



NGO Effectiveness Framework – June 2004

Defining the Sector

Australian NGOs are non-government development organisations that are formed voluntarily and operate on a not-for-profit basis. Australian NGOs chose to specifically define themselves as values-based organisations that are part of Australian civil society.

In addition to being part of a sector within the aid industry, each Australian NGO is an autonomous organisation, with a philosophy and values that are unique to that organisation. While many of these values overlap or are shared with other organisations¹, each Australian NGO can point to its own unique contribution to development based upon its philosophy and values and the manner in which it operationalises that philosophy.

NGO Effectiveness

Effectiveness is defined as promoting sustainable change that addresses the causes as well as the symptoms of poverty and marginalisation – i.e. reduces poverty and builds capacity within communities, civil society and government to address their own development priorities.

Principles

All Australian NGOs have principles that flow from their values and philosophy. Some of these are unique to each organisation.

The sector also has shared principles, as detailed in the ACFID Code of Conduct:

Organisations which are signatories to this Code aim to build creative and trusting relationships with the people of the developing countries and to meet program standards which:

- give priority to the needs and interests of the people they serve;*
- encourage self help and self-reliance among beneficiaries and thus avoid creating dependency;*
- involve beneficiary groups to the maximum extent possible in the design, implementation and evaluation of projects and programs;*
- respect and foster internationally recognised human rights, both socio-economic and civil-political;*
- seek to enhance gender equity; and*

¹ For example, the research indicates that many Australian NGOs have as a core value that they work on behalf of or with the most needy or most marginalised within society

ACFID NGO Effectiveness Framework, June 2004

- *are based on an understanding of the history and culture of the people served.*
(taken from ACFID Code of Conduct)

Australian NGOs particularly endorsed the principles related to human rights and gender analysis. In addition Australian NGOs have identified a further common principle

Australian NGOs shall identify their values, communicate them to all key stakeholders and reflect them in their work.

Policies

Each Australian NGO has its own set of organisational policies that govern the work and approach of the agency. Some of these are sector wide, as reflected in the ACFID Code of Conduct². Some of these are peculiar to each organisation and will reflect the different management practices, resources and internal processes of each NGO.

Program Strategies

Every Australian NGO has a program strategy to operationalise their philosophy, values and principles. In other words, each organisation has its own way of 'doing things' to contribute to development. This diversity within the industry is valued, as it allows a wide range of possible responses to the complex issues of development.

At the same time Australian NGO programs are characterised by certain common qualities that contribute to effectiveness. These include:

- *High quality relationships*

One of the critical features of Australian NGO work is that apart from humanitarian response, most Australian NGOs do not implement directly. Instead, reflecting a commitment to building local capacity and self-reliance, most Australian NGOs chose to work through local implementing organisations³. For this process to work effectively, Australian NGOs place a high value on the quality of the relationship between themselves and their implementing partner.

Good relationships evolve over time, based upon trust, mutual learning, accountability and acceptance of difference. The purpose of good relationships is to build capacity of implementing partners and increase the process of self-reliance and/or local ownership.

- *Long term engagement*

Development situations are usually complex and most often require engagement⁴ that go beyond short-term project and program cycles. Australian NGOs seek to work in ways that allow for long term engagement⁵ in locations, in sectors and with people, for the purpose of more effective and sustainable solutions to development problems.

² The ACFID Code of Conduct sets out agreed minimum policy standards in areas of governance, management, financial control and reporting.

³ Local organisations can include local NGOs, community based organisations and community groups, local government and also the local office of transnational NGOs.

⁴ Engagement all the possible activities undertaken by the NGO. Most often they include projects and program in the field (both overseas and in Australia), advocacy and lobbying work and humanitarian relief. They also include community education and information work undertaken in Australia.

⁵ The average length of engagement of Australian NGOs in their programs is eight years.

ACFID NGO Effectiveness Framework, June 2004

- *Learning*

Given the dynamic nature of development, Australian NGOs and their implementing partners seek to undertake ongoing reflection about their work and the context of that work, for the purpose of improvement.

- *Adaptation*

As above, Australian NGOs work in situations of change and new information. They seek to adapt to information and try to be responsive to changing circumstances.

- *Working together*

In many situations Australian NGOs are able to bring about increased impact and effectiveness by working together, either in the field, or in coalitions within Australia. Through the ongoing work on quality and effectiveness the NGO community is focusing and placing greater emphasis on the value and importance of working collaboratively and in cooperation. Working in difficult contexts is by definition harder and more complex than working in less complex contexts. Working together with other NGOs can only be of benefit.

- *Risk taking*

Australian NGOs will often choose to work in situations where outcomes are less certain, in order to meet the needs of people otherwise poorly served by other aid delivery mechanisms.

- *Quality of staff and volunteers*

It appears that the quality of people employed by Australian NGOs is one element of their effectiveness.

While program strategies will be unique to organisations, they will be coherent within the agency philosophy and will reflect the shared principles and the above characteristics of the Australian NGO sector. In addition, it is important the activities or areas of engagement of the NGO are coherent with the stated agency program strategy.

Standards of engagement

Most Australian NGOs have established standards that guide the development and implementation of their activities. In addition to these the Conference participants proposed the following sector wide standards to be reflected within all Australian NGO engagement:

- *Australian NGO activities aim to provide appropriate solutions to the root causes of poverty and marginalisation, addressing specific protection needs of the most vulnerable (including women, children, disabled, elderly, indigenous) and respecting all peoples' dignity.*
- *Australian NGO activities reflect high quality gender practice. That is, engagement reflects an understanding of different male and female roles within communities and should work to bring about greater equality of opportunity, taking into account the cultural and other contextual features of the situation.*
- *Australian NGO activities are based upon and are coherent with an analysis and understanding of situation and context. This includes attention to diversity in communities and groups and to the links between micro and macro conditions.*
- *Australian NGO activities have an appropriate design that identifies people-centred outcomes, and the means and processes required to achieve these. The designs are flexible, to enable adaptation to the dynamic situation of implementation.*

ACFID NGO Effectiveness Framework, June 2004

- *Australian NGO engagement aims for wider impact through various means, including empowerment and capacity building of partners and communities, and by taking a programmatic approach to activities.*
- *Australian NGOs, together with their implementing partners, undertake monitoring and evaluation of their work, in order to identify areas of success, areas requiring improvement and in order to implement timely and appropriate change.*
- *Australian NGOs are able to demonstrate that costs associated with their engagement are appropriate to the context and the nature of the intervention and reasonable in relation to the proposed outcomes and benefits.*
- *Australian NGO activities have sustainability strategies that take into account the wider context and give attention to long-term impact.*
- *Australian NGOs assess and manage risk during their activities.*
- *Australian NGOs work in ways that include clear and transparent accountability mechanisms to all key stakeholders.*
- *Australian NGOs provide appropriate quality technical input, as necessary, in their engagement with others. This input is cost effective, maximises local input and capacity and utilises appropriate technology.*
- *Australian NGO activities are implemented with an informed understanding of the environmental impact of the activity.*
- *Australian NGO work towards the participation and increased control of people of their development situation. This includes genuine participation of people at all stages of the program cycle and is reflected in the way engagement is undertaken.*

Working in Emergencies

Being able to respond to an emergency is an important element of development. There is an growing need for development agencies to respond to increasing vulnerabilities and protection needs of specific groups (women, children, disabled, elderly) and to promote the human security concerns of the people in communities that they are working in.

The 'unique' aspect of working in emergencies is that the protection needs, the time frames, the demands on staff and partners, the need for good relationships and coordination, the scrutiny by media, the public and donors and the need to understand what laws and rights govern the local rule of law all become more 'intense'. In other words, the demands that are required for good emergency response practice are the same as for good development practice but far more 'intense' pressures come into force.

Advocacy work

Program work is about effective engagement that changes people's lives but is also about building constituencies to do effective advocacy. If policy change is to lead to practice change that effects people's lives there needs to be a strengthening of constituency and their capacity, plus an increase in political space for local organisations to take policy change and make it real. Therefore the program and advocacy link is very important. This is not just work for large agencies but something that could be divided amongst agencies. Small agencies also play a key role especially in building capacity of local organisations.

In addition to the elements described above, a key feature of effective advocacy is legitimacy. This includes the following:

ACFID NGO Effectiveness Framework, June 2004

- information arising from strong field relationships and practice
- and high quality research
- enabling partners to speak for themselves
- independence from Government or others

Meeting the standards

Participating NGOs agreed that not all the work of their organisations necessarily reflected all of these standards. Indeed in some situation there might be some need to prioritise some standards over others, or to significantly improve areas of engagement in order to reflect these standards. To this extent the standards are aspirational. In addition, people noted that the these standards required further definition and examples, in order to work towards meaningful assessment of how any particular area of engagement reflected a particular standard.

However there has been agreement about these standards should be reflected in Australian NGO work. There is further agreement that Australian NGOs should embark on the process of improving their work according to these standards.