

HOW TO BUILD A GOOD SMALL NGO

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SECTION F: BUILDING SUSTAINABILITY

This Section consists of Chapter 12.

The original numbering is left in place so that extracts can be traced back.

BUILDING SUSTAINABILITY

12.1 Institutional sustainability

Remember: Sustainability is People

An NGO which is concerned about long life might choose to do an exercise called a SWOT – Strengths, Opportunities, Weaknesses, Threats. This exercise helps the NGO to identify the key issues which could make its future either more secure or instead, threatened in some way. The issues may be internal (organisational issues) or external (environmental issues). The purpose of doing a Swot is twofold; firstly it enables the NGO to find the issues which everyone agrees are strengths, weaknesses etc. The next step is to work with these issues, establish the relationship between them, select the ones which are priority and then transform them into policy issues or Things-to-be-Done.

In this chapter we describe a SWOT that focuses on sustainability, but the same broad approach can be used to analyse other problems, such as the capacity issues in Chapter 8.5.

Steps to take:

- The NGO finds a workshop leader, from it own staff or from outside, who has a good analytical mind and can run the workshop well.

- It allocates a block of three days for the whole examination of sustainability. Of these days, the first half-day is given over to the SWOT exercise. During the rest of the time there are discussions and brain-storming to find the policy issues and Things-to-be-Done
- Then, the meaning of Strengths Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats are explained and agreed on. Participants are asked to identify issues that fit into these categories. An issue might fit into two categories. For example, if an NGO only has one very generous donor this could be both a strength and a weakness; however for the purpose of the SWOT exercise it can only be discussed in one category – and in the context of sustainability it is a weakness.
- Both issues internal to the NGO and those that are external, need to be identified. For example, if a major donor is cutting back on contributions this is a serious external threat. If the NGO is spending too much on administration this is an internal threat.
- A fundamental concept in organisations is explained to the participants. It is this:
An organisation is like a plant; there is a part of it which is above ground – stem, leaves, fruit. These are the organisational aspects which an outsider can see – the projects, the administration, the capacity building. But there is also the part below the ground, the roots, or institutional aspects of the organisation. This part is strong if the NGO is serious about its purpose, has strong objectives and convictions. If the boss and staff have lost their vision, the roots are weak but may still be rescue-able and a guarantee that the NGO can survive.. If the roots have been eaten by pests, no matter how well the office is run, the NGO will die.



Planting the NGO well for the future

EXAMPLE:

An Asian NGO had the stated aim of improving the skills of farmers throughout the country. However there was also an unwritten aim, held by the boss and most of the Board; that was to spread the culture of the majority ethnic group into minority areas. This aim had changed the nature of services for the worse. There was no serious decentralisation and all training was in the majority language even where the farmers could not understand it. The staff were becoming increasingly demoralised.

Workshop Technique:

- As the groups work, findings need to be written up. If the only resource is a blackboard, that can be used. But it is one step better to use big sheets of cheap paper and felt pens. Even better are file cards and bullock, which is like chewing gum and sticks cards to walls or paper. Its advantage is that cards can be moved around, grouped in one way and then another. Each group will need a blackboard or paper, cards and felt pens.
- Staff are put into groups. If the NGO is democratic, the groups can have a mix of gender, job status, HQ- based and district-based, technical and non-technical etc. If the SWOT is happening in a culture where juniors cannot speak freely in front of bosses, then a different mix in the groups has to be done. Or, if needed, different kinds of groups can be made up for different steps of the SWOT exercise.
- Each of the groups discuss each of the four themes for a certain length of time, perhaps fifteen minutes. Then a short break, a cup of tea or coffee helps the digestion of ideas.
- Everyone comes back together and each group presents its findings. As each group talks, the Workshop Leader writes up what they say under “external” and “internal”.
- Under Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats, the Leader notes all the issues brought forward by the groups. These are then reviewed and the not-so-relevant ones left out. Through discussion, the remaining issues are put into an order of priority. Ways of addressing each problem in turn are discussed. As agreement is reached, and tasks assigned.

EXAMPLE:

An NGO in Lesotho did a SWOT analysis to look at sustainability. A major finding of the workshop was that Board members had a lack of commitment to the basic goals of the NGO, and that this was an institutional weakness that needed to be addressed. A sign of poor commitment was that too many Board members missed meetings.

A number of Actions were identified to change this:

- Firstly, there was a very careful, tactful discussion on whether the right Board Members had been chosen, whether they actually had the time and means to do a good job. From this discussion, the NGO came to a consensus on the future profile for Board Members and the procedure for selecting them.
- Secondly, it was agreed that the Board members should have training. This was done.

- Thirdly it was agreed that the District Office Co-ordinator should raise the interest of Board Members; this was done by visiting individuals at home, introducing individuals and their skills to the meetings and raising her own profile as an example. Board members were also encouraged to read NGO literature and documents.

This example shows how a workshop can identify a weakness, find organisational and institutional answers and agree on the steps to take to address it so that the weakness no longer exists. These actions together also raised the motivation and standing of the Members.

It is important that the SWOT exercise does not focus only on weaknesses and threats, but devotes a lot of time to achievements and strengths. They should be highlighted and used to give more perspective to the weaknesses and threats.

Another “must” in successful SWOT-ing is that everything should be done to separate issues from personalities. The SWOT has to deal with functions, processes and procedures and not with the performance of individuals. It is not a performance appraisal of staff. Where an NGO has a serious issue linked to an individual, this should not be dealt with in a workshop but through other means.

The final steps of a SWOT workshop would be to plan a reunion after a couple of months to see how well the planned actions are implemented. Then participants are thanked and the workshop is closed.

12.2 Sustainability for projects

If you have projects which help your beneficiaries, then:

- either these activities should have a limited life, for example a one-off health promotion action;
- or they should be able to survive on their own if and when you stop your support.

So there should be a degree of community participation and/or contribution in cash and kind in order to guarantee a minimum level of ownership. Income-generating activities should be making a real income for the target groups and therefore be more than just social schemes. The management of the money involved should follow the same rules as money management within your NGO.

12.3 Sustainability and training people

There are important issues of sustainability if you train people to do a job at village level. Be very careful of training people in health matters, unless the Ministry of Health is going to take responsibility for the trainees and supervise them. Why? Look at Water and Sanitation projects, where projects want Hygiene Education activities and often train village people in health matters. But sometimes the project ends; the trainees have a certificate, little training and no supervision. They may buy a white coat, start giving injections, knocking out the teeth of children with diarrhoea or branding them with red-hot bicycle spokes. They can do harm. The

same thing happens when NGOs start so-called Primary Health Care projects, train community health workers but disappear after a year.

***** Be careful of creating a group of workers. Either they should have a future, can be rewarded and supervised; or, their task should be self-limiting *****

12.4 Building sustainability through strong networks

Networks allow different groups to work together toward a shared goal by co-ordinating strategies and pooling resources. Networks, which include a range of organizations, groups, and individuals, demonstrate to policy makers that there is wide support for particular policies or programmes.

The term network here refers to a group of organisations that communicate and collaborate on a shared advocacy strategy – that is making their point of view known to the people who matter. The goal is to come together, to pool resources and capabilities and to work more effectively for proposed programs.

12.4.1 Challenges to building a network

Despite the benefits, building and maintaining networks is hard work. Network members must keep in mind the following challenges and be prepared to address them:

- Building consensus is a time-consuming process. And even then, network members may not always agree on the goals, objectives, and strategies of the network.
- The network must build trust among its members. Member organisations and programmes may compete for funding from the same donor agencies, hampering their ability to collaborate. Building trust in the face of such conflicts is difficult – members may have previous experiences, both personal and professional, with each other, that affect their ability to work collaboratively.
- The larger the network grows, the more complex it is to manage its logistics. Keeping all members aware of meetings, actions taken, results, and upcoming activities is important.
- The network must remain a collaborative effort among all members, rather than the possession of one or several of the most powerful members.
- Members must agree on rules necessary for the network to operate smoothly and effectively.
- The network must decide how to leverage resources for its collaborative activities.

12.4.2 Guidelines for effective networks

Articulate and committed young people can help the network remain true to its mission of serving youth. Youth are excellent representatives for programmes designed to address their

needs. Young people can organise students, friends and other young people to support the network's campaign.

Keep people informed: maintain up-to-date mailing, phone, fax, and e-mail lists of network members and key contact people. Keeping members informed maintains trust, interest, and involvement. It also minimizes misunderstandings and identifies points of disagreement before they become problems. Network members should always receive minutes from meetings, updates, news clippings, and information on future events. Adequate advance notice of meetings and other events encourages participation in important discussions and decisions.

Select spokespeople who will represent the network to the media: Early in the network's development, identify members who have experience in public speaking or interacting with the media. The spokespeople may or may not be the same people as the leadership team. One spokesperson should be a young person. Members should agree on a process for handling inquiries from the media.