Local NGOs and their contribution to social change in Latin America: paradoxes and contradictions

Critical Reflection Paper

Action-Learning Process on the Theory of Change
Latin America sub-process
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Paper prepared by
Iñigo Retolaza
Paola Rozo

*"It is not simply that we should seek new and better ways
to manage society, the economy and the world. The
point is that we should fundamentally change the way we
behave"*

Vaclav Havel, 1992

PREFACING REMARKS

A few years ago, the Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation (Hivos) embarked on an action-learning process aimed at rethinking and reflecting critically on the best way to understand and accompany civil society organisations and local NGOs working to achieve development and social change in the South. With this aim in mind, it set up a global programme. By applying and developing the Theory of Change approach, this programme seeks to explore new ways to tackle the ever growing complexity and difficulty of supporting these processes of social change around the world.

Within this framework, this paper has been prepared with the intention of feeding into the analysis that will be carried out at the Critical Reflection Workshop to be held in La Paz, Bolivia, on 19 and 20 January 2012. The main purpose of the workshop is to provide a space for critical reflection that helps the organisations participating[1] to analyse and update their approach and practice of accompanying the local NGOs and organisations with whom they work in Bolivia and other countries in the region.

The event is particularly relevant in the current international development cooperation context. Firstly, competition for access to increasingly restricted sources of funding has intensified. Secondly, the effectiveness and impact of the work done by local NGOs as they seek to enable this long-awaited development and social change to happen is being seriously questioned. All this requires a further upgrading of organisational performance and the corresponding achievement of results, at every stage in the chain of development aid.

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[1] Hivos, Ibis-Denmark, Global Fund for HIV-AIDS, Fondo Conexión.

LOCAL NGOs: PARADOXES AND CONTRADICTIONS ON THE GROUND

Historically, local NGOs have done exceptionally good work in fostering processes of social change in Latin America. They have traditionally been progressive and this has enabled them to promote and support various different social movements and groups who are excluded and/or repressed. They have managed to influence progressive legal frameworks in the region's countries, and on more than a few occasions they provided a refuge and a platform for the work of many professionals committed to democracy and human rights during the dictatorships, in both rural and urban settings.

For the last few years, in our practice as facilitators, both together and individually, we have had the opportunity to accompany various different national and international NGOs, as well as grassroots civil society organisations, most of which promote human rights (including indigenous peoples' rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and the rights of GLBT groups, young people, women, etc). This accompaniment focused on supporting the processes of strategic thinking and action taken forward by these organisations in different areas of social and political action. This interaction with different civil society organisations and local NGOs in South and Central America has abounded with significant points of learning and unlearning: some personal, others particular to each organisation, and others that are recurrent and generalizable to all or almost all these organisations.

This critical reflection paper highlights some of these points of learning and unlearning, and presents them as inputs for the workshop, seeking to promote a reflexive and analytical exchange. We therefore place emphasis on the contradictory and paradoxical[2] aspects of these points of learning, in line with the complex thinking on which the Theory of Change approach is based. In this case, we set forth certain *contradictions* as issues that need to be resolved because of ethical or operational imperatives, and/or for reasons of consistency and credibility. The *paradoxes*, on the other hand, we see as issues that cannot necessarily be resolved but which nevertheless need to be made explicit, acknowledged and managed in a way that makes it possible to navigate the complexity of social change processes without getting shipwrecked.

The points of learning and unlearning oscillate and interact between two dimensions: one is internal, and has to do with the organisations' own internal dynamics; the other is external, and has to do with the interaction of these local NGOs with the civil society and grassroots groups with whom they work and who, we assume, are at the end of the day their very reason for existing and acting.

We have chosen to be minimalist and critical in order to focus on just a few points of learning and unlearning. We consider it key to make these explicit and analyse them more carefully and in greater depth. The aim is to provoke a cognitive dissonance that will help us to move beyond where we are at the moment in our thinking and action when we interact with these organisations and accompany the processes they are taking forward.

With this as the starting point, and without wishing to question the existence and relevance of these organisations in any way, our intention is to throw light on certain paradoxes and contradictions that we believe need to be reflected on critically, considering the challenges in the current context.

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[2] For the purposes of this paper, we understand a *contradiction* as that which can not be one thing and at the same time another (different) thing. As for *paradoxical thinking*, we understand it as an "apparently true proposition that leads to a logical contradiction or to a situation that defies common sense. In rhetoric, it is a figure of thought that involves using expressions or statements that imply contradiction" (Wikipedia in Spanish, accessed on 4 January 2012).

Paradox 1. The work of local NGOs is aimed at promoting more democratic, plural and inclusive societies and states; internally, however, they systematically reproduce the same things they say they want to change on the outside.

This statement is perhaps best reflected in the organisational culture and how this reveals the serious contradictions between discourse and practice. It is therefore essential to bear in mind that the organisation's internal dynamics have a crucial influence on their implementation of the main actions aimed at achieving social change 'on the outside' (starting assumption). Opening up spaces to make these dynamics visible and to be able to reflect on them, in order to then change them, is a challenge in itself. Experience shows that local organisations have few 'formal' resources (planning, financial, methodological and action-learning) to address such a major challenge by themselves.

A clear example of this disconnect between discourse and practice is the way in which decisions are taken within these organisations. Firstly, most of the local NGOs we have worked with have a *governance system* that includes cross-checking mechanisms. This means that their decision-making structures comprise general assemblies in some cases and, more commonly, steering committees that have the mandate to oversee, advise on and develop strategic guidelines to be implemented by the organisation's executive arm (the management and technical team). Normally, the members of the steering committee are not the same people as those in the executive team. Therefore – in theory – this should provide a balance of interests and enrich internal views with others coming from outside (which are assumed not to suffer to the same extent from the inevitable endogamy of those who work in the local NGO). The *strategic and ethical premise of the cross-check* is thus respected and promoted. Secondly, these governance systems, often made explicit in the organisation's statutes, establish the requirement that the post of manager/director must rotate every few years. Here again, the *democratic principle of alternation in power* is fulfilled.

In practice, however, we observe significant difficulties in complying with this governance system. There is undoubtedly a series of factors that may explain this recurrent situation, but we can highlight the following:

i. In most cases, these 'formalities' do not become an installed practice in the organisational culture. Instead, they are simply assumed as part of the requirements for the organisation to function. Executive managers are not necessarily able to make them dynamic. Neither do the technical teams seem to understand them as part of their competences, in such a way as to demand or invoke them when they may be useful for the processes they are taking forward.

ii. This may also be understood as a consequence of an apparent lack of political will on the part of management (and also, in some cases, the steering committee itself) to 'activate' and respect the governance system as initially designed and 'formalised' through statutes (bearing in mind that these may have been presented to donors and partners – if there are any – as an organisational and democratic achievement). Here a fundamental contradiction becomes explicit. Democratic systems are called for and/or promoted in the external setting – as part of the organisation's work – but there is clearly a resistance to implementing its own 'models' inside the organisation itself. The fact that these basic democratic principles are not complied with makes it impossible to experience at first hand what it means and implies to live in a (more) democratic system, at least as far as certain basic principles of all democratic systems are concerned, such as cross-checks and alternation in power. Therefore, the local organisations are not managing to set up within themselves a valid and referential experience that would enable them to better understand the challenges involved in promoting democratic practices in external spaces. As well as being contradictory and paradoxical, this is a basic matter of credibility and consistency.

Paradox 2. Local NGOs design and promote learning and social change processes; however, they find it seriously difficult to take forward an internal learning and change experience of their own.

This paradox is directly related to the way in which local NGOs manage the power-knowledge pairing. Due to Latin America's peculiar political culture, which also has an impact on the first paradox, it seems that one's knowledge is more "valid and correct" the higher one rises up the organisation's power ladder. In other words, the relevance and pertinence of knowledge and learning for social change in many of these organisations depends more on the position of power one occupies and in which internal spaces one participates, than on where, with whom and on what issues the member of the organisation works.

Most of these organisations are structured in a top-down way as far as decision-making is concerned, and to some extent they replicate this same arrangement in the knowledge management process. In some ways, this holds back the development of capacities for more strategic, inclusive and plural management in terms of how the diverse knowledge bases and experiences that exist in the organisation are dealt with (management, administration, technical teams, areas of work, experience of relating to different actors, academic disciplines, past experiences, etc). All this affects these organisations' ability to learn and unlearn what they should be learning and unlearning based on their exposure to changing, emerging and complex environments, agendas and actors. Hence, it also affects their ability to change and be more flexible with regard to the way they organise themselves internally (and, therefore, their ability to achieve results and address challenges). This dynamic is not designed and perpetuated only by those who are at the top of the ladder, but also by those who are a few rungs further down. We understand that this is due among other things to a subaltern mindset and a culture of silence, understood as a means of resistance to established power inside the organisation, and which is expressed (often but not always unconsciously) in day-to-day behaviour.

Because these are organisations whose formal structures are quite static, tensions (not necessarily creative ones) arise with regard to how to manage teams as processes go forward. Often, the resistance to greater flexibility in how teams are managed and how links are made internally, and/or the inability to achieve such flexibility, has more to do with the power dynamics and struggles inherent in a certain political culture and practice, rather than questions of learning and organisational change based on the common good.

Therefore, a tension arises between *the formal and the non-formal* in team management, and this needs to be made explicit. In our opinion and based on the empirical evidence we have found on the ground, an anachronistic and less than democratic management of the power-knowledge pairing generates internal conflicts that directly affect:

   i) the organisational climate in general;
   ii) people's motivation to be more effective and responsible in their role/job;
   iii) how long trained staff who have a good knowledge of organisational dynamics stay in the organisation; and
   iv) the organisation's ability to constantly adapt to the changing environment (and therefore to be more effective and relevant in its contribution to social change).

Paradox 3. Many civil society organisations involved in human rights activism decide to become NGOs, either in order to continue their work to further their demands and/or to be able to receive funding without intermediaries, among other reasons; however, the process of institutionalisation and joining the chain of international cooperation aid comes at a high social cost, generating strong contradictions between discourse and practice, distancing them from their own grassroots, and distorting their original 'raison d'être.'

This is a phenomenon we noticed some time ago in rural and indigenous organisations, but it is also very strongly evident in urban areas. Some of these local urban organisations are strongly criticised by their grassroots constituencies for several reasons. One common criticism, for example, is the fact that, as NGO employees, they benefit from the demands of different social groups (GLBT collectives, for example) by getting a job. These groups in turn do not feel that they necessarily benefit from the projects which, in theory and in the first instance, were drawn up in their name and designed to benefit them directly. There is frequently a perception in Trans communities that when NGOs work on GLBT issues, they end up "using" members of the community to complete lists of workshop participants and thus justify receiving funds. The realities and dynamics in the way local NGOs interact with their grassroots constituencies are undoubtedly much more complex than this, but it serves as an example of how the institutionalisation process and the dependence on projects paradoxically ends up generating distrust and distancing them from each other. Another recurrent example is the fact that former activists who are now NGO employees must spend a considerable amount of their time embroiled in implementing projects designed in a top-down, non-participatory way, writing reports and accounting to donors, rather than on strengthening the fresh and at times naturally disorderly[3] activities being taken forward by their own grassroots. In many cases, the technocratic and bureaucratic nature of the procedures in the aid chain significantly reduces the time and energy available for close and strategic contact (communication) with the grassroots constituency, leading to a painful distancing and distortions when it comes to determining priorities and providing social legitimacy to the NGOs' working agendas. In part – and only in part – this also happens as the result of the process of some NGO employees getting comfortable and settling down.

Fundamentally, we interpret these tensions as part of the disconnect between the disorderly, non-linear nature and dynamics that characterise these groups embarked on complex processes of social change and, in total contrast, the linear, bureaucratic and restrictive framework of projects as they continue to be set forth by donor agencies in the North. In the end, the excessive bureaucracy of western donors (who must in turn report to headquarters in their countries of origin) turns out to be limiting and mortgaging the transformative potential of those collectives in the South who started from the assumption that institutionalising themselves as an NGO would qualitatively assist their cause.

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[3] "Disorderly" in the sense that they do not operate in line with processes designed and planned beforehand and managed under a rationale of vertical, predictable control, as suggested by the modern positivist paradigm that underpins social intervention projects financed by international donors. Therefore, we do not wish to imply a pejorative connotation here about what it means to be disorderly; on the contrary, we understand that on many occasions this is the most pragmatic and effective way to behave in the complex socio-political environment in which we now live.

Paradox 4. Emerging collectives that are clearly urban adopt social technologies and approaches to socio-political intervention from other spheres with a longer historical and methodological track record, such as rural-indigenous communities; however, these intervention approaches may end up inhibiting the creativity and mobilizing potential of these other collectives.

Here we are faced with the challenge of innovating, developing and/or adapting new technologies for socio-political action better suited to the urban setting and the issues that concern emerging groups (for example, GLBT collectives in large Latin American cities). On repeated occasions we have heard the staff of local NGOs working on these issues say, *"Even I am tired of doing workshops"* or *"People are tired of coming to training workshops."*

Historically and currently, scattered rural communities have needed to develop new non-formal socialization spaces that are able to train or raise the awareness of a larger number of people and promote new socio-political leaders who can help to deal more effectively with the new contexts and emerging challenges arising from the processes of modernisation and democratisation of the state and society (i.e. the popular participation law in Bolivia). In the urban setting, in contrast, people are already provided with their own spaces and mechanisms for socialization and citizen awareness-raising. These are: i) the various public spaces where people naturally gather (schools, universities, bars, streets, markets, neighbourhood associations, youth groups, or city squares); ii) online technologies that generate processes of collective action and awareness-raising (Facebook, twitter, e-mail, text messages, etc). It is worth pointing out that this is already happening incrementally in different parts of the world.

In conclusion, all this does not mean that we must stop organising workshops or large-scale awareness-raising campaigns in the old style (i.e. pamphlets, posters or the traditional radio spot). What the growing urbanisation process taking place in our countries presents us with is a challenge in terms of the capacity of these local NGOs to unlearn, learn and bring themselves up to date with social intervention technologies that are more innovative and better suited to the urban environment (i.e. *flashmob* in public spaces, *lip-dub* in the street or in schools, street theatre, thematic festivals and fairs, concerts, film festivals, etc). Again, the urban environment, whether we like it or not, is the setting in which most of these collectives – and increasingly society as a whole – mainly operate.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR ACTION-REFLECTION

Although in this paper we have focused exclusively on local NGOs, many of these contradictions and paradoxes (and other, additional ones) apply equally to other support organisations such as international NGOs or other entities set up by them and/or bilateral donors. We are therefore proposing a series of questions that we think could be explored, not just in the workshop but also within the support organisations themselves.

1. What does it imply to be critically explicit about the contradictions and paradoxes we face in our work of contributing to social change?

2. What responsibility do support organisations (INGOs, support funds) bear and what role do they play in reproducing these and other dysfunctional dynamics inside the civil society organisations and local NGOs that they support?

3. What are the implications of adopting this perspective and analysis when defining the criteria for selecting partners for development and social change?

4. What does all this imply for updating the approach and methodology for the accompaniment that these local organisations require?

5. To what extent can the paradoxes and contradictions we have identified help us to adjust and/or redesign what we understand as organisational strengthening?

It is not enough to identify a problem and propose a solution. The solution must be put into practice before learning can occur. This raises the interesting issue about the relationship between organisational and individual learning.

Jerker Carlsson and Lennart Wohlgemuth
Learning in Development Co-operation – an Introduction

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