

Irish NGOs & Development Effectiveness

“How We Did It” Seminar series

The “How We Did It” breakfast seminar series provided an informal forum for senior staff from Dóchas member agencies to share experiences of “Effectiveness” initiatives. In the first half of 2010, Dóchas hosted five such meetings, in addition to other, more formal, seminars and briefings on the challenges arising from the “Development Effectiveness” debate.

This document briefly summarises the topics discussed during the seminar series.

1. NGO Mergers - the example of Self Help Africa

In the analysis of Ray Jordan, CEO of Self Help Africa, current trends in the Development sector mean that it will become increasingly difficult for small NGOs to survive, unless they obtain a level of leverage through alliances or mergers with other organisations. He described the process and reasons behind the merger of Irish-based Self Help Development International and UK-based Harvest Help. He said that the fact that the ethos of both organisations was very similar, and that both organisations were at a similar phase in their organisational life, greatly improved the chances of success of the merger.

The vast majority of mergers in the private sector fail, and there are very few examples of non-profit organisations merging. He identified a number of key lessons that his organisation learned during the process:

- The importance of a clear vision for the future
- The importance of constant and honest communication with all stakeholders
- The need for an experienced and trusted mediator/facilitator.
- Having an in-principle agreement in place before the legal experts get involved.
- The importance of clear leadership from the boards of both organisations.

He stated that one of the key benefits, besides the scale of the new entity and its ability to leverage energies and funding, was that the new organisation prompted a fundamental rethink of all policies and practices of the two existing organisations. “The merger gave us an opportunity to completely rethink everything the organisation was doing”. The merger made it easier to operate at a more strategic level, and to apply standards of best practice across the organisation. Self Help Africa feels its role is in making the case for small farmers; it is gradually moving away from direct implementation, and towards research and advocacy.

< Further reading: [Dóchas briefing on NGO Cooperation](#) >

2. Reviewing Governance – the experience of VITA

John Wallace of VITA presented the background to his organisation's recent and very profound review of its internal processes and governance structure. As a small NGO, VITA was facing a number of challenges relating to its organisational skills, procedures and oversight, and it realised early on that it needed to address them.

The organisation set off on a root-and-branch review of its operations, starting with the formulation of a new strategic plan. After that, its next priority was a fundamental review of its corporate governance. In this context, VITA created a number of Board sub-committees, and developed terms of references for the Board, and for each individual Board member and office holder. In addition to investing in more staff for the office, VITA also formulated relevant policies, including a Fraud & Reserves Policy, Authority Level policy and Risk Management systems.

“When developing our corporate governance principles, we used the Dóchas Code, and adapted it to suit our needs, and develop our own manuals.”

Governance is now a recurring item at every Board meeting, and a Board induction process, including a written letter of appointment and explicit TOR for the role of Director, is in place for every Board member. As a result, VITA feels the Board's understanding of its dual role of safeguarding the organisation and ensuring the achievement of its organisational mission statement, is greatly enhanced. VITA feels it is more accountable, more flexible, and more strategic in its work. Governance review, John Wallace reminded participants, is an intensive and delicate process, that takes time but has allowed VITA to put its organisation on a much more solid footing.

< Further reading: [Irish Development NGOs Code of Corporate Governance](#) >

3. Formulating a Policy on Partnerships - The experience of Aidlink

Aidlink exists to improve the lives of those living in poverty in the developing world, and it works in partnership with organisations in three priority countries: Uganda, Kenya and Ghana, in its efforts to empower local communities to directly implement development actions.

Since the concept of “partnership” is so central to Aidlink's work, the organisation decided to invest in a process to clarify its notion of partnership, and to elaborate guidelines and criteria for the identification, initiation and continuation of its partnerships with other organisations. Aidlink realised that, as its work develops and the number of partners grows the complexity of the relationships will increase; Aidlink will be involved in a range of different partnerships at the same time and these partnerships will be at different stages of development and will not be static but will be constantly evolving. Aidlink will also be facilitating other partnerships among and between its partners, both at home and overseas.

For this reason, Aidlink engages in a series of discussions with its partners and other stakeholders, with the aim of building a common understanding regarding Aidlink's approach to development and the central role of partnerships and capacity building in this work. These discussions resulted in a draft policy, which was further developed after consultation.

The policy provide practical guidance to both Aidlink and its partners as to how to most effectively establish and manage partnerships and how to maximise the opportunities for capacity building at local level, and proposes guidelines and criteria as to how these partnerships and the work of building local capacity can be monitored and evaluated.

< Further reading: <http://www.aidlink.ie/aidlinks-partners.html> >

4. Downward Accountability – the CAMFED model

Camfed is an international NGO supporting girls' education. It recently teamed up with Linklaters, a major law firm specialising in advising companies and governments on governance issues, in an attempt to build a client-based accountability system for the organisation. Key questions that came up during the process related to a) the identification of Camfed's key clients, b) how to protect those clients' interests and c) whether doing so would bring about systemic, not just sporadic, change.

Camfed's starting position was that, fundamentally, its work on education is about power. Its programmes are about empowering girls and parents in favour of education, and about overcoming power obstacles to change. It therefore decided that its model for change should be based on power-sharing.

"The more transparency we have, the better the programme. Because the clients know what they're entitled to. Provided of course, that there is a system of redress, and a sense that they'll be listened to" says Camfed's CEO, Ann Cotton.

< Further reading: [Camfed model "Accounting to the Girl"](#) >

5. An NGO Impact Assessment Framework – I.S. Ireland

In the last seminar of the 2010 series, Aidan Leavy described how International Service Ireland (ISI) has addressed the challenges of measuring and documenting programme and organisational impact. Over a period of some 12 months, ISI, and international development organisation that places development workers to help strengthen local organisations' capacity, has developed two crucial, and inter-related tools: an Impact Assessment Framework, and an Organisational Self-Assessment tool.

The process started with a review of partners' needs, and the formulation of a definition of outcomes, outputs and impact, that could be agreed with all partners and staff. With the assistance from outside experts from a consultancy company called "Framework", and based on tools developed by the OECD DAC and others, ISI formulated three key areas of organisational performance, and a series of 52 dimensions of impact. Based on that model, a comprehensive self-assessment tool was developed, to allow ISI and its partner organisations to discuss and analyse organisational capacities, and develop capacity strengthening strategies.

The Impact Assessment Framework is designed to improve the quality and quantity of evidence that International Service (IS) brings from its country programmes. IS works with partners in a variety of specialist areas - sexual and reproductive health, citizen engagement and sustainable

livelihoods. The framework therefore contains a large number of tools and will continue to expand as IS source new material and work with new partners.

The Organisational Self Assessment Tool allows partner organisations to assess themselves against 50 capacities that IS consider important in a 'healthy' organisation. The process is conducted annually.

< Summary video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c28qureAOss> >