

Advancing Good Governance Seminar

7 June 2012 – 2:00 – 3:30 PM

Opening Plenary: The Governance Spectrum

The opening plenary featured a discussion amongst panelists representing civil society organizations (CSOs) of varied sizes, histories, and cultures, and serving varied populations. The panel focused on how best to improve governance in CSOs worldwide, while allowing each individual CSO to remain true to the mission it was established to achieve. Ultimately, panelists found that CSOs should function to ensure that the communities they serve are more empowered in all aspects of their lives.

Key Points from the Plenary

1. **Empowerment of the client/beneficiary.** Certain factors pull organizations from empowering (hearing and being responsive to) their beneficiaries. Among these are short-term financing and fund-raising efforts; governing structures that permit no beneficiary input or influence; reporting practices and requirements which end up shaping an organization's mission and its delivery at the expense of remaining attuned to the beneficiaries. In short, the panel felt that there is a vast difference between *talking about* listening to communities and consulting them, and ensuring that they are active, committed *participants*. Empowerment is not simply a goal that CSOs should have, but rather is part of the process that must be used in order to improve civil society.
2. **Governance is essential.** The process by which CSOs govern themselves mediates different priorities and different views. No matter how an organization is organized, good governance is absolutely essential, in that it is an organization's governance that will, among other things, determine outcomes when the organization experiences clashes among competing priorities, obligations, worldviews, etc.
3. **Challenge/opportunity of boards.** The role/construction of a CSO's board can be outcome-determinative for the organization. Boards can be afforded complete transparency through the entire organization and thereby challenge the senior leadership, but having such boards, full of internationally recognized experts, may serve to alienate CSOs from the communities they exist to serve by forcing them to be responsive to the board and not necessarily to the constituents. Accountability should be aimed first and foremost at those served, not the donors, and boards should support, encourage, ensure that the organization is succeeding in this.

Emerging Questions

1. What are the factors that alienate an organization from its intended beneficiaries, and what are the factors that bring the organization closer to those beneficiaries? Is it possible to come up with a list of such factors, so that an organization can put itself to the test and ensure that it is considering the best interests of the beneficiaries in everything it does?
2. What are the governance structures that embody, implement, support the factors referred to above, so that through the various challenges an organization faces as a

result of competing priorities, the organization's essential mission – serving its intended beneficiaries – is not compromised?

3. How can an organization ensure that its board is truly facilitating the essential mission of the organization? A board should not alienate the organization from its intended beneficiaries. What are the steps – kinds of board members, kinds of board activities, culture among board members, etc – that can be taken that will help ensure an organization's top-to-bottom focus on serving its intended beneficiaries?