Advancing Good Governance Seminar

8 June 2012 - 9.30-11.00

Plenary: Does Mainstream International Development Foster Good Governance?

This plenary focused on the critical role of good governance in legitimizing an organization within the countries where it operates, including with local governments and to the beneficiary communities served. Delegates posited a key test for good governance within a civil society organization ("CSO"): the extent to which the CSO gives up the power it wields and allows the beneficiary community to participate in and guide and, ultimately, control the organization's decision-making. Delegates further identified a critical weakness within the CSO sector as the overreliance on jargon, and the way that jargon can create distance between an organization and its intended beneficiaries and hide vulnerabilities in its governance structure. Finally, delegates voiced a concern that while good governance is essential, it cannot replace core values such as genuine care, protection, and love, which must underpin the work of CSOs.

Key Points from the Plenary

1. **Positive empowerment.** Good governance can assist in legitimizing organizations within the countries where they operate, both with respect to local governments and to the communities served. Good governance is more than a technical process, detailed on paper, but is a cultural process, through which organizational statutes and other documents can foster cultures of empowerment. A key test for good governance relates to what role does the community play in the organization's decision making. Sharing power is not reducing power but rather is an opportunity to give the community the ability to direct its future, engendering independent rigour and the occasion to hold both CSOs and government to account.

2. **Importance of engaging donors.** By allowing donors to take on more proactive roles in selecting projects, the distance between them and the beneficiaries can be reduced. Getting donors out in the field can lead to enlightened donors, who will better understand the people carrying out a given project and will educate them as to what projects can be effective and what not. In instances where donors seek to drive the kinds of projects undertaken, this form of education is important. Such site visits help deepen donor's commitment. What should be strived for is long term relationships with donors, which will improve chances for achieving systemic change.

3. **Opaque language.** Governance should not be an excuse for more technical jargon, which is often used to obfuscate/distract from certain weaknesses. Governance also should not detract from baseline principles of genuine care, protection, and love, which should be a core value of many organizations' work; those core values should not be supplanted by corporate reporting language. "The limits of our language are the limits of our work" was a telling statement by one delegate.

4. **Funding architecture.** Longer term arrangements are more likely to deliver better outcomes both because funding is guaranteed over a longer period of time which enables more sustainable endeavours, but also because relationships between funders and delivery partners develop over time. Shorter or less flexible funding arrangements can hinder development and shift the balance of power in the aid

sector in favour of the funder, which is detrimental when seeking to empower at grassroots level. A donor that is willing to listen and learn is vital.

5. **Constructive evaluation.** The lessons learned are just as important as the success stories, if not more so. Learning from mistakes, adapting process to avoid repeating them needs to be built into the DNA of an organisation and all stakeholders need to feel enabled to communicate when something didn't go to plan.

Emerging Questions

1. How can an organization surrender the power it wields in a way that it views this as a sharing of strength, not a loss of strength? Can organizations "just take the plunge," or do they need to be persuaded that the social transformation they seek to achieve can best be achieved through the surrender of power and the involvement of local communities in all aspects of decision-making?

2. What are the methods through which "better" relationships with donors, in the broadest sense, can be fostered?

3. How can the sector take on the problem(s) of jargon?

   -- how identify the scope of the problem?

   -- what are its possible solutions?

   -- what impact will attacking, and solving, the problem entail?

4. Is a culture change within CSOs possible whereby mistakes and criticism can be dealt with openly? Instead of donor pressure to always focus on "the positive," can organizations become comfortable with accepting mistakes, sharing those mistakes, and, hopefully, truly being transformed by them?