Capacity Building Through Partnership: Intermediary Nongovernmental Organizations as Local and Global Actors

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Abstract

Partnership and capacity building have become popular strategies among intermediary nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Partnership is viewed as a cure for centrally managed bureaucratic NGOs and capacity building as a measure for strengthening local NGOs. This article examines the case of an intermediary NGO that followed a unique strategy combining capacity building through partnership. Through this, it reveals the trade-offs involved in the choice of an appropriate governance structure. It was found that although the decentralized network form of governance proved to be a powerful innovation, it presented a paradox. Especially in this case where the goal was transmission of specific values and perspectives about sustainable development, such a strategy posed a complex set of trade-offs. Drawing from the experience of this organization, the author suggests that a "plural form" organization may provide maximum governance efficiency for intermediary NGOs like the one examined here. These insights may also apply to social movement organizations.

Keywords: *capacity building; intermediary nongovermental organizations; partnership model; governance; centralization; decentralization*

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)[1] have established their presence as important civil society actors. However, one important reason for their inability to bring sustainable impact has been their failure to make the right linkages between their work at the grassroots level and the larger sociopolitical systems and institutional structures in which they are embedded (Edwards & Hulme, 1992). In other words, the problem has been one of negotiating between local imperatives and global structures. The problem has become acute in the context of a globalized world, where lobbying global institutions is as important as delivering services locally to have a sustainable impact on development efforts.

Over the past two decades, a new type of NGO that aims to create linkages between local issues and global institutions has emerged. These NGOs have been variously termed as "intermediary NGOs" (Carroll, 1992), "bridging organizations" (Brown, 1991), and "support organizations" (Brown & Kalegaonkar, 2002). They have in common two features that distinguish them from conventional NGOs. First, they are located at the center of several constituencies—local groups, national bodies, and international institutions. Second, their activities include innovative programs like organizational capacity building, training and staff development, research and advocacy, collection and dissemination of information, networking, all of which are not considered to be traditional NGO activities.[2] These features enable such organizations to establish the "bridging ties" between civil society groups and organizations and the institutional structures at the national and global level. Thus compared to conventional service providing NGOs, they have greater potential for making sustainable and large-scale impacts. As far as their political orientation goes, support organizations may be largely apolitical adopting political stands on an issue basis while lobbying governments and international organizations. These organizations often become suppliers of information and active participants in various social movements and transnational advocacy networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998). Thus, these organizations are at the same time local actors and global actors depending on the nature of their issue involvement at a particular point in time. The unconventional nature of their functions and their structural location makes the issue of governance a problematic one for such organizations.

This article is an in-depth study of the governance related issues of a leading intermediary NGO, the Society for Participatory Research In Asia (PRIA, India). This organization had a unique decentralized network form of governance. On the one hand, it collaborated with international organizations in generating and disseminating knowledge about various development issues. On the other hand, it collaborated with a network of regional NGOs in imparting training to local NGOs on various organizational skills. Drawing on the case of PRIA, this article reveals the unusual paradox that confronted the organization and explores some of the related governance challenges.

SITUATING GOVERNANCE

One pertinent question that needs to be answered is whether intermediary NGOs[3] are truly a new type of organization, and if aspects of their governance warrant special attention. The only other type of organization that resembles these is "halfway houses"[4] described by Morris (1984) in the context of their role in the emergence of the American Civil Rights Movement. Intermediary NGOs are similar to such halfway houses with respect to their repertoire of functions but radically different in their structural position in the organization environment. They are similar to the extent that both types of organizations

are preoccupied with building the capacities of individuals and organizations to enable them to improve their performance. They are both valuable to their causes (movements and development agenda, respectively) because they can provide additional resources to strengthen their indigenous base. Halfway houses strengthen the indigenous base of movements and help to create the internal organization that movements need to sustain collective action over long periods of time. They do this by training people in organizing tactics and educating them about past movements. Likewise, intermediary NGOs like PRIA strive to strengthen the internal organization of local NGOs and community-based groups so that they can sustain their efforts to facilitate development over long periods of time. They do this by providing training in organization development issues.

However, when it comes to their structural position in the organizational environment, intermediary NGOs are more advantageously located than halfway houses. Rather than being relatively isolated from mainstream society, these NGOs are at the center stage of development discourses. It is possible to say that they fill the crucial structural gap created by the separation between local NGOs and global funding agencies. Intermediary NGOs like PRIA target local and global actors to achieve their purpose. And in doing this, they face a structural dilemma that halfway houses did not face because they targeted only individual actors. In that sense, they are similar to community-based mediating structures studied by Couto (1999) who noted that in these cases successful advocacy came from the capacity of the organization to pursue community organizing and community development simultaneously, at least to some degree.

I argue that the source of this dilemma has to be traced to the choice of appropriate organizational structures in sustaining collective action toward achievement of the end goals, which in this case are development and the inculcation of a "perspective" about it. I argue that this is akin to the problem that social movement organizations confront in the creation of appropriate "mobilizing structures" (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996).[5] Within the social movements literature, resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) and the political process model (Tilly, 1978) addresses the creation of mobilizing structures.

In social movement organizations, the problem of mobilizing structures has typically presented itself as a dilemma between centralization and decentralization. Among those who study it there is a divide between those who argue that centralized bureaucratic organizations are comparatively more effective in mobilizing resources and sustaining collective action (Gamson, 1975; McCarthy & Zald, 1977) than decentralized informal organizations sharing an overarching ideology (Gerlach & Hine, 1970). However, while centralized structures facilitate technical expertise and coordination that are essential for successful mobilization and institutional change, they are less effective in engaging grassroots participation. On the contrary, decentralized organizations are effective in engaging grassroots participation but find it

more difficult to ensure strategic effectiveness in mobilizing them (Zald & Garner, 1966). In addition, it has been noted (Zald & Denton, 1987) that decentralization provides greater opportunity and flexibility to innovate and experiment in response to local situations, while centralization provides greater facilities and control for implementation.

One of the central problems that is implicitly present throughout yet conspicuously absent in the existing treatment of governance issues in the social movement literature is the question of efficiency (or the lack of it): efficiency of governance structures in achieving ultimate social change goals. A profitable way of highlighting efficiency concerns is to view this discussion of governance problem in light of the transaction-cost economizing perspective. For this we have to consider PRIA and its partner organizations as the nonmarket equivalent of a "strategic network", that is, "interorganizational relations [that] take on a more perduring nature than that of the narrowly defined instrumentalities of procuring necessary inputs and disposing of products, . . . [but include] seeking unfair advantages and subverting the market mechanism" (Williamson, 1981, p. 570). And in cases like this where knowledge and shared values are more important than skills, continuity of interorganizational relationships has added value. In PRIA's case the assets of interest were those that facilitated a continued supply of services (partners acting as channels for dissemination of training to other civil society organizations and groups). According to the transaction-cost approach, in such cases the main issue is identifying governance structures that are appropriate for uncertainty and asset specificity, particularly human asset specificity (which arises from learning by doing; Williamson, 1987, p. 555). For PRIA and its network, such human asset specificity lay in the partner organizations' (specifically its leader's) subscribing to PRIA's normative standards and values.

Applied to the noncommercial context transaction-cost analysis provides us with a valuable insight. This is the knowledge that for nonprofit enterprises the governance implications of transaction-cost analysis are always incompletely realized because transaction-cost economizing entails the sacrifice of other valued objectives (of which power is often one; Williamson, 1981). The study of the trade-offs of such valued objectives has been deemed important by scholars in the field (Williamson, 1981).[6] From this vantage point, this case study may be viewed as an analysis of the trade-offs involved in following a decentralized partnership network as a form of governance.

Conclusion

Because this study entailed the examination of a complex organizational process, a case study method was thought to be the most appropriate. This method provided an ideal way of incorporating the NGO's contextual conditions and allowed for a detailed examination of the organization and its strategy. I entered the organization as a disinterested observer and drew on several different documentary sources of information and conducted interviews with key personnel in the organization and its partners.[7] Overall, by using different sources of information I was able to minimize the possibility of biases and inconsistencies. One drawback of using a case study method is that it makes generalizations impossible. However, with that qualification, it is possible to argue for the worth of case studies because they give us rich analysis of actual processes rather than predicting the probability of future events. In that sense, the scope of case studies is limited but is well suited to its purpose.

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