, such as water purity or education. International standards also often apply, for instance in UN charters.

Many areas of NGO work are not formally regulated. The Sphere project has set international minimum standards for providing emergency assistance in humanitarian disasters. Activities like training and management advice can be very high quality or very poor. Low quality advice may be actively harmful, 'unhelpful help'. NGOs may choose to develop their own indicators and standards in these situations.

NGOs should not aim to apply the highest standards in all cases. Over-specified standards may raise the cost and restrict the scope of service delivery. They should not trample on the contribution NGOs make through international solidarity, 'being there' with people in difficult times. Standards should be creatively used, to balance different factors in appropriate ways for operating contexts.

The specific contribution that some NGOs make may be around managing relationships, for instance in tackling gender or caste inequalities, or trying to bridge conflict. In these cases, technical standards are likely to link closely with how the NGO manages relationships.

Many NGOs and funders contribute to other organisations by funding them. The way donors go about their job has a major effect on recipients' work, both positive and negative. Surprisingly, there are few established standards for the best ways of providing funding. DARA's Humanitarian Response Index, CEP's Grantee perception reports and Keystone's partner survey may evolve this way.

6. Frontline staff

NGOs' first priority should be to support and encourage frontline staff to contribute effectively to other people's efforts.

Frontline staff are often the most important factor in delivering high quality work. NGOs depend on them to develop relationships with local people and other collaborators, make judgements about what to do and provide appropriate assistance.

Managing frontline staff is crucial for NGOs' performance. They will not be able to serve and support other people if the NGO is not supporting them to work in a flexible, responsive way.

This has implications for all stages of human resource management. For instance, NGOs should recruit frontline staff for their values and judgement as well as technical competencies, and provide training and guidance in these areas. Training should be provided on a demand basis, rather than a supply basis, supporting staff's own enquiry and development.

Staff need flexibility and support to respond to and empower collaborators. A coaching style of management can enable this, helping staff make good judgements, as well as discussing their performance in relation to pre-determined targets. An authoritarian style, where staff are expected to do what they are told, is unlikely to work.

A great deal of NGO work is about putting personal values into practice. It is often not intuitive to 'help people help themselves' and respect their autonomy, rather than trying to solve problems for them. Staff may need continual encouragement and opportunities to deepen their understanding of these values.

Management systems should strike a balance between control and support. They should allow a reasonable level of decision making and flexibility at the local level. For instance, overly rigid budgets and procedures reduce flexibility and the NGO's credibility as a responsive collaborator.

There may be a natural tension between central and local priorities. This needs constant monitoring by managers, including routinely asking frontline staff about the impact that organisational systems and priorities have on them.

NGOs should fight bureaucracy! Frontline staff need the time and space to do their jobs. If they are asked to take on one additional responsibility, can another be taken off them? It may be appropriate to set targets for the amount of time staff spend working with collaborators, to help protect this space.

"… responsibility and authority must be decentralised … as far as possible. … A responsive and flexible development practice can only be achieved by the organisation that has responsive and flexible practitioners out there in the (development) field, reading the development process of its clients/counterparts and facilitating responsive interventions."
Allan Kaplan, 2000

7. Continual improvement

NGOs should create organisational cultures of continual improvement.

In order to contribute most effectively to other people's efforts, NGOs need to continually assess their performance and how they can improve, at all levels.

NGOs have to constantly reinforce core values, particularly around *helping people help themselves* – recognising that they do not hold the answers to other people's problems – and being responsive to dynamic social situations.

Continual improvement needs a readiness to consider that activities may have to be adapted and that mistakes may originate with the NGO as well as collaborators. Such self-criticism can be uncomfortable and counterintuitive. It has to be balanced with creating confidence and purpose within the organisation.

Senior commitment to acting on performance data and to personal values can help strengthen a culture of continual improvement.

Managers should demonstrate a burning commitment to making the best possible contribution to other people's efforts and that they take feedback and other performance data seriously. They should use it to encourage reflection and improvement among staff, adapting plans and activities as necessary. Performance data can be used as part of staff assessment.

Managers should model relevant personal values to inspire staff to adopt them. This is likely to involve managers using a collaborative style, responsive to their staff, and welcoming feedback and comments. Managers may need their own support to achieve this.

Other approaches may help strengthen a culture of continual improvement, such as making time for reflection and learning, public recognition for high-performing staff and continual reinforcement of values, for instance at team events or in newsletters.

8. Transparency

NGOs should operate open information policies, based on the presumption of disclosure, and make information easily accessible to relevant collaborators.

NGOs operate for public benefit, like governments, rather than private benefit, like companies. In order to make the most contribution to other people's efforts, NGOs should operate with the openness and transparency expected from democratic governments, unless there are strong reasons not to.

Information is power. Transparency empowers the people an NGO works with. It makes it easier for them to collaborate with the NGO, as they understand its work better and how it can best contribute to other efforts.

With proper information, collaborators can hold NGOs to account for their performance. This creates incentives for continual improvement within an NGO. It is a crucial tool for fighting corruption and the perception of corruption.

At the sector level, transparency makes it easier for NGOs to learn from each other in pursuit of common goals. Funding can be better matched to strong performance, so resources can be used more effectively.

Finally, by being transparent themselves, NGOs model the good practice that they often press other stakeholders to meet, for instance among governments and private sector companies. This can help citizens develop the skills and confidence to hold powerful actors to account.

NGOs should routinely publish:

- Strategic plans, goals and background analysis
- Performance reports, including feedback & scope indicators and evaluations
- Which standards they use and performance in comparison to them
- Major collaborators
- Legal status, governance and management arrangements, including identifying board members and senior managers
- Financial information
- Contact information

NGOs should make relevant information available in ways that are easy for different stakeholders to access. In particular, they should make information accessible to the organisations and poor people they work with directly.

At the project level, this may mean providing information about project level goals, performance, expenditure and contact details in appropriate languages and media.

Naturally, NGOs need to keep the costs of transparency under control. In some cases, transparency can increase political and security risks. There are likely to be personal privacy considerations. Sensible judgements should be taken about what information is appropriate to publish and withhold, based on the presumption of transparency and collaboration, rather than privacy.

Examples and related initiatives:

- ActionAid International's open information policy
- Christian Aid's open information policy
- Oxfam's open information policy
- Aidinfo – working to make aid more transparent
- Publish What You Fund – campaign for donors to publish what they fund
- HAP – examples of NGOs being transparent to beneficiaries
- Who Counts? – campaign for financial reporting to beneficiaries

9. Ethical fundraising

NGOs should systematically check that fundraising claims are ambitious but realistic, within the limits of what they can achieve.

NGO managers have to handle relationships with many different stakeholders. If funders have unrealistic expectations about what the NGO can achieve, this can create huge pressures that prevent NGOs from contributing effectively to other people's efforts.

On the one hand, managers have to make a compelling case for why funders should support them, rather than other NGOs. This naturally encourages NGOs to aim for major results and to report positive performance. NGOs are also ambitious to achieve as much as possible with the funds available.

On the other hand, the need to impress funders can distort how NGOs manage their performance. It can encourage NGOs to focus on long term impact. It can make it difficult to acknowledge poor performance internally and learn how to improve. It can encourage NGOs to focus more on funders' priorities and less on being responsive to local people.

NGOs can handle this tension by systematically checking that fundraising claims are realistic, acknowledging the limits of what the NGO can achieve. This applies to all fundraising and communications work, including formal proposals and fundraising from individuals.

Fundraising material should describe how NGOs are contributing to other people's efforts to improve their lives and societies. It is an opportunity to educate supporters about NGOs' role in helping people help themselves.

All fundraising material should be reviewed to check it is realistic, accurate and does not overstate the NGOs' capabilities. This could be similar to the ethical review process used in academic research proposals.

NGOs should systematically report actual performance to their funders, including feedback and scope indicators.

Fundraising often also needs stories that link the NGO's work to wider changes. It may be most appropriate to collect these through an 'internal journalism' function, separate from performance management systems.

"To remain credible, [NGOs] need to be more modest about what they are able to achieve." (Fowler, 1997)

10. Sector learning

NGOs should collaborate in a collective effort to continually improve performance and use resources as effectively as possible across the sector.

Each NGO is part of a wider effort to tackle the worst effects of poverty and injustice. They share a collective responsibility to use the available resources as effectively as possible across the sector, rather than for the maximum benefit of their own organisation. NGOs also share responsibility for maintaining the sector's credibility.

NGOs should allocate a reasonable level of resources to learning and improvement at the sector level. For instance, they should collaborate through organisations like Bond,InterAction, HAP and ALNAP, as well as on standards like Sphere, research resources like ELDIS and less formal networks like Pelican.

There are particular opportunities to improve performance by developing shared standards and performance measures for similar NGOs, like the Keystone partner survey. These encourage benchmarking and comparison between NGOs, which create incentives for improvement. Joint evaluations can reduce costs and allow comparisons.

NGOs should start new enquiries and planning processes by finding existing research, experiences and initiatives, and considering what they can contribute to it. In many cases, this is cheaper, easier and more effective than starting from scratch.

NGOs should publish their own experiences and provide honest accounts of successes and failures, so that others can learn from them. This can be particularly helpful for keeping donors up to date with developments, so future funds are directed towards the most effective work.

Section 3: Related initiatives

This section sets out examples of how NGOs are managing performance and summaries of related research and initiatives:

- Planning tools
- Feedback examples
- Beyond impact
- Logical frameworks

Each page includes descriptions of the work and extensive links to more information.

Planning tools

This page presents planning and monitoring tools that are alternatives to 'logframes'. They all provide structured ways of analysing behaviours and relationships and identifying 'who has to do what' to achieve goals. There are significant overlaps between them. This is not a comprehensive list. The tools would need to be complemented with detailed implementation plans.

Theory of change

Keystone has developed a guide and interactive template for developing a theory of change. The method involves:

- Working with collaborators to identify a vision of success – what the desired social changes would entail.
- Identifying who has to do what to achieve and sustain those changes, considering the full system of relevant actors, including allies and opponents. This is expressed as a system map.
- Analysing each actors' contributions to change further by identifying the preconditions needed to achieve them.

Outcome mapping

Outcome mapping was developed by IDRC. It focuses on a development programme's contribution to a wider system of social changes and involves identifying:

- 'Boundary partners' – the people and organisations a programme will interact with directly.
- Outcomes – defined as changes in the behaviours and actions of boundary partners.
- Progress markers – graduated indicators that show how much the outcomes are happening.

Outcomes and progress markers are usually identified in dialogue with boundary partners. Monitoring is expected to contribute to on-going learning and improvement

Social framework

The social framework was developed by Rick Davies. It is an adaptation of the logical framework "designed as if people and their relationships mattered" – i.e. it is people-centred. It is closely linked to work on network maps.

The approach involves identifying all the actors involved in a project. Changes in each actors' behaviours and relationships are identified that are necessary for achieving the project's goals. Alongside them, objectively verifiable indicators, means of verification and assumptions are identified for each change in behaviour. The assumptions focus on "what other relationships will also be important".

Participatory Impact Pathway Analysis

Participatory Impact Pathway Analysis was developed at CIAT. It begins with a participatory workshop where stakeholders develop 'impact pathways'. This involves analysing problems and solutions using network maps, to identify the role of different stakeholders.

These are presented as an "outcomes logic model", identifying which actors are expected to make which specific changes, how the changes will come about, along with targets and means of verification.

In addition, an "impact logic model" can be developed that shows how changes in the outcomes are expected to change the livelihoods of ultimate beneficiaries.

Feedback examples

This page presents some leading examples of feedback systems that NGOs are using to measure their performance. It is not comprehensive.

Community Scorecards

Developed by CARE Malawi and now promoted by the World Bank, communities and local providers both separately identify and rate key aspects of local service provision (e.g. of primary health care). At an 'interface meeting' the two groups discuss the findings and plan improvements.

NGOs like CARE and ACDI/VOCA are using versions of the scorecard to monitor their own and partners' work.

In 2004, a randomised trial in Uganda found that, after a year, communities that used a scorecard gained many health benefits including a 33% reduction in child mortality. *(Bjorkman & Svensson)*

Keystone Partner Survey

In 2010, Keystone brought together 25 European and US NGOs who support southern partners. Using a common questionnaire, the partners were invited to rate different aspects of the support they received. The survey generated quantitative data on questions like "how useful is the northern NGO's training?", "do they provide funds on time?", "how approachable are they?"

The survey generated credible performance data on how well the 25 northern NGOs were doing their job and how they compared to each other, through benchmarking.

"I really appreciated the survey. All questions are clear and relevant and will surely contribute to improve our relationships with [the NGO] in future." *Survey respondent, 2010*

See also the ethical framework developed by Keystone to guide feedback exercises in development work.

Measuring Empowerment

A social movement in Bangladesh developed a framework of indicators that describe exactly what 'empowerment' means for local community groups, in their terms. Groups use it to assess their performance every year. They are reported as finding the assessment process useful and inspiring.

Quantified summaries are reported to managers and donors, disaggregated by gender and providing a new basis for assessing staff performance.

> "… a methodological breakthrough … [that] shows participatory assessments can empower and transform relationships, and at the same time generate reliable and valid statistics …"
> *Robert Chambers, 2010*

Coping Strategies Index

Developed by WFP and CARE, and now used internationally, this index measures household food security by asking people *"what do you do when you don't have adequate food, and don't have enough money to buy food?"*

First, local coping strategies are identified. Then households are surveyed to ask how many times they have used each strategy in the last week. A single score is generated, which can be monitored over time and compared between sites. The findings correlate well with more complex indicators, like income or food production.

Listen First

Concern and Mango developed 'Listen First' to monitor how well NGOs collaborate with local people. It is based on a 4 x 4 framework, setting out flexible performance standards in four areas: providing information, involving people in making decisions, listening and staff attitudes.

The approach generates feedback from local people and field staff using the framework, aiming to generate dialogue for improvement. It provides a way of measuring the level of participation actually achieved.

Outcomes Star

The Outcomes Star is a tool for measuring outcomes of work with homeless people in the UK. It is based on ten 'outcome areas' such as: physical health, self care and managing money. Homeless people mark their position on a scale of 1 – 10 for each area, in dialogue with care workers.

The approach has been widely adopted in the UK, with over 90 organisations signing up to use it.

"The Star is one of the few tools that are useful for both clients and staff and helps us demonstrate what we're doing – it ticks a lot of boxes." *Norwich City Assertive Outreach team, undated*

New technologies

New initiatives are using SMS text, mobile phone and web technology to collect and present feedback in new ways. They include:

- www.frontlinesms.com – large scale two way text messaging
- www.ushahidi.com – crowd sourcing citizen reporting
- www.emoksha.com – increasing citizen awareness and engagement
- www.sensemaker-suite.com – analysing stories from the bottom up

Other resources

- Who Counts? The Quiet Revolution of Participation and Numbers, Robert Chambers, 2007
- Creating the Missing Feedback Loop, Alex Jacobs, 2010
- Feedback: Good Practice Principles, ALINe, 2010

Beyond impact

Well informed and experienced authors, such as those below, argue that 'impact' is not an appropriate concept for managing performance in NGOs.

Impact evaluations can play an important role in testing and shaping NGOs' overall strategies. They should be allocated a proportionate amount of the resources available for measurement.

"… the results of impact assessment mechanisms are insufficient on their own to make sensible decisions about resource allocation to projects or organisations. There are other criteria, notably understanding of context; the ability to listen, learn, adapt and innovate; management capacity; and the ability to work with others and communicate learning." *Chris Roche, 1999*

"Our … argument is that it is not feasible, or even desirable, for all organizations to develop metrics at all levels on the logic chain."

"… measuring impacts makes sense under a severely limited set of circumstances …" *Alnoor Ebrahim & Kasturi Rangan, 2010*

"One way in which the necessity of aid has been understood is that 'aid is necessary for development' … . One of the main conclusions to be drawn from a dispassionate review of the evidence is that this is not true… . Development, growth and poverty reduction do take place without recourse to aid. … Thus the central question in aid discourse is not 'Does aid work?', but rather 'How can aid to poor countries be made effective?" *Roger Riddell, 2007*

"Outcomes often occur a long way downstream and may not take the form anticipated. Outcomes depend on responsiveness to context specific factors, creating diversity across initiatives. The value and sustainability of outcomes usually depend on the depth and breadth of involvement by many stakeholders. These characteristics make it difficult for external agencies: (a) to identify and attribute specific outcomes to specific components of their programs; and (b) to aggregate and compare results across initiatives."

"As they are currently applied, the concepts of 'attribution' and 'impact' represent threats to learning from evaluations of development efforts."

"… the search for impact has become an accepted and dominant part of the development discourse. I would argue, however, that when donors and their recipients try to be accountable for achieving impact, they are severely limiting their potential for understanding how and why impact occurs. The drive to claim credit interferes with the creation of knowledge." *Terry Smutylo, 2001*

Logical frameworks

The logical framework approach (LFA) is widely used as a standard approach for planning and monitoring NGO projects. A growing body of work assesses how well it works, including consistent criticism.

The approach is based on a 4 x 4 framework with 'activities', 'outputs', 'outcomes' and 'impact' down the vertical axis and 'narrative', 'indicators', 'means of verification' and 'assumptions' across the horizontal axis.

On the one hand, the framework meets the needs of powerful decision-makers to have a simple summary of plans and indicators. It also appears to link activities to long term social change. However these links are often aspirational.

On the other hand, LFA assumes change is linear and predictable, cannot handle political differences and is closed to unintended consequences. It tends to exaggerate NGOs' influence. Research has shown that its use tends to reduce local control and ownership.

"… the LFA tends to over-specify objectives and to over-emphasize control as opposed to flexibility."

"Since the focus of LFA is on achieving intended effects via intended routes, its utility for monitoring & evaluation is rather limited."

"It is often difficult for different actors to agree on terms like output or outcome because they are not naturally occurring divisions in time. It is particularly difficult to communicate this way of thinking to actors with different … cultural backgrounds." *Richard Hummelbrunner, 2010*

Tina Wallace carried out 10 years of research into how logframes are used in practice by NGOs and found:

"… the majority of NGO staff indicated that they did not refer to the logframes once funding was secured and implementation began. … What is written is often divorced from reality, both at the planning and reporting stages of the cycle. … The plans and guidelines often prove irrelevant at best, distorting at worst, and do little to support or enhance the development work being undertaken." *Tina Wallace, 2006*

In the 1980s the German and UK government aid agencies, GTZ and DFID, both introduced logframes as a standard tool for planning projects. Over 20 years later, in the late 2000s, DFID found that the expected benefits of logframes were not being realised. They issued another set of revised guidelines. GTZ has gone further and reduced logframes to one among 40 tools that might be relevant to different situations. (Jacobs et al, 2010)

Research on logframes

- Hummelbrunner "Beyond logframe: Critique, variations and alternatives" in "Beyond logframes; using systems concepts in evaluation" ed Fujita, FASID, 2010
- Wallace "The aid chain", Practical Action Publishing, 2006
- Jacobs, Barnett & Ponsford "Three approaches to monitoring", IDS Bulletin 41.6, 2010
- Bakewell & Garbutt "The use and abuse of the logical framework approach" SIDA, 2005
- Smutylo "Crouching impact, hidden attribution", IDRC, 2001
- Ebrahim "NGOs and organisational change" Cambridge, 2003

Section 4: References

ActionAid, 2006	*ALPS: Accountability, Learning & Planning System*, ActionAid ActionAid's system for managing Accountability, Learning and Planning – primarily based on a set of principles. See also the 2007 review of ALPS they commissioned and a 2005 field view.
Bakewell & Garbutt 2005	*The Use and Abuse of the Logical Framework Approach*, SIDA Balanced report into practitioners' experiences of using logical framework analysis. Identifies some advantages (particularly for senior decision makers) and many disadvantages (particularly for front line staff).
Cosgrave, 2006	*Tsunami Evaluation Coalition Synthesis Report*, TEC, available:www.tsunami-evaluation.org Sector-wide evaluation of the international response to the 2004 Asian tsunami, making major recommendations.. See the synthesis report (even just the executive summary).
Ebrahim 2003	*NGOs and organisational change,* Cambridge Detailed analysis of the relationships between NGOs and funders, drawing on the actual experiences of two Indian NGOs, and how logframes inhibit learning and performance.
Ebrahim & Rangan, 2010	*The Limits of Nonprofit Impact: A Contingency Framework for Measuring Social Performance*, Harvard Business School, Working Paper 10-099, 2010 Synthesis of current debates about measuring performance and impact. Argues that, in the social sector, organisations should measure different kinds of results, depending on their strategy and theory of change. They should not all measure impact.
Ellerman, 2005	*Helping People Help Themselves*, University of Michigan Press, available as a paper here Substantial and accessibly analysis of what it means to help people, drawing on eight philosopher-activists (including Freire). Ellerman emphasises that external actors have to be 'helpers' not 'doers', respecting their 'autonomous development' rather than falling into the trap of thinking we can solve their problems.
Fowler, 1997	*Striking a balance*, Earthscan Comprehensive analysis of managing NGOs, providing practical guidance for managers. Includes many examples of good and bad practice.
Goetz, 2008	*Who answers to women? Gender and accountability* UNIFEM Progress of the World's Women Report 2008/09 UNIFEM's major international report finds that development progress for women has been unacceptably slow and that progress depends on strengthening the accountability of powerful decision makers to women.
Hummelbrunner 2010	*Beyond logframe: critique, variations and alternatives* in Beyond logframes; systems concepts in evaluation ed Fujita, FASID, 2010 Summary of literature considering the strengths and weaknesses of logframes, using the German GTZ experience as an illustration of how a development agency has moved beyond logframes.
Jacobs et al, 2010	*Three approaches to monitoring* IDS Bulletin 41.6 Article comparing the strengths and weaknesses of three different approaches to monitoring: logframes, participatory monitoring & evaluation and feedback systems.

Kaplan, 2000	*Understanding Development as a Living Process*, available in "New roles & relevance", ed Lewis & Wallace, Kumarian Press Passionate and highly experienced practitioner explains why development is about people, not project activities or pre-determined outputs – and what this means for NGOs.
Keystone for Bond, 2006	*A Bond Approach to Quality in NGOs: Putting Beneficiaries First*, Bond A report from research from across the UK NGO sector into what drives quality, concluding that it is primarily determined by the quality of relationships with beneficiaries. Now linked to the Bond Effectiveness Programme
Riddell, 2007	*Does Foreign Aid Really Work?,* OUP Huge synthesis of evaluations of government aid and NGO work. Concludes that we don't and can't have the evidence to prove whether aid generates social results, and suggests we should ask 'how can aid work better?' instead.
Roche, 1999	*Impact Assessment for Development Agencies,* Oxfam Well regarded book reporting on a lengthy action research project by major NGOs, on the strengths and weaknesses of impact assessment. Shows how impact is locally specific, and has to be negotiated between local actors – i.e. it is not objective or easy-to-measure.
Sen, 2000	*Human Rights and Human Development*, UNDP, Chapter 1 Discussion of what development means, around the idea of enhancing the capabilities that people have reason to value (not just what we think they should value, or just GDP).
Smutylo, 2001	*Crouching Impact, Hidden Attribution*, IDRC Introduction to Outcome Mapping, including background analysis which is critical of using 'impact' and 'logframes' to manage performance. See also much more information on Outcome Mapping here.
Thomas, 2000	*What makes good development management?* in 'Development and management' ed Eade, Oxfam Paper that discusses what is distinctive about managing development projects, as opposed to managing other kind of work, and the links with personal development and empowerment.
Wallace, 2006	*The Aid Chain,* ITDG Compelling and disturbing evidence that shows how (a) NGOs use logframes to describe their work to donors, and (b) logframes actively get in the way of high quality field work.

About

This paper and www.ngoperformance.org are written by Alex Jacobs. Email me on alex(at)ngoperformance.org or leave a comment on the site.

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