

Constituting an NGO Board: Creating a Strong Baseline for an NGO's Activities

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There is a growing need for nonprofit and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) throughout the world to be more effective and productive. One of the many ways they are achieving this is by broadening and strengthening the constitution of their Boards. An increase in the effectiveness of NGO board itself has been achieved by bringing together organizations and leaders with a shared interest in the work of boards; building capacity by training; and developing management and governance tools.

Having a good and effective NGO Board provides a basis for successful management of its organization; familiarizes its target constituents with the activities of the NGO; help in better understanding the organizational structure of the NGO, and also assists in distributing responsibilities among the team members within the NGO organization.

This short write-up takes the reader through the various working mechanisms of a typical NGO Board. An NGO Board may be called by different names - 'Board of Directors'; 'Steering Committee' 'Advisory Group' etc. The term 'Board' is used collectively and interchangeably to mean all these names.

Board Functions

How does an NGO board function? What does it do? It first of all, sets policies and strategies for the NGO, in line with the agreed purposes, principles and scope of the NGO. It also sets operational guidelines, work plans and budgets for the NGO and policy and programme support. Many times, it is also called on to make funding decisions.

It assists the internal workings of the NGO by setting criteria for membership of, and appointing, review panels and/or support groups. It may also establish a framework for monitoring and periodic independent evaluation of performance and financial accountability of activities supported by the NGO.

One of its main roles is representation of the NGO in the larger community. It represents views of the NGO in various constituencies, or within the NGO community in relation to outside organizations. It is frequently asked to coordinate with outside agencies, as well as advocate for the NGO, and mobilize resources.

Often, the Board is the first contact that an NGO's target audience have, and in some cases it is the first contact where peoples' concerns are actually heard - due to the high standing of Board members in the community. The Board's presence in the field

sometimes forces decision-makers to listen to affected peoples' concerns, and can help to open up alternative solutions.

Within the board set-up itself, an NGO board selects and appoints chairpersons for the Board, and also participates on committees and working groups of the NGO.

Mandate and working methods

What is the mandate and working methods of an NGO board members? They participate fully in all meetings of the Board (including study all relevant documents in order to provide input in the decision-making process). Many NGO Board Members are also expected to participate in teleconferences and other virtual means of communications among Board members, the NGO community, networks and with the other NGO Board members - especially due to their work schedules etc.

NGO Board Members advocate the participation of community representatives in the design, implementation and evaluation of policies and programmes at all levels of the NGO. They provide input into equitable and appropriate allocation of resources and maintain a focus on issues of importance to the community and NGO movements in general. Board members also seek input from the community on key issues related to relevant documents and consult with and report to the broader community of NGOs and CBOs and people and communities, as well as appoint advisors for the NGO's programmes and projects.

Qualifications and criteria for selection

Who should become an NGO's Board Member? What criteria is necessary to select Board members? Based on the Board's functions, including representing the various constituencies, the process of selection of Board members (and their designated Alternates) takes several criteria into consideration.

Board members should possess an understanding of the scope of work of the NGP/NPO and opportunities it presents; the ability to strengthen the Board's understanding of NGO and other issues; have experience and responsibility to carry out tasks and roles of the Board; represent issues related to NGO involvement in its target issue/area; and represent issues related to the NGO's target community.

They should also have a minimum number of years in front-line NGO work, and an ability and capacity to communicate and network effectively and broadly (for example, they must have functioning communications linkages such as telephone, fax, computer and email).

Board Members are expected to have the ability to represent and promote the NGO publicly, as a Board member representing the NGO community; ability to act within a team setting; be gender sensitive; possess diplomatic and strategic political skills, including capacity to think and work strategically; possess the ability to work in

international and local languages; and also have linkages to an organization that can facilitate communication and liaison; and provide consultation and support.

Composition of a Board

An NGO Board usually has 10 to 15 members, with a President, a Treasurer and other positions designated to specific tasks/issues related to the NGO's programme areas. The member positions could be rotating and/or renewable.

Length of terms

The length of terms for NGO Board Members and Alternates varies from organization to organization, but usually ranges from one to three years.

Cessation of Appointment

Due to the nature of the work and contribution to the workings of an NGO board, criteria for cessation of appointment is also usually set out. An NGO Board Member could cease to be a Member if he/she resigns, he/she no longer has an employer who is supportive of the time commitment required or he/she no longer has links to the organizations that secured his/her nomination and/or selection to the Board; he/she is unable to perform the agreed upon tasks; he/she is unable to work with the other NGO Board Members as part of a team; or if a conflict of interest is declared.