

Barefoot Guide Tool

Exploring the Unique Roles of NGOs

A strategy role-playing simulation game

The purpose of this simulation exercise is educational, enabling participants within an NGO or on a course to understand the unique nature and work of NGOs. It will help people to think about the work, relationships and organisation as well as some of the primary questions and tensions faced by NGOs and practitioners.

Group size

Between 6 and 20 participants

Process

Give each participant the story and read through.

Each participant should then be assigned a role of one of the following

- Director (up to 2)
- Fundraiser (up to 2)
- Trainers (a few)
- Fieldworkers (a few)
- Members of the Board (a few)
- An observer (1 to 3)

and each given the briefing notes only for the role they have been assigned.

After people are familiar with their roles seat have them sit as for a meeting of this kind. The observers are not part of the meeting and should sit to the side. The meeting should then be allowed to happen.

Decide on a cut-off time, which could be anything between 25 to 45 minutes - or when you feel that enough has been surfaced for learning purposes.

After closing the simulation, tell the participants that they must now let go of their role. Quite often people get so involved with their role that they struggle to let go which interferes with the unpacking of the issues.

Move into a learning circle to draw learnings from the simulation. Move into a learning circle to draw learnings from the simulation. Decide first on the kind of questions you would like to explore, for example:

- What are the unique tensions and contradictions faced by NGOs trying to practise developmentally?
- How do these issues play themselves out in the work and in the organisation?
- What does this experience say about donor relationships and practice?
- What have you learnt from this that applies to your organisation and what does it mean in practical terms?

Use the Action learning guideline. If the group is large you may want to have small groups

At the end is a small handout as the basis for an input, for a reading to be discussed in the light of the experiences or as a take-away.

Time required

Set-up, story and role briefing	20 minutes
Simulation meeting	45 minutes (longer if the energy is still there)
Drawing learnings	45 minutes
Input	<u>10 minutes</u>
Up to	120 minutes - 2 hours

THE STORY

You belong to an NGO whose primary task is to help communities to establish autonomous pre-school centres (Early Childhood Educare - ECE - Centres) which will be run and owned by the community. This is taking place in a country where the government does not make provision or provide resources for early childhood educare. Your NGO believes that pre-school education is vital for the child's later life and the role which s/he will play in society. Your NGO further believes that communities should develop to take control of their own affairs; therefore it seeks to assist those community groups involved with child care to become independent community-based organisations.

Your NGO engages in the following activities:

It has fieldworkers (or community development workers) who work directly with community groups in facilitating their development towards autonomous early child educare organisations.

It has trainers based at the NGO's offices who run training programmes for teachers and committee members. These are short courses run at the NGO's offices.

The directors of the NGO lobby government for changes in the educational system. They lobby for more resources to be given to early childhood educare and for the government to adopt the model of community-based organisation (rather than state-run centres) which your NGO is promoting. They also liaise with other educare organisations around this same model, trying to establish a powerful network of educare NGOs operating in a similar way.

Your organisation is funded by foreign donors. Very few of these donors actually visit the centres in the communities; they prefer to speak with the directors and to assess your NGO's effectiveness by the organisation's reported figures, which stress the number of training courses run, the number of trainees who have attended, and the number of community-based centres which your NGO services.

Recently a particular donor made an exception and was taken around to a number of centres by a fieldworker. They received the impression that the model for community early childhood educare which your NGO is promoting was not working, and they subsequently withdrew their funding.

Now, another major donor is about to pay your NGO a visit. At the same time, a national conference on ECE is being organised by your NGO, at which your NGO hopes to get its model adopted by other NGOs and to take a leading role in the national network being formed. Government is currently reviewing its educational policy, and may be influenced by the proceedings of such a gathering.

It is clear, however, that there is dissension within your NGO with respect to the value of the work which it is doing. A full staff meeting has therefore been called, to resolve the situation before these events take place.

The NGO is relatively big, comprising sixty staff members:

Directors:	2
Fundraisers	2
Middle Management:	5
Trainers:	10
Fieldworkers:	26
Trainers:	10
Admin Staff	15

At the meeting, the following will be present:

Directors
Fundraisers
Trainers
Fieldworkers
A member of the Board

THE DIRECTORS

You have called this meeting because you feel that the work which you have been involved in for the past twelve years is in danger. At the same time, opportunities for lobbying government and influencing the field have never been greater, and you do not wish to jeopardise these.

You believe that your model for Early Childhood Educare (ECE) provision - that of independent community based centres - is the correct one. You also believe that the methodology which you have worked out over the years is the way to achieve this. This methodology focuses on centre-based training courses, followed by community work in the field. You believe that your trainers and their training courses are the best available. The number of trainees passing through these courses, coupled with their positive comments on the courses, is further proof of this.

You have spent much time and energy meeting with government officials, writing papers, and influencing the practice of other NGOs. At last this is about to pay off. You feel also that after so much time you deserve recognition for the work you have done, and your national status and standing is very important to you. You would like to play a leading role in the national network which is about to be formed.

Yet now your fieldworkers are saying that your model and methodology do not work, that effective teaching is not taking place in these centres and that the centres themselves are not autonomous but are dependent on the NGO. You feel that this is unacceptable criticism given the fact that the training courses are well-received and that the number of centres is increasing, as is your staff compliment. The fieldworkers have always moaned about everything, including their conditions of service. Yet they have no overview, no understanding of the whole methodology or of the issues which are at stake.

A major donor is coming; a major conference is approaching. Your credibility and status, as well as your life's work, is on the line. You are determined to put a stop to this dissension in the organisation right now, whatever the consequences.

FIELDWORKERS

You are angry, but also fearful. You fear that if you speak honestly, you may lose your job. Also, you do not know if the other fieldworkers will speak out with you, because you seldom meet with them, spending most of your time on your own with the communities your service. You know that the other fieldworkers are also unhappy, but you do not know whether they will have the courage to speak, and if they do not, but you do, you will be on your own, with no one to back you up. This makes you scared, but you must speak, because you are angry and frustrated.

You know that the NGO's model and methodology are not working. You know this because you interact with the ECE centres on a daily basis. You believe in the vision of independent community-based ECE centres as much as anyone, but your NGO's methodology is not working. The teachers in the ECE centres teach

badly, and anyway they mostly leave after a short while because the pay is so bad, and new teachers have to be sent on the training courses, and they also leave soon afterwards. The community committees who are supposed to be running the centres are not working either. They are unskilled, full of conflict, and do not enjoy community support. The fact that they have been on training courses at the NGO offices does not mean a thing, because the reality out in the community is very different. There are power plays, battles for prestige and scarce resources, and therefore much conflict.

In a word, the centres are not viable, let alone independent. They are completely dependent on the NGO for continued servicing and for fund-raising, and they are dependent on you to keep the centres functioning and the teachers teaching.

You are angry because this has all been said often enough before, by the fieldworkers in various forums, but no one else in the NGO seems to listen or to care. The directors are concerned only with their own reputation and status. They never visit the centres, except sometimes with funders; they are seldom in the organisation and spend most of their time running around the country to high-powered meetings. They refuse to evaluate what is happening on the ground, or even to take the time to listen. The fundraiser is only concerned with raising money, and so wants the NGO to create the impression of success, even where this impression is not true. The trainers believe that everything revolves around their courses, and do not pay any attention to what happens in the field. They also enjoy a higher status in the NGO, with higher salaries, more power and more perks. Your own managers - referred to as middle management - are useless; they have no management training and are interested only in pleasing the directors and thus maintaining their status.

On the other hand, you feel that you, as a fieldworker, have the least status of anyone in the organisation. You get the lowest pay, and are the least specialised and trained. Indeed, there is no fieldworker training that takes place; you are simply expected to be able to work constructively and developmentally with the community because you come from the community. There is no fieldworkers' forum where you can discuss issues, and you feel marginalised because you are always out in the field and do not partake in the life of the NGO the way the office-based staff do. There is little constructive supervision, no evaluation, monitoring or reflection. There is very little training or development that takes place with respect to fieldworkers.

Yet you know the centres could work if more attention was paid to fieldwork, to the actual developmental facilitation of the community organisations themselves. It is in the communities that the real work of the NGO takes place, yet all the organisation's energy seems to focus around the office activities. For example, the training courses should be specialised addition to fieldwork where necessary, rather than as it is now where the organisation concentrates on training and regards fieldwork almost as a by-product, a necessary evil.

Now a crisis meeting is taking place because a funder learned the truth behind the facade. Will this be just another sham, or has the time come to speak up at last?

TRAINERS

A meeting is being called because some fieldworkers, it seems, gave donors the impression that the NGO was not nearly as successful as they had previously believed. Why had the fieldworkers done this? Were they trying to destroy the NGO because they felt marginalised? Did they take the donors to the worst of the ECE centres - certainly there are some which appear very disorganised, but these are by no means the majority. Or were they simply incompetent, and the donors decided to discontinue funding on the grounds of what they saw of the fieldworkers themselves, rather than the ECE centres?

You feel angry with the fieldworkers, who often criticise the NGO's practice but seldom have anything constructive to offer. You wonder, in fact, what they do on their own in the communities, and whether they are productive at all. You wonder too whether middle management has any control over them, or over what is going on in the field. And you feel a great sense of frustration, because the success of your training courses is dependent on the follow-up work which the fieldworkers do in the field, and their lack of competence sometimes makes you wonder.

Certainly there is no problem with the training courses themselves. Both the courses for teachers as well as the courses - in organisation and finance - for committee members are the best available, leading all other NGOs. As well, you receive very positive feedback from course participants - trainees - at the end of each course. All the trainers have themselves been well trained, and the course material has been evaluated by experts.

In your opinion, if there is a problem at all it is the fieldworkers themselves. As trainers, you have no control over the quality of work which fieldworkers do. But you know that fieldwork is non-specialised, general sort of development work which the fieldworkers should be able to perform competently, given the fact that most of them come from the communities they service. Yet you know that fieldworkers are the weak link. They seem unable to follow simple instructions, and do not seem to understand the link between the training courses and the follow-up work which they should be doing. Sometimes you feel that they undermine the positive achievements of the training courses.

You hope that this meeting will allow the necessary things to be said. Things cannot go on as they are.

FUNDRAISERS

Well, it is about time this meeting was called. You cannot go on in this way anymore, having all of your efforts to cultivate donors being destroyed by a few fieldworkers who do not know which side their bread is buttered on.

Funding is tight for all NGOs at the moment. You have your work cut out just trying to maintain current levels of funding, let alone bringing added funding in to cover the rapid expansion of the organisation. You simply cannot afford to let your NGO develop a bad impression with funders. If there are problems in the field, problems with respect to delivery, then let them be discussed inside the NGO, openly but confidentially. It is unforgivable that fieldworkers chose to speak directly to donors about these things.

It's interesting that fieldworkers turn out to be the ones to endanger funding, yet they are always the ones complaining about how low their salaries are. Where do they think the money comes from, anyway? They do not have any understanding as to how hard it is to raise the money in the first place.

The point is, as anyone who has been in marketing would know, the way the product is packaged is everything. It is the impression which brings the money in. And of course the impression must be as close to the truth as possible. But no NGO practice will be perfect. And the only way to improve that practice, in order to benefit the target community, is to ensure that the NGO has adequate funds to do its work with the least hassle and constraint.

In a word, you do not interfere with the work of fieldworkers or trainers, and you wish they would not interfere with your work. A major donor is about to arrive. You are looking to this meeting to sort the problems out, so that the donor will get the right impression from all staff members.

MEMBERS OF THE BOARD

You do not normally participate in staff meetings; indeed, you do not even know all the staff. But this is a serious situation, and you have been asked by the Board to be at the meeting, so that the Board can gain an objective impression as to what is happening in the NGO.

You know the perspective so far as the directors are concerned; they have let their feelings be known at Board meetings. But you seldom get to see the rest of the organisation. This is not normally a problem; the Board has implicit trust in the integrity and competence of the directors, and of the picture which they present concerning the organisation. But this particular issue is a very dangerous one, and the Board felt it important to have a presence in this important staff meeting.

Please remember, if the meeting reaches an impasse and things get stuck impossibly in accusation and counter-accusation, you have the power, if you deem fit, to call in a consultant to help achieve some clarity and resolution. Only you can do this. If you do so choose, the consultant will be available immediately.

OBSERVERS

You are not actually part of the meeting but there to assist with drawing learning. Your role is to observe the meeting and to notice what happens, what gets said, what strikes you as interesting. Take notes and be prepared to feed back your observations.

NGO CHARACTERISTICS WHICH ARE UNIQUE AND CONTRADICTORY

SOME BRIEF NOTES

The pursuance of multiple strategies at the same time, which create contradictory demands. Thus: welfare, development, advocacy. Welfare and development in many ways contradict each other, while advocacy demands assertiveness and aggression where development requires listening and facilitation. Moreover, advocacy is directed towards the powerful elite, while development and welfare are oriented towards the community.

The chasm between supply and demand. Supply emanates from donors, while demand comes from clients. Thus the organisation is torn between packaging and truth, between the needs of different departments. Also we run the risk of bloated NGOs forcing themselves onto unwilling wallflowers, or starving NGOs whose next stop could save the world if only they could find the taxi fare to get them there.

The facilitation of development creates an organisation with extremely porous boundaries, engaged with social change. Thus the demands and chaos of change in society inevitably enter NGO reality. Far from being able to shut it out - as many other organisational types do to a certain extent - it is incumbent on the NGO to embrace and incorporate it, and through this even to model its desired social future in its own organisational form. The way things are done in the NGO become - correctly - as important as the things that are achieved, the successful NGO itself being an achievement. The negative side to this issue is that the organisational design of the NGO - that is, the structure - is often a response to 'political' reality rather than to the needs of the organisations strategy and methodology. Put another way, good organisational practice has form following function, but in the type of situation just outlined form does not follow function but rather function is forced to follow form.

For similar reasons, NGOs in their development trajectories often tend to skip the differentiation phase, also referred to as the phase of scientific management. This phase is seen - generally unconsciously - as too conservative for a progressive organisation trying to model the type of social form for which it is striving in its work in the world outside. Yet organisations skip this phase at their own risk; the dangers are manifold and apparent.

The work of the NGO takes place on the periphery of the organisation, rather than at the centre. Indeed, the fact that the client is the producer and that the NGO can only facilitate that production means that production does not take place inside but rather outside the NGO. Therefore, for the primary worker, the fieldworker, "production" often takes place "alone", beyond the boundaries of the organisation. This can be debilitating in itself; it becomes worse because power concentrates in the centre, and being on the margin of the organisation promotes marginalisation of fieldworkers. Further, the real information which the NGO needs to adapt and improve its practice comes from the field, and can only come through the fieldworkers. But fieldworkers are marginalised, paid the least, (supposedly) the least skilled, therefore are not taken seriously enough by the powers which concentrate at the centre.

Through the needs of the lobbying strategy - "creating an enabling environment" in which the development work can take place - the services of the (often) most valuable members of staff are lost to the field as founder members, strategists and good fieldworkers gravitate towards the policy arena. Not only does this

adversely effect power relations in the NGO, but the NGO often begins to ride on image rather than reality of what is being achieved on the ground. Often the result of all this is simply hot, thin air.

There is no straight line between cause and effect, between input and output. Also, the very consequences of the work that you do - often particularly if successful - force current strategies into irrelevance, and therefore demand change. In other words, responsiveness and flexibility become key. Yet this contradicts the notion of proactivity. Therefore planning is no longer a simple task; it must be able to adapt and deal with contingencies. Management and supervision too become different ball-games; what is required is the notion of disciplined flexibility. Also because the NGO worker must be facilitated into developing her/his effectiveness if s/he is to model this relationship in doing development work outside the organisation.

Therefore, too, evaluation should seldom be summative, but generally normative, as an ongoing process of action-learning is the only way to bridge the contradiction between responsiveness to the field, on the one hand, and strategic clarity and proactivity on the other. Evaluation must become an ongoing activity, built into action. (Yet, of course, there is no end to the demands presented by the social context and obligations of the NGO; therefore there is always too little time).

Due to the seductive nature of packaged products as against the frustrations and (seeming) costliness of long-term process, 'production' activities always gain over 'facilitation' activities. Therefore, within the NGO, 'specialists' - for example those running specialised training courses - gain power and position as against fieldworkers, who come to be regarded as 'generalists', where this word is used in a derogatory sense. Also, centre-based activities gain precedence over field-based activities. Finally, the NGO itself gains as against the client, (i.e. the fieldworker remains unprofessional, ad hoc and untrained, while the NGO dines with donors).

Some guiding questions in using the Action Learning Cycle as a tool

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ACTION

What significant things happened? Describe the events. Who was involved, what did they do? What picture emerges? How did I/we feel?

REFLECTION

Why did it happen, what caused it? What helped, what hindered? What did we expect? What assumptions did we make? What really struck us? Do we know of any other experiences or thinking that might help us look at this experience differently?

LEARNING

What would we have done differently? What did we learn, what new insights? What was confirmed? What new questions have emerged? What other theories help us to deepen these learnings?

PLANNING

So what does this mean for practice? What do we want? What do we want to do, to happen? How? What are we going to do differently? What do we have to let go of or stop doing? How will we not repeat the same mistake? What steps will we use to build these new insights into our practice?