The intractability of information: non-governmental development organizations and the uses of knowledge

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Abstract

The globalization of information has led to increased optimism about the increasing role of global civil society. However, the underdeveloped have been left out of this information explosion. Through development, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) seek to empower the poor so that they have the resources and abilities to join the rest of the world. Unfortunately, these NGOs have problems of their own: issues with accountability to donors and the bottom-up participation of their beneficiaries. As NGOs become increasingly market-driven, they take on characteristics of the private sector, including their information problems. This paper argues that the corporate information solutions offered for these problems will not be successful in the NGO context, and that NGOs instead should focus on organic responses to these informational constraints.

Contents

Abbreviations

ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IGO	Inter-governmental Organization
IS	Information Systems
IT	Information Technology
KM	Knowledge Management
NGDO	Non-governmental Development Organization
NGO	Non-governmental Organization
NNGO	Northern Non-governmental Organization

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The current rise of information globalization, driven by improvements in computer technologies and the Internet, has led to the increased optimism of global civil society.[1] With access to more information, and more ways to communicate it, it is believed that social movements can be more effective than ever before at mobilizing around issues or making themselves heard. Although skepticism exists regarding the centrality and benefits of technology (Heeks, 1999), many within civil society believe in the promise of the information revolution (Meyer, 1997; McConnell, 2000; Edwards, 1994; Reade-Fong and Gorman, 2005). More and more of the world is "linked" up in the form of e-mail access. A message which once might have reached a few hundred can now be received by millions of people via e-mail or a website. Within civil society, non-governmental organizations (NGOs)[2] serve as important bridges between the larger civil society and other actors, such as government, intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), and the private sector, and they take a growing role in international negotiation (Albin, 1999). They also coordinate smaller informal groups into larger coalitions. These groups and organizations become instruments of soft power which interact in significant ways with both governments and the private sector (Florini

[1] Global civil society, also often called "transnational civil society," refers to formal and informal groups, linked up with other groups and individual across national borders, set up to meet people's wants and needs and "includes only groups that are *not* governments or profit-seeking private entities" (Florini and Simmons, 2000, 7).

[2] This paper defines an NGO as a formal organization within civil society involved in development, advocacy, or humanitarian assistance. This corresponds to most definitions in the literature Carroll (1992); Edwards (2000); Suzuki (1998).

and Simmons, 2000).

The greatest promise of information globalization for civil society is not in the linking-up of groups from disparate geographical regions. It is also the linking up of groups from diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. The poor should have just as much right to speak as the wealthy, and their voice should have just as much power. Because civil society's goal is global governance, information sharing must be truly global, and thus encompass the entire spectrum of the world's peoples.

However, not everyone has access to this web of information. The term that has emerged is "The Digital Divide."[3] Although the true nature of the digital divide is more complex than the numbers suggest (Heeks, 2005), the poor in developing countries are still at a severe informational disadvantage. The problem goes deeper than just a digital divide. For some, the question is not when they will get access, but when they will have more basic needs met—nutrition, health, and education. Underneath the digital divide is a more fundamental sustainability divide. A local society must be at a certain capacity before it can make use of the globalization of information, even if it is already being touched by its effects. Some sort of action must be taken to improve their overall situation–to grow their capacity.

The name for this action is development. The primary actors of development are non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs).[4] In the same way that advocacy NGOs link up causes with the state and the private sector, NGDOs take the wealth and knowledge of the developed world and seek to bring it to the underdeveloped. The desired outcome is not just the immediate results of improved well-being, but the long-term goal of enabling these communities to take an active role in the larger world.

Unfortunately, as the number of NGOs have grown, so have the pressures imposed on them by the development context. These pressures are forcing NGOs to choose between organizational sustainability and meaningful development work. NGOs, which were tra-

[3]The term "the digital divide" is something of a misnomer. In reality, there are many digital divides, and these exist even within developed countries: divisions based on poverty, race, and even gender. Most software is in English, which presents a language divide, and most software and websites are designed for those with good vision and physical coordination, so there is also a disability divide. Fortunately, there are technological solutions to the last two: internationalization and accessibility have become easier to factor into software development.

[4]See Suzuki 1998, Appendix B, for a exploration of the types of Development NGOs described in the literature.

ditionally less formalized and grassroots oriented, have faced criticism from donors for a lack of professionalism and accountability (Edwards and Hulme, 1996). Accountability traditionally was a top-down pressure coming from donors, who request detailed reports on the NGO's actions. As time has gone on, the rhetoric has changed from top-down accountability to stakeholder accountability, in which not only donors but beneficiaries and civil society as a whole have a voice in how the NGO performs (Kovach et al., 2003). However, stakeholder accountability is difficult in practice (Fowler, 1997).

As the development industry has matured it expects a higher order of management and professionalism. NGOs can no longer gain legitimacy through their on-the-ground status and grassroots support. Legitimacy instead comes from putting forth a professional image (interview with researcher, August 22, 2006). Thus, NGOs have become more corporatized: what Roberts et al. (2005) refer to as "the globalization of managerialism." This managerialism has led to the adoption of corporate practices within the NGO.

This paper explores the ways that NGOs are transforming in response to global pressures, through the lens of information sharing. It argues that adopting corporate-based solutions to its informational problems will exacerbate, rather than reduce, its problems with stakeholder accountability and bottom-up participation, even if it satisfies donors. The first chapter examines how NGOs are shaped by the information pressures and demands placed on them from various actors. The second chapter looks at information problems common to many development NGOs, and questions whether adopting the corporate answers to these problems will be solve them. The third chapter explores organic responses to these informational processes, and how these responses can be effectively used.

Chapter 2

Information pressures

There are numerous information pathways existing within the NGO and between NGOs and other actors on the international and local level. Because they are directly involved in the development process, the primary actors are donors, clients, and other NGOs. However, the general public and the media also have influence. While NGOs shape the information that they share with each actor, the information shared also shapes the NGO itself. This chapter addresses the NGO's informational pressures, and how these pressures shape its behavior.

2.1 Donors

Donors are organizations involved in providing money to the NGO and include donor governments, foundations, and some large international NGOs (INGOs) and northern NGOs (NNGOs). The factor that most influences the relationship between the donor and the NGO is money. Because donors have it, and NGOs need it, donors have a great deal of power over how the NGO behaves. Although the donor may not directly control what the NGO does, where it operates, or who it serves, it can do so indirectly by its information requirements.

For most donors, accountability means effectiveness, and effectiveness means showing

real development returns on the investment of aid. In order for donors to see real and clear progress from development, they must receive information that reflects this progress. These information requirements lend themselves towards quantitative rather than qualitative information. Critics argue that this has a spillover effect: NGOs begin to tailor their projects and activities to match the information requirements. For example, Ebrahim (2002) points to the use of logistical frameworks as a donor-imposed information model which is used to determine the shape of the project, including the imposition of dozens (as much as 83 in one example) of "success indicators."

In addition to shaping the forms in which information is gathered and presented, the power relationship also affects the kind of information an NGO is generally willing to share. For example, several authors note that NGOs are often reluctant to report setbacks or failures in projects for fear that this will negatively affect funding (Fowler, 1997; Ebrahim, 2002; Hulme and Edwards, 1997). Often, funding is earmarked for specific functions, limiting the ways that the money can be used (Dichter, 2003). As a result, NGOs are very concerned about revealing what amount of money allocated for a project is actually going towards organizational expenses (interview with program director, August 22, 2006).

This top-down relationship is not quite as straightforward as the literature describes. To begin with, the category of funders are not a homogeneous grouping. They include donor governments, international governmental organizations, foundations, and even other NGOs (usually in the North[1]). Foundations are often more flexible with their information requirements (Ebrahim, 2002), and NNGOs are more likely to understand the difficulties for an NGO of the extensive paperwork involved in submitting reports (Blewitt, 2000). In addition, NGOs have considerable influence in their relationship with donors. As much as they need the donors to secure funding, the donors need them to continue ongoing projects and development work. Once donors have made an investment in an NGO, it is likely that they will be reluctant to abandon that investment, so this offers NGOs considerable leverage in demanding more flexibility from donors (Suzuki, 1998).

This influence has been offset somewhat by the introduction of the funder practice of

[1]In this paper, "Northern" or "the North" refers to developed countries, while "Southern" or "the South" refers to developing countries.

bypassing INGOs or NNGOs and making funding directly available to smaller community organizations. The NGO's competitive advantage—its informational access to the local context—is being undermined by the ability for smaller groups to gain direct access to the larger global arena (Bebbington and Riddell, 1997), made easier by global communication. However, this has led to quasi-NGOs in search of easy money (Asian Development Bank, 1999) and some NGO activists argue that for this reason larger or northern NGOs still have a place in the development arena as bridges between donors in the North and civil society in the South (Bebbington and Riddell, 1997). At the same time, Southern NGOs are beginning to be molded by the same donor-driven pressures as they begin to take over for their Northern siblings as recipients of development aid (Dichter, 2003).

2.2 Clients

Clients are the focus of NGO aid, support, and development. NGOs may have a variety of clients, depending on both the size and nature of the organization. For larger NGOs, particularly NNGOs, their clients may be smaller (usually Southern) NGOs. For intermediary" NGOs, their clients will be grassroots support organizations or member support organizations Carroll (1992). NGOs also work directly with "beneficiaries"–the poor. Most of the discourse on information interactions with these beneficiaries centers on the concept of participation.

Participation, however, is an unclear term; there is disagreement in the literature regarding what does or does not count as participation (Fowler, 1997; Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Carroll, 1992). Carroll (1992) states that the process is participative so long as beneficiaries are provided with information on decisions. Others argue that the beneficiaries must also take an active role in decision making (Schneider and Libercier, 1995).

Within this realm of participation, beneficiaries can be seen as taking part in a variety of different "information points" during the development process. At a minimum, they may be simply be informed of decisions made on their behalf (Carroll, 1992). This has the disadvantage of taking place primarily after the fact rather than during the process. Also, it does

not provide an actual mechanism for feedback. At the next level of involvement, participatory evaluation involves the beneficiaries in the feedback process. Through interviews, surveys, meetings, and other mechanisms, the NGO gathers information about the status of a completed or ongoing project. This gathering process may be performed by NGO workers or by beneficiaries themselves. The emphasis is generally on accessible methods which are understandable to the community. The beneficiaries not only know how they should gather the data, but ideally also understand why that information is being gathered and are presented with the gathered results in a form they are able to comprehend–in the local language or in a audio-visual form if the community is not literate (Feuerstein, 1993). Finally, beneficiaries may be the sources of new ideas, insights, or suggestions leading to new projects. This may take place in the form of conversations or interviews, or emerge from spontaneous or guided forms of data / information creation. For example, in one case villagers were given video cameras and asked to document their lives and experiences. Not only did these videos demonstrate the villagers' key concerns, they also revealed differences between men and women in the village. For example, women used the video cameras to document the long distances they were forced to walk in order to gather the things that they needed, while men used the videos to demonstrate technical problems they were experiencing (Protz, 1998). Protz (1998) particularly praises video for its ability to communicate emotional information largely absent in the written word.

NGOs engage with information-sharing with their beneficiaries on three different levels. On the organizational level, they share information about the organization and its projects. For example, the NGO may try to improve its stakeholder accountability by disclosing its financial information in order to "prevent resources being captured by powerful political interest groups and...provide insight into how to reduce the risk of resources being misspent" (Jacobs and Angood, 2005, 8). The second level is training and education. The goal of the training might be very focused–such as teaching a new technology or instructing villagers in health–or it can be geared towards more broad-ranging goals such as empowerment, literacy, and capacity building. The third level is providing information tools, in the form of ICTs. This may be a newer technology, such as a telecommunications

center (Senthilkumaran, 2005) or an older technology such as a radio station (Levey and Young, 2002). Sometimes these are presented largely in isolation, but successful projects tend to combine technologies (Senthilkumaran, 2005) and target information sources to different social groups, including women and children (WIGSAT, 1997).

In some cases, the beneficiaries are also members of the NGO. In this case, they are often considered membership organizations rather than NGOs (Carroll, 1992), but many of them can grow to become full fledged NGOs which are treated as such on the national or even international level (interview with program director, August 22, 2006). In this case, the NGO has to maintain in constant communication with members not only to maintain the same beneficiaries relationship as described above, but also because the members "make up" the organization. Members will want detailed information about changes and projects that are taking place and how the actions of the NGO are impacting their lives, and the NGO may seek information about its members in order to better coordinate its work. For NGOs with internationally dispersed members, the Internet is becoming the primary way of staying in touch (interview with program director, August 22, 2006). This membership focus does not guarantee that the NGO is more participatory; a study by Carroll (1992) found that in Latin America grassroots support organizations (i.e., not membership-based) could be just as participatory as membership support organizations.

2.3 Other NGOs

Despite a great deal of talk about collaboration, cooperation, and networking, the main way that NGOs interact is via competition. Although funding has been increasing in recent years, it has been matched with the growth of NGOs, so there are still limited funds to go around. This is reflected in the ownership and manipulation of information that exists within the NGO context. This paradox stems from the conflict between "programme-centred" and "organization-centred" needs (Suzuki, 1998, 13). From a development standpoint, sharing of information benefits all NGOs, who will learn from it and take back new information that they can incorporate into their organizational knowledge. Unfortunately,

the need to sustain the NGO often means that others will become regarded as competitors, rather than partners, in development. This competition can have a negative effect on the way that the NGO shares information, not only with other NGOs, but with other actors as well. For example, in order to compete NGOs may be tempted to lie or exaggerate in order to convince potential donors of their advantages over other NGOs (interview with program director, August 22, 2006). NGOs also make use of information and reports developed by other NGOs in the context of their own work. Sometimes this may even mean stealing this content, using it in their own reports, and passing it off as their own research (interview with research worker, August 22, 2006).

One significant way that NGOs work together rather than compete is through a network. An NGO network may be managed or controlled by a center office, but may also be a non-hierarchical community of NGOs(Starkey, 1997). The primary function of these networks is to share information, although often these networks form in order to build and increase political influence and professionalism (National NGO Congress, 1991). Sometimes they join for utilitarian purposes. For example, the Lesotho Council of NGOs is able to use its tax-exempt status to make tax-free purchases for smaller NGOs (UNDP, 1997). However, in many ways these networks serve largely symbolic purposes. Members join partly because they want to engage with other NGOs, but mainly because they believe they will only be taken seriously if they are part of a network (Østergaard, 2005).

From an informational point of view, networks may not be as useful as they appear: "because of time pressure, the tendency for many network members is to be recipients and translators of information, rather than active providers" (Fowler, 1997, 112). Because many of these networks are judged not by their utility but by their symbolic value, the number of networks is generally too great. As a result, "relational capacity is spread too thin" (Fowler, 1997, 112).

2.4 The general public and the media

The relationship between the general public and the NGO could be described as advertising rather than information sharing. The direction of information flow is largely one-way (from the organization to the public) and is geared towards promoting the legitimacy and importance of that NGO in the mind of the general public. Towards that end, they may create a brand for their development or advocacy work. One recent example was "Make Poverty History" which embodied the concept of international development in a fashion statement (the white wristband).

Many organizations encourage the public to become members, usually by giving money to help the NGO continue its work. Not all members are expected to provide money, however. Many NGO campaigns turn to their members to create voices of protest against or support for various causes, usually in the form of petitions, demonstrations, or phone calls and letters. These protests have moved into the digital realm, with electronic campaigns targeting members via e-mail.

The relationship between NGOs and the media is somewhat more subtle. While NGOs continue to push the brand through the media, and will contact them with press releases regarding organizational issues, they also can use the media to promote issues of concern that relate directly to their organizational purpose. Over time, as connections develop between a reporter and an NGO, the reporter might automatically turn to a certain NGO as soon as they are assigned to write on a certain geographical region or subject that falls within that NGO's expertise. Thus, over time NGOs have become legitimized as sources of expertise and impartial information (Edwards, 2000). While the general public comes to associate the NGO with good deeds, the media comes to associate it with good information.

The relationship with the media and public has led development NGOs to position themselves as a brand, and offer up units of their development as commodities (Sponsor a Child, Buy a Goat, etc.). This reinforces the general belief that development can be based on moving resources, rather than making structural changes.

Chapter 3

Information problems and the NGO

NGOs face considerable information challenges in their development work. Some of these derive from their project-based funding and time-line constraints, others from inherent difficulties in human development. Three key informational difficulties include retaining knowledge, learning from past experiences, and transferring knowledge within development. International pressure to become more "professional" has lead NGOs to adopt corporate approaches to these issues. This chapter examines the corporate approaches of knowledge management, organizational learning and the learning organization, and knowledge transfer. It is argued that the general assumptions of these techniques are highly problematic, and that they pose unique problems for NGOs should they decide to go ahead with them.

3.1 Knowledge management

A serious problem with all organizations, but particularly crucial to NGOs, is how the organization can retain the information that is contained in the minds of its workers. Although all organizations experience turnover, it is particularly common in NGOs and often

coincides with the end of a project(Suzuki, 1998), just when the accumulated knowledge would be most useful to the NGO. The concern for NGOs is how to gather this knowledge gained from the project experience before these workers leave the organization. The question of how to move personal, experiential knowledge into a form that is accessible by the entire organization is the central focus of knowledge management.

Knowledge management (KM) is central to the way that many organizations think about information. Although it now has a larger, holistic meaning related to an overall organization culture, its origins have a mechanistic and IT-based focus. The evolution of information systems relate to the increasing complexity of kinds of information. The first IT systems could only store simple data, and had extremely limited processing functions. In the business world, these systems are referred to as transaction processing systems, used to store customer records, payments, and other quantitative data (Curry et al., 2006). As computers progressed in both storage and processing capabilities, they were able to store more complex information. These are known as management information systems and are used to make strategic decisions (Curry et al., 2006). Finally, some argue, we have reached the point where computers can now process information at a higher level, leading to the idea of KM systems (Zorn and Taylor, 2004). However, some question whether computers can ever process knowledge at all.

In his exploration of information management in the context of the NNGO, Schueber (2003) argues that knowledge, and even information (as he defines it, "meaningful facts, endowed with relevance and purpose" (11)), can only really exist in the human mind. From his perspective, both information, which has meaning, and knowledge, which integrates many different pieces of information, require the ability to understand the facts in a larger context, something only the mind can do. His definition of information is a bit restrictive; most information theory literature (Bocij and Chaffey, 2003; Curry et al., 2006; Kmetz, 1998; Powell, 2003) is perfectly comfortable placing information squarely within a computer's capabilities. However, many people are uncomfortable with allowing computers the same free reign with knowledge. For example, Spender (2003) argues that "a realistic theory of knowledge management must encompass a theory of the knowing self" (60), suggesting

the requirement of a human actor.

The literature of KM is heavily influenced by Ikujurio Nonaka, who divided knowledge into two distinct types, explicit and tacit. Explicit knowledge is generally more simple, observable in use, and is easier to articulate, while tacit knowledge is more complex, personal, and generally more difficult to explain or encode (Bounfour, 2003). Nonaka identified four pathways that knowledge could take within an organization: socialization, which translates tacit knowledge from one individual or group to another; externalization, in which tacit knowledge is transformed into explicit knowledge; combination, in which explicit knowledge is added to a larger set of explicit knowledge; and internalization, in which explicit knowledge is absorbed by an individual or group and becomes tacit (Schueber, 2003).

Zorn and Taylor (2004) describe four "major uses of the KM label" (98). The most typical use describes a strategy associated with its emergence with IT, and envisions KM as way to combine certain organizational practices with an ICT-based system for storing explicit knowledge. The second use of the label is for "specific software applications that are marketed as KM solutions" (Zorn and Taylor, 2004, 99). In this case, knowledge management is an external system which, in theory, can be grafted onto any organization, regardless of its strategy. The third use is applied to smaller initiatives to manage information, such as a centralized database or an intranet. The fourth use of the term simply describes how professions that use knowledge, such as doctors or lawyers, interact with one another (Zorn and Taylor, 2004, 99).

The first three labels focus on the use of computers to store knowledge in conflict with the idea knowledge can only exist in the human context. Nonetheless, putting knowledge into computers is the main goal of many organizations implementing KM. Evidence suggests that many organizations implementing knowledge management are less concerned with the human angle. A survey of 431 companies in the US and Europe listed "changing people's behaviour" as the number one barrier to knowledge management (56%) and "attracting and retaining talented people" as the lowest barrier to knowledge management (9%) (Bounfour, 2003, 158). This suggests that firms do not value the tacit knowl-

edge present in their workers. The range of answers in the top four most-identified barriers (changing behavior, measuring knowledge asset value, determining what knowledge should be managed, and justifying the use of scarce resources for knowledge initiatives) compared with the least-identified barriers (making knowledge available, dealing with technical limitations, identifying the right team / leader for knowledge initiatives, and talent retention) suggest that corporations are more focused on a view of KM as functional strategy centering on adapting people to "match" the knowledge system, rather than as an interactive process in which the focus is on the human and tacit nature of knowledge, and where the system must be adapted to match the people. The survey results reveal an anti-worker bias that is certainly not present in most organizations' rhetoric concerning KM. And yet, it reflects a largely unspoken but discernible attitude in traditional management theory.

Mills et al. (2005) identify a common trend in a number of bureaucratic and decisions theories which place organizational structures–usually management, but sometimes also processes–and workers in two opposing groups. The structure, usually management, is seen as rational, while workers are seen as irrational or emotional. Thus, "early management theorists were united in their belief that only managers fully identified with the formal goals of the organizations, but workers were more typically motivated by their own self-interests. It is easy to see how these beliefs contributed to the general assumption that the rationality of the organization resided exclusively in the functions of management" (Mills et al., 2005, 238).

While private sector organizations are also negatively affected by this attitude, there is a uniquely significant problem if this attitude takes strong hold within an NGO context. The conflict may become manifested not between management and workers, but between the field office and headquarters. Information channels break down or become less useful as individuals at the field office level become less and less comfortable in sharing non-mandated information, particularly if this information concerns project difficulties or failure (Fowler, 1997). As a result, participation suffers. Because rationality resides at the top, so does decision making. Workers, even if they are "encouraged" to participate or

engage in bottom-up information sharing, may question whether their input is welcomed if the management does not offer a model to them of participation and respect.

Another immediate result may be a reluctance to share knowledge. If workers believe that the KM system is in place to ultimately replace them, or if they feel the KM system will be used primarily to extract knowledge from them rather than offer them added benefits to their own work, then they will be reluctant to use it, or to make their most valued knowledge available to the organization.

One unique feature of KM within the development context would be the inclusion of beneficiaries' knowledge. If the NGO is serious about participation, beneficiaries should be included in KM, not just by contributing local information at the beginning of the project, but by engaging in a consistent way with the knowledge sharing and creation process. This presents two difficulties. First, most KM plans are designed to exist exclusively within the organization. A KM plan involving beneficiaries would require additional considerations to boundaries of information, spaces for gathering and sharing the information, and methods that matched the beneficiaries' capacities. Secondly, there is the question of ownership of knowledge. It is generally agreed that knowledge generated within an organization belongs to that organization, but what about knowledge originating from beneficiaries? Indigenous knowledge, including descriptions of local plants, tribal maps, and other locally relevant information, has gained increasing recognition as a source of useful development information (Grenier, 1998; Jordan and van Tuijl, 2002; Protz, 1998). Problems have arisen regarding ownership of indigenous knowledge, including incidents where concerns over the NGO stealing or benefiting from the knowledge led field office workers to purposefully omit key information from geographical data when sending it back to headquarters (Fox et al., 2003). A development process such as Participatory Rural Appraisal generates much of its information from the villagers (Power et al., 2003). How much control do the villagers have over where this information is used? These questions cannot be answered by looking to corporate KM models.

Roger (2003) openly questions the value of KM. Like many, he believes that "the fad and fashion for knowledge management is...driven by the newly delivered capabilities of

information and communication technologies" (Roger, 2003, 101), especially considering businesses and organizations have managed to exist and survive during the past thousands of years without the benefit of the KM concept. Roger points out that "independent, uncoordinated knowledgeable action" can in fact lead to collective fallacy rather than productive action (103). He feels that it is much more useful to understand what an organization *doesn't* know about itself and its practices, and therefore recommends the use of Ignorance Management instead of KM:

> Group processes naturally include their ignorance as well as their knowledge to answer questions. How many models of knowledge management incorporate ignorance? (Roger, 2003, 108)

Ultimately there is a more fundamental problem with knowledge management which comes from basic assumptions about the utility and meaning of information. Spender (2003) argues that "meaning is inherently problematic and relative, and...data or signs are not necessarily meaningful" (60). An increase of "knowledge" does not necessarily lead to an improvement in the effectiveness of the organization. The main focus of most KM thought– "the relatively trivial operational issues of collecting, storing, and communicating data" (60)–ignores the more compelling question of the organization's purpose and organizational activity (Spender, 2003).

3.2 Learning

In development, there is always the danger that NGOs will not learn from past mistakes. The problem of learning from past experiences within the organization has been the focus of a corporate management concept known as the learning organization. In the past few years, NGDOs have begun to embrace the idea of becoming learning organizations. Although this is partly out of a desire to be open to learning and organizational change (Roper and Pettit, 2003), it could equally be true that NGOs are following a trend set by the private sector. In some ways, identifying yourself as a "learning organization" is another

form of self-promotion, whether or not it has any meaning in the organization's ongoing practice.

Learning in organizations is described by two concepts: organizational learning and the learning organization.[1] In the literature, they mean different things. The "learning organization" is aspirational and describes techniques and rules that an organization can use to become a "better learner", while "organizational learning" is somewhat more analytical and describes how organizations learn, through various lenses: technical (mostly focused on information / knowledge management), sociological, economic, or psychological (Roper and Pettit, 2003). In reality, though, the diverse literature addresses a key theme: the idea that learning is central to the effectiveness of the organization. The learning organization is able to use its past successes and failures to improve its practices in the future. The process is organizational learning.

While the learning organization itself is seen as positive by most of the literature, it does not always have such a benevolent effect on the workers in the organization. For example, Tourish and Hargie (2004a) cite "The Learning Organization Story" as one of the excuses used in downsizing: the need for constant learning means that an individual with "outdated" skills is no longer needed. Downsizing appears to be a common step in becoming a learning organization. The reduction in staff can be considerable; in one case a CEO reduced administrative staff by 90% (Belasen, 2000). Most authors prescribe a "flat" organizational structure, which means eliminating middle management one way or another (Roper and Pettit, 2003).

Although there is evidence that this tighter, flatter organization is more effective at adapting to change (Belasen, 2000), it presents two problems. First, although its ultimate goal is to encourage bottom-up information sharing, it must be enacted using highly authoritarian management techniques, otherwise it would be impossible to do away with middle management. And secondly, although the ability to learn may be increased, the organization, by losing so much of its staff, has lost a great deal of its knowledge, stored tacitly in the minds of those made redundant. The knowledge of an organization resides

[1] See Roper and Pettit (2003) for an in-depth comparison of the literature on organizational learning vs. the learning organization.

not only in the information stored at any "node" within the organization, but also in the linkages between these nodes, as well as linkages to the outside. Many of these linkages are lost. In addition, downsizing, even when implemented carefully, can have negative psychological effects on the organization (Tourish and Hargie, 2004a).

Fowler (1997) discusses one of the aims of becoming a learning organization as moving from "single-loop learning" to "double-loop learning" or "triple-loop learning." Single-loop learning is mostly reactive, responding to problems as they come up without developing a largely strategy. Double-loop learning questions practices and tries to extract lessons that can be applied to the larger organizational context. Finally, triple-loop learning questions the organization itself–its purpose and reason for existence (Roper et al., 2003). The contrast between what the literature says about NGOs and how NGOs are actually acting suggests that at NGOs are engaging primarily in single-loop learning. Even if they do improve their practices, the larger context of these practices goes unexplored. Many NGOs know–and the literature forcefully states–that projects are an inherently flawed vehicle for development (Edwards and Hulme, 1996; Ebrahim, 2002; Fowler, 1997; Dichter, 2003). And yet, NGOs continue to follow the project model, primarily because this is the system that donors prefer. The recommendation of Suzuki (1998) that NGOs should "educate their funders" is apparently not being followed. Even more seriously, the question raised by Dichter (2003) of whether NGOs, particularly NGOs from the North, should be involved in development at all, is unlikely to prompt many NGOs to question whether they should exist or not. Triple-loop learning may be a painful prospect for many NGOs. Even assuming that NGOs are willing to critically examine and understand the problems of their organization, this does not mean that they will necessarily change. There is a huge gap between understanding and behavior.

Furthermore, Ebrahim (2005) argues that donors' requirement for accountability is actually making it more difficult for NGOs to engage in organizational learning. Because evaluation is largely done for the benefit of the donor, the information gathered may not be of much use to the organization itself: "performance assessments give funders the arsenal to base funding on 'successful' projects, thereby rewarding NGOs that stick to discrete and

proven product-based approaches the development while punishing those that attempt to develop and test more innovative and risky process-based approaches"(Ebrahim, 2005). Embracing risk is a key trait of the learning organization(Belasen, 2000), but research has shown that in the context of ambiguity and uncertainty, individuals subject to high evaluatory pressure are more aware of potential punishments and become risk averse (Lee et al., 2004). Cognitive resources are expended on thinking about performance and impressions rather than on the problem at hand.

A more fundamental problem with organizational learning is the description of learning as a fundamentally positive behavior. Learning, in this context, is given an unspoken boundary of "useful" or "helpful" learning. In practice, it is difficult to restrict an organization to beneficial learning only. Individuals within an organization, and organizations as a whole, absorb not only "wisdom" but also habits, attitudes, conventions, and ideologies. Not all of these are positive, and many of them are difficult to identify. In an article entitled "Learning failure in information systems development," Lyytinen and Robey (1999) stress the dual meaning of the phrase "learning failure": not only can it mean failing to learn; it can also mean learning to fail. Information systems (IS) development, much like NGO development, is highly project-based, and a large number of these projects are unsuccessful. Many of these projects experience some of the identical problems that development projects do.[2] Lyytinen and Robey (1999) argue that IS development has become habituated to project failure, to the point where it is accepted and sometimes even expected. It has been argued that the same thing has happened within NGOs (Dichter, 2003).

Traditional information theory holds that information reduces uncertainty and thus aids in making better decisions (Kmetz, 1998). However, this ignores the fact that information can be wrong, or have numerous meanings, or have a meaning that is so ambiguous that it can lead to wrong decisions (Eylon and Allison, 2002). Learning new information is not necessarily beneficial. It can be harmful if the organization or individuals within it

[2]In software development, the users do not themselves pay for the project (in the corporate environment, at least) and have very limited input into its development, many of these projects have a political or symbolic origin rather than a declared need, the project is put into the hands of "professional experts" who often have little in common with the final users, and the projects often confuse the means for the ends (the goal of the project might be "build a website" rather than "increase the ways we can communicate with customers" or even "sell more products") in the same way that NGOs often confuse service delivery with development (Carroll, 1992).

are learning the wrong things, or learning behaviors or habits that make it more difficult to adjust to change.

3.3 Knowledge transfer

When an NGO begins a development project, it can essentially take one of two paths: either it can start a completely new project, or it can model it on an existing project. While some projects are "experiments," other projects are meant to take advantage of prior research, using successful models to lower costs by increasing returns to scale (Dichter, 2003). However, there is evidence that it is very difficult to successfully replicate prior project.s as models.

Within a corporation, the key focus on knowledge transfer is intra-organizational. It focuses on the problem of unequal productivity between subunits of the organization; for example, two factories which may be identical in structure but have very different output levels (Szulanski, 2003). Companies therefore may attempt to transfer "best practices" from the successful units to the less successful ones. If successful, not only will the company be working "better" but it can also capture "rents" which currently are being loss to the non-productivity. Thus, there is a strong economic motive for organizations to engage in this knowledge transfer, so long as the cost put into this process is less than the benefits to be obtained.

Despite the expected benefits of knowledge transfer, corporations still face problems in implementing it successfully. One of the more conventional explanations for its failure has been a lack of motivation, either on the part of the "senders" (the users of the successful practice) or the "recipients" (the group the new practices are intended to benefit). This can be seen as placing the blame on the workers rather than the process, as also occurs in knowledge management and organizational learning. The answer is to increase incentives on the worker level (usually, rewarding the workers if they are successful in the transfer) and give them more resources (usually time) for the transfer process (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2002). This attitude may translate to development, where there is an unstated belief

that the beneficiaries may be resisting the development process because they are not sufficiently motivated. The answer in this case has been to give them more "ownership" of the development process, for example requiring them to invest at least a token amount of their own funds into the project (Dichter, 2003).

However, research on knowledge transfer seems to suggest that the reasons for difficulty are a great deal more complex than the attitudes of the workers. Szulanski (2003) did extensive research into why corporations encounter difficulties in transferring knowledge and describes the problem in terms of "sticky knowledge"–knowledge that does not transfer easily from one context to another. Application of this concept can move the focus away from practices and techniques and towards a focus on the knowledge context–the kind of knowledge is being transferred, and the natures of the senders and recipients of this knowledge. Szulanski (2003) found that motivation was not nearly so central to knowledge transfer as was commonly believed. Instead, the three most significant determinants of knowledge "stickiness" were the recipient's lack of absorptive capacity (defined as "inherent and irreducible uncertainty as to precisely what the factors of production are and how they interact" (Jensen and Szulanski, 2004)), causal ambiguity (a lack of clarity about how different parts of the practice effected the whole), and an "arduous relationship between the source and the recipient" (Szulanski, 2003, 55).

Although this research involved corporations, it is easy to see analogues in the NGO development context. There are clear signs of causal ambiguity in the development process. The reason why projects are successful in some communities and fail in others is often unclear, and is usually explained by a failure to fully adapt the project to its new context (Dichter, 2003). An alternate explanation is that attempts to adapt the knowledge will be unsuccessful because it is the knowledge itself that exhibits causal ambiguity. The uncertainties inherent in the practice being transferred mean that it is impossible to choose which parts of the practice are central and must be maintained, and which aspects can be changed for the new situation. This is supported by further research by Jensen and Szulanski (2004) that found that in situations of high causal ambiguity, adapting a practice during knowledge transfer to allow for local conditions actually *increases* the stickiness of the knowledge

transfer: "the characteristics of the practice...may have more weight in determining the difficulty of the transfer effort than do motivational issues or issues of legitimacy in the local environment" (518). It must be noted that this research was in the context of organizational practices, and the results could be different for development projects themselves. However, although there has been some literature acknowledging the role of ambiguity in knowledge transfer for development (Clark and Geppert, 2002), it remains largely unexplored and would benefit from empirical research.

Absorptive capacity presents a significant challenge to knowledge transfer. If a group lacks the ability to absorb new knowledge, then a knowledge transfer is not going to be successful. However, absorptive capacity can be directly linked to specific infrastructural and human resources made available prior to the process. Szulanski (2003) describes several features important to absorptive capacity: a common language to talk about the practice, a clear vision of the goals of the transfer, the necessary skills to engage in the practice, technical and managerial competence, and a clear understanding of who can get new information about the practice or solve problems associated with it. In most development, even those in which the ultimate goal is capacity building, much of these determinations are made by the NGO, not by the intended beneficiaries. Actions needed to increase absorptive capacity–such as training or institution-building–are often taken after, rather than before, the project is underway. In addition, development may sometimes reduce absorptive capacity, rather than increasing it:

> A sizeable project can actively underdevelop the local institution when it establishes its own systems and structures to carry out tasks which the local institution has previously taken care of, although on a smaller scale...if a sizeable regional development project runs efficiently...with the help of direct payments, its own procurement system and a strong expatriate staff, it will most likely, instead of "developing" the region, effectively 'underdevelop' its institutional structure. (Sitari, 1988, 27)

As to the third predictor of sticky knowledge–an arduous relationship between the sender

and the recipient–it would be hoped that an NGDO would be on good terms with their beneficiaries, and often they are. However, it is not a balanced relationship (Smillie, 2000), and Dichter (2003) argues that the poor may feel that the rich are getting more value out of it than the money they are spending. At the very least, it helps to assuage guilt over global inequality; offering ongoing aid through NGDOs makes it easier to ignore the structural and policy changes needed to have long term impact. NGDOs are increasingly being steered by donor behavior away from advocacy and global movements, and towards service delivery (Asian Development Bank, 1999). Thus, even if beneficiaries are on good terms with the NGDO, "when money is the fundamental basis of a relationship...the friendship can become lopsided" (Smillie, 2000, 43).

Considering that these three indicators are central problems to knowledge transfer, and that they are also central features of most development projects, it is not surprising that project-based development as a whole continues to have limited long term effect. However, projects remain the best way for donors to see and NGDOs to demonstrate immediate progress, and so they remain the primary vehicle of development.

Chapter 4

Organic responses to the organization

4.1 Storytelling

As the popularity of knowledge management grew, so did the understanding that even if the impetus for KM research was the rise of the machine, the growing understanding of how it worked in the organization pointed to the primacy of the human, not the machine, as the most valuable information system resource. It was out of this understanding, particularly research into the behavior of "tech reps" at Xerox who shared much of their knowledge about repair through informal conversations on the shop floor, that an interest was formed in storytelling as a form of organizational information sharing (Sole and Wilson, 2002).

One reason storytelling may be particularly effective is because it mirrors the way that humans think (Roch and Sadowsky, 2004). Narration can be an effective tool for NGOs to build a common understanding of a central idea or activity, what Suzuki (1998) calls "envisioning or articulating" (92). When an abstract idea like "transparency" or even "participation" is transformed into one with shared meaning, the term "has a life of its own

and shapes the behaviour of the staff" Suzuki (1998, 94). Narration allows the introduction of subjectivity and personal perspectives. Storytelling can place information into an emotional context. Because stories are highly contextualized, they automatically recognize, where abstract description may not, the unique and local nature of a described situation.

In addition to these uses, Sole and Wilson (2002) describe another interesting potential for storytelling: to "facilitate unlearning" (3-4). This runs counter to the traditional idea of learning (and information sharing in general) as an additive process. However, it is possible for individuals in an NGO to be fairly rigid in their beliefs or processes; sometimes these beliefs get in the way of adapting to the organizational environment (Suzuki, 1998). Storytelling may be more effective than traditional forms of training at overcoming this rigidity: "Rational arguments are...insufficient to accomplish change; an emotional or intuitive element is also needed to convince us at our level of tacit understanding. Stories can be effective in achieving this" (Sole and Wilson, 2002, 4).

Another reason NGOs in particular should look to storytelling as an information-sharing tool is consistency with their external practices. It is common for NGOs to engage in storytelling as a means for sharing knowledge with their beneficiaries (Feuerstein, 1993; Carroll, 1992). If the management of NGOs believe that storytelling is an effective tool for sharing knowledge with villagers, their staff may benefit from them modelling that behavior in organizational communication, since organizations should "model the way we want them to interact with people in the community" (quoted in Suzuki, 1998, 60).

4.2 Resistance and information sharing

Not all responses to information sharing problems are mediated across formal channels, and sometimes in fact these responses come in the form of resistance to, rather than collaboration with, other actors or the information system as a whole. Resistance in this context generally takes the form of subversion: using systems or processes in ways that benefit that actor at the expense of the formalized goals of the system. However, this paper argues that these forms of resistance are ultimately positive sources of contextual insight–they are

direct and unmediated messages from the resister to the resisted that reveal "what's really going on" under the surface. This section explores three forms of resistance: worker resistance against systems, NGO resistance against donors, and beneficiary resistance against development.

4.2.1 Resistance to formal systems

In general, resistance against systems means resistance against inflexible information technology (IT) or information systems (IS). Information technology does not have an exemplary record when it comes to making systems that work for the situations they were designed for. In fact, the opposite is true: most informational technology projects fail; with some numbers suggesting as many as 75% of major projects do not meet the needs or expectations of the organizations that developed them (Heeks, 1998). Because development is done by experts in programming and not by the members of the organization itself, there are a number of "opportunities" in the process for important perspectives to be lost as they are filtered or translated between contexts (i.e. from worker to manager, from the manager context to the software architect's context, and from the software architect's conception to the coder's implementation).

Spinuzzi (2003) looks at how information systems can be subverted by workers using them. The system he examines is a traffic system which was based on a map-based view of the data. In order to access information on a particular intersection, the formal procedure was to locate the grid number on a large roll-up map and punch the cell's code into the computer. One worker created a handwritten post-it note of codes for the intersections, which she referred to instead of the map. Spinuzzi describes this behavior as an innovation placed on top of the system.

Spinuzzi (2003) argues that it is possible to capture some of these innovations and use them to the benefit of the organization, if the system is correctly designed with flexibility and power open to the user. He points to the wide use of custom macros in database, spreadsheet, and geographical information system applications as evidence that people are willing to take the time to customize their information environment if they are given

the power to do so. He encourages the use of online forums where these macros, or other tips about the information system, can be shared between users.

Some resistance systems are actually based in IT: Jones et al. (2004) describe shadow systems which "replicate in full or in part data and/or functionality of the legitimate systems...of the organization" (Behrens and Sedera 2004, qtd. in Jones et al., 2004). Their example is a university, in which a department had developed a local web-based system for updating student information and posting class information. Central management attempted to impose an enterprise-level system provided by PeopleSoft, a well-known software corporation. Although much more expensive, this system was disliked by many of the teachers because it was inflexible, required very specific hardware to run, and did not provide the features they needed. Nonetheless, the upper management did everything they could to impose the new system and discourage use of the older, locally-developed system. Despite this pressure, the department continued to use the system, primarily because it was the only one that actually worked for the teachers' needs. In traditional IS/IT thought, shadow systems are seen as negative because they pull information resources away from the formally established and recognized systems. However, (Jones et al., 2004) argue that shadow systems "are not purely negative systems that should simply be eliminated. Instead organisations should seek to investigate and understand the contributory factors behind the development of shadow systems. It is through this understanding that the organisation may be able to improve its operation by addressing the root causes behind the development of shadow systems within their organisation."

Traditional information management theory encourages the removal of shadow systems, and avoiding other resistance techniques such as using post-it notes to store relevant data instead of the central database. However, existence of these resistance-based systems indicates a real problem with the existing system. If it cannot provide information in the way the staff is accustomed to, then it is the system that needs to be changed, not the staff, even if this means sacrificing some control over the data.[1]

[1] 10 years of experience in developing web applications and databases has led me to the conclusion that the most overlooked, and most needed, data field for almost any kind of record is the memo or note field. Even though programmers and database designers would like all of the data to be organized into individual fields, most people find it difficult or cumbersome. In addition, memo fields allow the introduction of qualitative information,

4.2.2 Resistance to formal authority

While individuals within an NGO may resist the restrictive nature of information systems, NGOs themselves may use resistance as a tool to deal with the restrictive nature of the donor's informational demands.

Ebrahim (2002) argues that NGOs resist attempts by funders to control their behaviors by controlling the amount and kinds of information that they provide. He identifies three strategies that NGOs use in order to resist donor influence: symbolism, selectivity, and professionalization. Symbolism refers to fact that often the data that NGOs collect for donors is purely symbolic—that is, the information "may never actually be used for decision making but is collected to lend legitimacy to an organization's activities" (Ebrahim, 2002, 103). Selectivity refers to the kind of information that NGOs are willing to provide. In general, NGOs provide product data, not process data. Product data refers to what an NGO has done, while process data reveals what the NGO is actually doing—its processes and activities, what Ebrahim calls its "core technologies" (103). While there are structural reasons for this—process data is more difficult to gather and report on, and product data is generally a higher information priority to donors—it also allows NGOs to "demonstrate success without having to reveal details of the processes through which those successes are achieved or to reveal the potentially ambiguous nature of that success" (105). A third strategy, professionalization, combines the hiring of experts with the expanded use of computers to further the organization's legitimacy. These experts become quasi-spokespersons for the organization, making it more difficult to level criticisms against the NGO. The new expertise also "served to smooth communication between...NGOs and funders" (106).

This sort of resistance can be very healthy to the relationship between donors and NGOs. It allows clear boundaries to exist between the two groups. In addition, if donors recognize this resistance, they can build a better understanding of the ways in which their requirement for professionalism is getting in the way, and hopefully improve the balance between flexibility and accountability. If an organization overwhelmingly sends product rather than process data, it may also suggest that the organization feels it is experiencing

even narrative, which approaches what Nonaka might call "explicit knowledge" (Schueber, 2003).

particularly high information demands and constraints. Ultimately, the donor's reaction depends on whether it actually *wants* more process data or not.

4.2.3 Resistance to development

Beneficiaries themselves can also manifest a sort of resistance to development. This generally manifests itself through finding ways to manipulate or use the project to serve their own interests, rather than the interests of the project. In a sense, this is the ultimate participation–beneficiaries deciding for themselves how they wish to use the development assistance given, often in unusual ways. Feuerstein (1993) offers the (possibly hypothetical) example of outhouses built in a village with the intention of improving the health and hygiene of the village. Designed to last, they are made out of brick and have sturdy locks on the doors. Instead of using them as outhouses, however, the villagers, who do not have locks on their houses, use the outhouses to store valuables under lock and key.

A project like this presents a conundrum to NGOs. Is this project successful or unsuccessful? According to most of the quantitative metrics they will be using to report to the donors, the project is a success: they were asked to build x outhouses, which they did. Qualitatively, the project is a failure: the villagers are not using the latrines for their intended purpose, and the larger goal of improved health will not be reached. From the villagers' perspective, it is a success, because they now have structures that are very useful to them.

This kind of resistance is invaluable to the NGO. By observing how beneficiaries react in the development context, they gain a better understanding of what they actually want, rather than what they may say they want. Dichter (2003) argues that the world's poor have, in many ways, "learned" what NGOs want to hear, and thus when asked might say that they want the NGOs to "help them to help themselves," whether or not this is really their concern at all. The way that beneficiaries respond to a development project–particularly 5 or 10 years down the road (assuming its effects last that long)–may be a better indicator of what they need or want. This sort of information is almost exclusively qualitative, and should really be included in the project. Information measuring the long term responses

could be more useful for future development than information about a recently developed project.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

This paper has explored the ways in which non-governmental development organizations (NGDOs) are engaged in information sharing. Their mandate is to help (or "facilitate") the disenfranchised poor achieve control over their own lives and ultimately connect with global civil society. In a very basic sense, much of this involves sharing information from the developed North with the underdeveloped South, although some bottom-up linkages are beginning to emerge (WIGSAT, 1997).

NGOs, however, are shaped by the linkages they make with other global actors. Funders, as the source of financial resources, inevitably shape the way that development occurs, either directly (Perera, 1997), or indirectly by information requirements that constrain or emphasize certain behaviors (Ebrahim, 2002). The clients–usually the poor, but occasionally smaller NGOs or community organizations–generally have very little power over the development process, but can have a great deal of ideological influence. The growing emphasis on bottom-up participation and participatory methods of development mean that NGOs must increasingly engage in information flows that are both more complex and more accessible. Members of organizations vary in their influence depending on the nature of the organization, but their influence can range from conferring legitimacy, to controlling the leadership, and occasionally the development model used.[1] NGOs must constantly

[1]For example, Save the Children has long used child sponsorship as a form of fundraising, even though there

improve the methods they use for staying in touch with their members, both to maintain goodwill and to mobilize them when action is necessary. As the number of NGOs grows, each NGO must deal with increased competition for funds and legitimacy. At the same time, they seek out alliances where they will be beneficial, joining up with NGO networks and umbrella organizations, sometimes for increased information but sometimes simply for symbolic reasons. Finally, in order to gain the sympathy of the media and the general population, they put on a public face that often can simplify the issues, putting an overly positive spin on their own work, while overemphasizing the suffering of their clients (Bennett, 1995).

The pressure from funders towards formalization and quantitative data, combined with competition pressures from other NGOs, has led to a market-driven development context, where NGOs are becoming increasingly corporatized. The information processes suggested by corporate world may backfire in the NGO context, and there is in fact doubt that these processes work at all, in any context.

However, resisting this trend will not be easy. NGOs became popular as tools of development precisely because they were so good at providing services. There is widespread consensus that when the immediate need is service delivery, NGOs are generally the best tools for the job (Bennett, 1995; Dichter, 2003; Carroll, 1992; Asian Development Bank, 1999). If NGOs want to remain the development tool of choice, they will have to keep doing what they do best even if they are not the best tool for every situation.

If the NGO decides to change the way it works, this will change the kind of information it gathers and uses for development. This poses a variety of problems. First, without the metrics it is familiar with, how will the donor know whether the NGO is really spending its money on development rather than allowing it to disappear into the organization itself? Second, even if the donor can trust the NGO, how will it know that the work being done is performed in an effective manner? But most importantly, how will the NGO itself be able

was substantial evidence that it had a detrimental effect on development. Save the Children UK now uses Child Link, which uses a single child representative for a community rather than connecting each sponsor with their own child. Save the Children USA still offers direct child sponsorship, although both programs fully disclose that the money is used for the entire village (Save the Children UK, 2006; Save the Children USA, 2006). According to Dichter (2003), maintaining the link between sponsor and child is both costly and problematic.

to measure the results of its work? And how will it choose the new kind of information being gathered, and how will it ensure that this information correlates to a real tangible improvement to the lives of the people it is trying to help? Ultimately, even empowerment is a means, not an end.

The argument of this paper has been that while information has been seen as liberating and enabling in a variety of contexts, in reality information is still very problematic. This is because despite the claims of much of information theory, information does not necessarily reduce uncertainty, it does not necessarily improve (or have meaning), and even when it does lead to understanding, understanding does not always lead to changed behavior. Information is, in essence, a stripped down version of reality. It may be a combination of data, which forces a one-dimensional view of the object of the data, or it may be extracted from the larger wisdom / knowledge of an individual or group. Either way, it is an incomplete picture. Ultimately, people's behavior is shaped more by their personalities, their culture, and their context, than it is by information. Development must take this larger context in mind if it is to be successful.

Thus, while information management is a key activity for NGOs to engage in, it is equally important that they remain grounded in the human level of global civil society. This means that NGOs must value people and processes over systems and outputs. It means that they must resist the pressures for formalization. If this means they must be smaller rather than larger, then NGOs must make the painful decision as to what is more important: their own long-term growth and survival, or fulfilling their purpose.

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Personal interviews

In addition to literature sources, this paper also draws on an interview from August 22, 2006 with two individuals with experience working within NGOs. They wished to keep their names, as well as the names of the organizations for which they worked, confidential. The former program director worked for an membership-based NGO that advocated for the rights of foreign workers, and the researcher worked for a development NGO in India.