Searching for NGO Effectiveness

Adil Najam*


For some time now, something quite significant has been happening in the world of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international development. Not only their sheer number, but also the scholarly and policy interest in this genre of organisations, has exploded all over the world, leading one observer to claim that we are in the midst of an ‘associational revolution’ (Salamon, 1994: 109). The three books reviewed here are best understood in the context of this revolution.

Interestingly, this revolution is accompanied by strange role reversals. On the one hand, erstwhile opponents in the corridors of the World Bank in Washington and in national capitals across the globe are becoming new converts to the various sects of ‘NGOism’. The promise of their gospel, which is joined in chorus by many NGOs, is that these organisations will succeed where governments have failed in fifty years of ‘developmentalism’. On the other hand, just as the new converts chant their mantras about NGO magic, a rich and powerful literature has emerged in which seasoned NGO practitioners and scholars are beginning to sound notes of caution. This sobering assessment dares to ask whether the NGOs’ new popularity in ‘official’ circles reflects ‘genuine

* Assistant Professor of International Relations and Environmental Policy at Boston University, Boston, MA and Visiting Fellow at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad, Pakistan.
recognition or does it accrue because NGOs have now been socialised into the establishment — the “development industry”? (Hulme and Edwards, 1997: 3).

For developing country NGOs, the new situation also brings new challenges. Even as the amount of official aid from Northern countries being channelled to (or through) them is on the increase, a certain ‘compassion fatigue’ on the part of donors is creeping in. It is not that money is not available to NGOs; in fact, more money than ever is available. It is simply that international donors are becoming more demanding about who gets to use their money, and how they use it. At least three related causes have contributed to this situation. First, the end of the Cold War has inspired new global agendas and aid policies (Edwards and Hulme, 1995). Secondly, a whole host of new claimants for the West’s sympathy have emerged, especially in the former Soviet bloc (Najam, 1995). Thirdly, there has been a remarkable increase in the sheer number of NGOs all over the world (Fisher, 1993). The overall effect is that, although the size of the aid pie has grown, it has become more — not less — difficult for individual NGOs to obtain a piece of it.

For international donors and aid agencies, all this has led to a pronounced preoccupation with NGO effectiveness. All of a sudden, keywords like ‘impact’, ‘performance’, ‘results’ and ‘accountability’ have assumed a new prominence. In response, scholars and practitioners have begun focusing on words like ‘indicators’, ‘monitoring’, ‘assessment’ and ‘evaluation’. Are NGOs as effective as they claim? How can NGO effectiveness be gauged? How can it be enhanced? The three books under review respond respectively to these three questions. It is these questions that lie at the core of the emerging literature on NGO effectiveness. It makes sense to review the three books together, not only because they signify the direction in which the literature is developing, but also because each adopts a different, although still consistent, approach to addressing the questions of NGO effectiveness.

In Searching for Impact and Methods, Roger Riddell and his colleagues tackle the toughest of all questions: How effective have NGOs been in their development interventions? The study then goes on bravely to confront the obvious next question: How effective are our methods of NGO evaluation? It is the answer to this latter question that points directly to the need for a book like Toolkits (by Louisa Gosling with Mike Edwards) which focuses on practical methods for effectively assessing NGO effectiveness. Completing the trio is Alan Fowler’s Striking a Balance which is concerned not just with evaluating NGO effectiveness, but with enhancing it. Although the appeal of each book is obviously broader, the principal audience of Searching for Impact and Methods is donors who commission and review NGO evaluations, for Toolkits it is those who have to carry out such assessment exercises, and for Striking a Balance it is the NGO themselves.

Commissioned by the OECD/DAC Expert Group on Aid Evaluation, Searching for Impact and Methods is probably the most comprehensive review
yet undertaken of NGO evaluations and assessments. It accumulates evidence from 60 separate reports of 240 projects carried out in 26 developing countries. The template derived from this analysis is used to organise a more detailed look at 13 case studies of 8 donors (Belgium, France, the European Community, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States) and 5 Southern countries (Bangladesh, Brazil, Chile, Kenya and Senegal) which seek to synthesise the available information on NGO impact. While the breadth and scope of the review are themselves impressive, the real significance of the study lies not so much in the amount of evidence that it sifts through as in the methodological rigour and intellectual clarity with which it does so.

Although the reader is sometimes frustrated by the authors’ adamant evasion of a direct answer to the study’s principal question (What has been the impact of NGO development interventions?), their reluctance to generalise is entirely understandable, given the paucity of good data and the multiplicity of contexts. After all, the overarching conclusion of the study is that ‘in spite of growing interest in evaluation, there is still a lack of reliable evidence on the impact of NGO development projects and programmes’ (p. ix).

The most compelling discussions in the study relate more to the design and quality of the evaluations it reviews than to the conclusions of those evaluations. It is these discussions that highlight why we know so little about NGO effectiveness. As the authors are bold enough to point out, ‘although impact is widely discussed, the precise meaning of the term is often not clear’ (p. 51). But, while the reader will not find a precise definition of the term in this study, he/she will find a useful list of criteria that contribute to NGO effectiveness (p. x): achievement of objectives; impact in terms of poverty reach, alleviation of poverty and the degree of participation; sustainability (financial and institutional); cost-effectiveness; innovation and flexibility; replicability and scaling-up; gender impact; environmental impact; and impact in terms of advancing democracy and pluralism and strengthening civil society.

Although one could have wished for a crisper writing style and clearer chapter summaries, the study does highlight the key challenges, albeit in a scattered manner. For this reviewer, the main issues that emerged from a reading of Searching for Impact and Methods relate broadly to the who, how, why and when of evaluating NGO effectiveness. What is the right blend of outside expertise and self-evaluation? Can ‘pre-packaged’ methods respond to different cultural and social contexts without losing their comparability? Should evaluations be seen as learning tools for the future or audits of the past? How can we instil a culture of assessment within NGOs so that we may obtain a dynamic sense of NGO impact and effectiveness, rather than periodic snapshots at particular points in time? Providing definitive answers to these questions was obviously beyond the mandate of this report; however, it does an important service to the literature by raising them.
One of the main conclusions of Searching for Impact and Methods is that ‘we are still searching for methods and tools with which to assess NGO development interventions’ (p. 101). Toolkits responds directly to this by providing a ‘practical guide to assessment, monitoring, review and evaluation’ with the purpose of ‘improv[ing] the effectiveness of development work and the quality of the contribution the work makes to the lives of the people it hopes to support’ (p. 7).

Toolkits is very much a handbook written as a ‘how-to’ for those who have to evaluate NGO effectiveness through formal assessments. Gosling and Edwards invite their readers to use the book ‘as you would use a real “toolkit”, by selecting the particular tools (in this case, approaches, techniques and chapters) that you need to deal with a specific problem’ (p. 7). It begins with a useful chapter on definitions and on the need for assessments, monitoring, review and evaluation in programme design and management. This is followed by an account of three underlying principles: involving the relevant actors, recognising and dealing with differences and discrimination, and the systematic collection and analysis of information. The second section then deals with practical questions related to each stage of the process, while the third provides a discussion of the various ‘tools’. These include participatory assessment (PRA); surveys; logical framework analysis (LFA); cost- effectiveness analysis; strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and constraints (SWOC) analysis; setting objectives; evaluating participation; using consultants; programme visits; and visual presentation for feedback.

There is, in fact, little in this book that is entirely new or unique. Its utility lies not in its novelty but in the fact that it provides under one cover — and in simple language — all the information that a practitioner might need on the subject. However, the quality and depth of this information tend to be variable. For example, a detailed description of the logical framework analysis (15 pages) is quickly followed by what seems to be a hurried and less than complete presentation of SWOC analysis (1 page). Similarly, deep and detailed treatment of PRA methods (28 pages) is followed by a much less elaborate discussion of surveys (6 pages). The concern is not simply about the space devoted to each tool but the level of detail (or lack thereof) that is provided.

This said, the only yardstick on which such a book can, or should, be tested is that of actually using it in the field. This reviewer has done this during a recent monitoring mission in Pakistan and found it a useful companion. In a world where more and more people are more interested than ever in trying to gauge NGO effectiveness by means of tools such as those described by Gosling and Edwards, Toolkits is sure to find ready — and grateful — audiences.

In Striking a Balance, Alan Fowler focuses not on the problems of measuring NGO effectiveness but on the challenge of enhancing it. In doing so, he sets himself a daunting task. As he points out (p. xiii):
effectiveness is achieved by those NGDOs who find and maintain the right balance between the contradictory forces, expectations, demands and processes associated with performing complex tasks in collaboration with resource-poor, powerless people in unstable and often hostile environments. There are two significant factors in striking a suitable balance. First, the right systems inside an NGDO must be coupled in appropriate ways to external systems and organisations. Second, the NGDO’s structure must reflect a consistent vision, adaptive capacity and culture of trust which motivates and facilitates staff responsiveness. A further characteristic of successful NGDOs is their ability to recognise, organise and manage the ambiguities and dilemmas which are built into the international aid system and are inherent in the role of civic — as opposed to state or market — actors managing social, economic and political change.

In essence, Striking a Balance sets out to provide a detailed roadmap for how NGOs — or non-governmental development organisations (NGDOs) as Fowler prefers to call them — can achieve all this, and more. There are any number of individual recommendations in the book that one might quibble with, but as a whole Fowler truly strikes a balance in outlining an approach that is both desirable and achievable. However, his prescriptions are by no means easy to implement and call for some hard and deep thinking on the part of NGOs.

Organised into three sections, the book begins with a discussion of international development and the role played by NGOs. The second section on NGO effectiveness contains five chapters which deal, respectively, with organisational issues, human resources within NGOs, NGO relationships, mobilising financial resources, and performance assessment. The two chapters in the final section look towards the future, including a rich discussion on capacity building. Obviously written with the NGO practitioner in mind, the book is filled with elaborate tables, charts, figures and boxes which highlight key points and illustrate difficult concepts. Special boxes with ‘tips’ for NGO leaders and managers are particularly useful in distilling key lessons in simple and trenchant fashion.

This is essentially a book about NGO management that is not only of practical use to NGO managers but is equally useful as a college textbook. Its most refreshing feature is that it neither idealises the world of NGOs nor trivialises it by simply imposing upon it the tools of the marketplace. The author asks some tough questions of NGOs, and is able to do so because he speaks to them as an NGO practitioner himself. This is a book that understands the constraints under which real NGOs have to operate, but it does not wish these constraints away. A particularly powerful example of this is the chapter on ‘NGDO People’ which tackles such messy (and often ignored) issues as when to use expatriate consultants, how to balance local preferences with international donor agendas, and the next generation of NGO leaders.
In *Striking a Balance*, Alan Fowler distils a lifetime of experience and insight into some three hundred pages of an amazingly rich blend of pragmatism and vision. The key message of the book is not only that questions of NGO effectiveness can no longer be ignored, but also that effectiveness is not something that just ‘happens’; it is something that organisations have to work hard to acquire.

Looking at the three books together, it becomes quite clear that NGO effectiveness is something that we shall be hearing a lot more about. Donors and NGOs seem equally interested in enhancing effectiveness, but equally unsure about how this can be done. Our methods for evaluating NGO impact and effectiveness are still beset with problems and whatever little they do tell us is often not comparable, either between sectors or across social and geographic maps. The daunting challenge before NGOs is to figure out how they can organise and manage themselves for enhanced effectiveness.

One is tempted to muse that this emerging literature on NGO effectiveness suggests that the NGO-international donor relationship for development is entering a new phase. The honeymoon period may finally be coming to an end. Donors need to figure out what they are trying to evaluate, and why. NGOs need to make sure that they can actually bring about the outcomes for which they have already been claiming credit. Both need to ask and answer some tough questions. They not only owe it to each other but also, more importantly, to the poor and the marginalised whom they purport to serve.

References


