



The INGO Path: Can INGOs be better at ‘shifting the power?’

Deborah Doane, Partner, Rights CoLab

When groups in the global south talk about #ShiftThePower, they’re often pointing their fingers at large International NGOs (INGOs). For most of the 25 years I’ve spent working in civil society, I have found myself both equally inspired and dismayed by some INGO practice. INGOs can seem to have too much authority over decision-making; or account for a disproportionate share of the resources. In sum, there is an overarching sense of power imbalance between global actors and local actors. So I’ve been asking myself, how do we genuinely shift the power to where it’s needed?

I spoke to 4 senior leaders from the north and south about the role of INGOs in helping to ‘shift the power’ to the local, specifically to the global south, and compiled some of their thoughts as part of the dialogue for the **Pathways to Power Symposium** taking place in London in November 2019.



Christine Allen
Director, CAFOD



Barbara Nöst, Director
Zambian Governance
Foundation
for Civil Society



Amitabh Behar
CEO, Oxfam India



Stephanie Draper
CEO, BOND

What do we really mean by shift the power?



When we talk about power, we’re talking about power over. You know the classic power over/ power with/power within. If you can have power with, that’s a different power dynamic, and that’s a big part of what we mean by shifting the power. We need a much more profound understanding of the power dynamics that are happening and how we can work together and benefit from each other’s strengths.



The framework is not of a donor and a grantee its actually of solidarity. I would even say solidarity is understanding with a huge amount of humility that the action that's happening on the ground is by the activists there and they're the ones with the power to change. You're at best in some small way contributing to building their power.

It's not about shifting power it's about building power from below. Shifting the power means shifting the responsibility, and what kind of responsibility are we talking about and what does that mean for our role as INGOs?

What about the localisation agenda: isn't it enough?



I would say it's pretty much a Colonial way of working where the power is pretty much in the north. At the moment, its more optics, where you have Oxfam moving to Nairobi or Action Aid to Johannesburg. Amnesty is also staying closer to the ground, but the real shifting of power from the north to the south has not happened.



I think CAFOD and Christian Aid have taken brave positions around things like the localisation agenda, like wanting to make sure we don't necessarily have lots of offices overseas. Within the funding situation, it's very much a kind of concern of not wanting to compete with our partners. I have come across situations where some agencies view the localisation agenda as a way in which organisations get funding for the local version of themselves, instead of local civil society.



Or those ones who are locally registered and have a local board, it's a rubber stamp board just to be recognised in-country as a proper organisation. Those ones I have the biggest resentment for – they register here, and compete with local NGOs and have all the rights of local NGOs. We start competing for tenders for money that should be reserved for local NGOs. But they're mostly won by the INGOs because we don't have the kind of background, we're not equipped as much as INGOs are. They come here for a project period only – 2 years, 3 years. This is even more damaging because they hardly leave anything behind.



This idea that those organisations operate as 'local NGOs' and INGOs – it's having your cake and eat it. It feels very disingenuous. It's like they're hoovering up the resources.



They benefit from being categorised as a local NGO, sit they with us, like-minded local NGOs, in the same room discussing issues. Then the day after they go and sit with the INGO forum, and benefit from the discussion they have with INGOs. It's a bit dishonest.

I think poaching is one of the biggest problems. I did an analysis of many of my staff. If I look back to where they have gone to, 90% went to INGOs, the rest of bi-laterals, EU, etc. We ourselves have made a clear commitment to our grantees, that we will never ever poach from our grantees.



There are questions about the extent to which INGOs can “poach” staff because they offer much better terms and conditions for local staff. Or you have a real distinction between expat staff pay and conditions and local staff. But there is a distinction between recognising the fact that staff, particularly locally, do have a right to develop, to work anywhere in the way that the rest of us do. We have to be careful about how we frame some of that, so that we don't make it sound like local staff shouldn't be working with INGOs.

Who are northern INGOs?



We can't not be British NGOs because that's who we are. Is that what's being asked, that we don't work in a country? The White Saviour narrative, the safeguarding elements that can paint an ideological picture, not a helpful picture. You can't paint everyone the same.



Many INGOs have a clash of accountabilities. They have to be accountable to their funders and they have to be accountable to the people that they serve, to their staff and to their Boards. The different needs of these group can present a conflict of accountability that is problematic.



There is a reasonable amount of recognition of the need to reinvent ourselves. To work more as allies in solidarity with the front-line activist workers instead of being these large entities who are often perceived and play the role of a donor.

Why is change so hard?



They don't want to bother to question their role as INGO representatives. In conversations, when you meet them in meetings or socially, this is a very tentative question and it is not something they would like to hear, because it threatens their existence.



That the system needs to be shaken up is absolutely right. But where we've got to is that old saying: *how do you eat an elephant?* That's partly because the dialogue and the conversation has been focussed on the what, and much less on the how. 2020 is the start of what the UN is calling the decade of delivery. The irony is we spent the last 5 years talking about the Grand Bargain, the Paris agreement for Climate, the SDGs. These things haven't only just been formulated they've been in existence for 5 years.



The only good news is that people recognise that we need to change. But we are really struggling at the moment. I have not seen enough momentum in terms of our ability to respond to the larger changes in global politics, the national politics, that we have seen, which is more rightwards, anti-democratic, shrinking of civic spaces. We have not been able to engage with social movements, the sporadic but spontaneous movements that are happening.

But it's all too risky....



There's still a massive flow of funding coming from north to south. That holds uncomfortable power dynamics even if you put in different governance structures. So that's a challenge and has been exacerbated by some of the rules and regulations that have been put in place in terms of a risk-averse funding environment. INGOs in the UK right now just feel totally embattled so it is more difficult to take risks. We need to find ways to de-risk the shift in power.



I'm constantly being reminded of the idea that if you don't take wounds in a fairly open war, then you'll not be able to shift power. I'm not really worried about one small segment not supporting us. I would say, that's where the problem is.



Boards are generally nervous of financial risk, which is their duty to pay attention to. There needs to be a conversation that engages boards in that, alongside getting other measures to be much more meaningful. I don't think there's a shared sense of what success looks like and it also differs between organisations. So it's quite difficult for CSOs to sell the shifting the power story to their boards because they haven't quite worked out what that looks like and they don't have measures of success that can match the financial metrics.



There's a massive amount of pressure that's on international NGOs that, to some extent, if we just stepped aside, and say 'ok you have it', it would absolutely destroy the southern and local NGO. It's like a cartoon acme weight coming down and it would squash them completely. It's not to say that we shouldn't hand over power, but we can't set them [local partners] up to fail or simply pass the risk further down the chain, because that can significantly change the nature and ethos of those local organisations too, because of the power of the donor.

How can the local and the global complement each other?



It feels that we need a much stronger sense of dialogue and discussion about the relative role of international NGOs in the context of a local eco system. And when an INGO comes to work in a country or develops a project of its work in a country, the first part of that needs to be a contextual analysis...and doing a pretty honest analysis of itself and saying 'what's our role in that'.



There should be a discussion about principles to demarcate where the space of the INGO and the local NGOs start, discussing how do we complement each other, rather than compete. How do we translate this into concrete terms in our collaboration, so that we do not suffer, or you don't distort the local market .How do we make it work for both parties?



Getting a feel of the need for a kind of principles or charter from local NGOs to say 'this is how we really want INGOs to behave' would be good. Not necessarily a list of 50 things, but maybe half a dozen simple principles that are reasonably top line that you can reflect on and provide with an opportunity of engaging.



What's exciting about INGOs, we have fairly small civil society organisations and we do not have the organisational muscle needed to make an impact, either the impact happens from the social movement space or the directly political space. But in the not for profit space, we're too small. It's only INGOs that have the size needed.



The fact that the global power processes are shifting and there's a kind of Putinisation of global leaders where they are playing by a completely different rule book and closing civil society space – that is a really important moment to show that muscle and show solidarity across the piece. I'm at a conference and we've just had a conversation about closing civil society space and local and international NGOs are working well together with the local NGOs being the face of the advocacy campaigns and resisting change and bringing communities and local actors together. INGOs are providing some ballast and back office expertise on the legal elements and international protocols. That is a good effective partnership.



When you're raising resources in the north, you clearly raise resources in the north in the name of the southern poor. And therefore at best, the entity sitting there are conduits or trustees of that money. Because that individual giving, that money is for the south. But that's not understood.

I just don't understand why INGOs need 100's of people sitting in the north with huge teams to support southern NGOs on the ground. Most of the resources get tied to these headquarters and little goes to the south. Real decision-making about what needs to be done and how, is still decided by HQ-based northern experts.

I get very surprised sometimes when the word colonialism/imperialism doesn't happen in a full one-day conversation and they're talking about changes in the South. So just that understanding that ahistorical conversations cannot work.



I went to the Finance for the Future summit, where they discussed social impact investors, private sector, local NGOs, INGOs, etc... they discussed how to divest and help institutions how to divest from fossil fuels and how to support local NGOs. But the local NGOs were very thinly represented. I have the impression that local NGOs don't have the clout or the power or the kind of sufficient networks that they have from INGOs to get to this kind of financing. This is where the INGOs can play a role a very useful intermediary role but making it clear that we shouldn't end up again with 1.3%, but a much bigger share.

Are we seeing this through rose coloured glasses?



The local NGO sector, there's a lot that we have missed out, and nothing is perfect on this front either. Lots of things needs to be fixed, from greed, corruption, sexual exploitation amongst local NGOs too.



It's not just INGOs. Indian NGOs are also grappling with the same set of problems, although in different contexts. It's the national vs. the local; the city capital vs. more community based. The organised NGOs vs. citizens movements, social movements. It's also our problem sitting in the south. Why have I not been able to build my people's power enough to relegate the money power to the second or third or fourth priority.

Oy, donors!



I think donors are one of the biggest problems. The EU, for example, they make it very clear that EU based NGOs need to benefit from this money that goes into ACP countries. By the nature of this clause, they have regular calls and you're basically left to compete with global NGOs in the European Union. Very little room for local NGOs to get any money, so you just give up.



There is a sense that you need scale for things to really change, which I think is not an INGO only thing – it's also about the institutional funders who are wanting to find short cuts, that means larger amounts of money to fund managers or multilaterals because it's less complex and requires less resource from them, as they themselves are under-resourced.

Where are the opportunities to help make the shift happen?



There are things like localisation or agenda 2030 that we might be able to use, rather than taking an ideological position and say we have to throw everything up in the air.



There is the Accountable Now international global standard. It's a cross section of principles and guidelines on how to make NGOs more democratic, participatory and inclusive.



My take is on the change curve, we understand the need for change. We've diagnosed the nature of the problem and talked about it a lot. My recommendation would be that we try some stuff. Many of our members are trying something. We need to do that more aggressively, alongside a very large dose of learning that can be shared – to provide a way to de-risk the scaling up of different approaches for the sector as a whole.

**Conversations held in
October and November 2019**