



Growing Global NGOs Effectively

How to achieve global coherence without losing local advantage.

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MOST NGOS GRAPPLE WITH THE CHALLENGE OF balancing expansion and organizational coherence. For many, growth has come through ad hoc replication, resulting in a loose partnership of legally separate fundraising entities that share a brand, (e.g. Save the Children US, Save the Children UK, etc) and receive support from a central office. For some, growth radiates from a center that maintains overall program budgets and controls field support. In either case, as these organizations expand, big challenges can emerge.

Radiators' local funders often want more influence over field work and direct relationships with frontline staff. Replicators, operating autonomously, can begin tripping over themselves, arguably wasting donor dollars when efforts overlap. Or the reverse is true and they suffer from isolation, failing to learn from peer experience.

Some global NGOs have addressed these challenges by evolving to a hybrid approach that combines advantages of radiators (e.g. coherence) and ad hoc replicators (e.g. the ability to act as a local anywhere) to great advantage. These "integrators" include micro-credit agency Opportunity International, sustainable development nonprofits Oxfam and World Vision, and Habitat for Humanity International, which helps poor families obtain homes.

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For some organizations, the benefits of becoming an integrator might not be enough to justify the cost of transitional upheaval. Nonetheless, the approach has great potential to enable increased effectiveness, and is worth considering. In that spirit, this article synthesizes what the Bridgespan Group has learned through case work with a diverse group of global nonprofits and interviews with the leaders and staff at more than 30 global NGOs.

Should your organization become an integrator?

If the following three "flashpoints" resonate, your organization might benefit from the integrator approach.

Flashpoint #1: Programs sharing a brand overlap in the field—sometimes front and center in the public eye. Technology allows the world to watch a disaster unfold in real time; similarly, word will spread instantaneously if two organizations bearing the same brand aren't coordinated at the scene, like the time half a dozen Oxfam affiliates from different countries arrived on the scene in the wake of the 1976 earthquake in Guatemala.

Less visible, but no less important over the long term, is overlap in the back office. Some staff in different locations may be duplicating tasks unnecessarily; others may repeat avoidable mistakes.

Flashpoint #2: Advocacy is at odds. Grass-roots experience gives organizations credibility in policy debates. But if voices from different parts of a network of organizations that share a brand are dissonant, this power evaporates; worse, the internal conflict can derail productive policy discussions.

Flashpoint #3: Funders are confused. When funders are approached by multiple bearers of the same brand in an uncoordinated fashion the ensuing confusion can have a negative effect. Consider a U.S.-based NGO with a program in India that is being funded by its UK affiliate. How should the NGO approach a U.S. foundation that has expressed interest in its work? Should the field manager talk to the foundation's program officer in India? Should UK board members approach people they know at headquarters? Should the U.S. affiliate approach the foundation on its own turf? Ideally, they could do all three; too often, the result is conflicting information and dropped connections.

Defining practices of integrators (and how to adopt them)

Our interviews indicate that integrators embrace three defining practices.

1. They distribute leadership expertise effectively

Distributing leadership effectively makes a global team more than the sum of its parts. Members of an integrator's leadership team are often distributed across the breadth of the network. All of the leaders we contacted travel widely. And most seek to bring people into the team who will round out their collective global experience, sometimes because they have worked in a particular country, sometimes because they have lived there. Having learned a lesson back in 1976, today Oxfam is led by chief executives from 14 country offices who coordinate planning and action; the team grows as affiliates join the network, and each leader has a vote.

NGO leaders accept that the costs of making this sort of ▶

Challenges that might cue consideration of an integrator approach

Duplicate Field Programs	Inconsistent Advocacy	Competing Fundraising
Inefficient use of resources through unnecessary duplications	Different messages in different countries conflict and confuse	Funds not directed to where potential for impact greatest
Programs operating at cross-purposes in the same geography	Bad reputation in one country can spread quickly to network	Uncoordinated or conflicting approaches to major donors
Missed opportunities to reap economies of scale, skill and scope	Inconsistent use of brand can blunt credibility and advocacy	Brand confusion

set-up work are steep in terms of time, money and physical strain. Many managers we interviewed spoke about the importance of getting the team together face to face, despite the logistical complexity and cost. As Jean-Michel Grand, the UK CEO of Action Contre le Faim, which has five national ACF partners that raise resources, commented, “We do a conference call every month and a meeting every quarter. The physical meeting is a key in building relationships. We could cut the cost of a trip, but at the end of the day there is so much more to gain by meeting in person.”

Some networks transfer people proactively, rotating CEO assignments. Others create interlocking directorships of country boards. Opportunity International Chair Terry Winters commented, “Our global board members generally sit on up to three boards within the network, and our CEOs frequently take on a board role in another country. We also started a network of mobile CEOs, which allows us to place people in hot-spots where their skills are needed. There are only about eight people at our headquarters; the rest of our network leadership lives around the world in different cultures and time zones.”

2. They focus on shared impact

It is easier for leadership team members to converge on desired outcomes, or goals, if everyone knows where the goalposts are. It is also easier for program leaders to learn from each other when they share measures of success, and for advocacy leaders to promote the right policies if everyone knows the specific change that the organization stands for. Employee motivation gets a boost as progress is demonstrated. What’s more, a sharp definition of desired impact can make requests to donors crystal clear, which is especially important if the donor is far away from needs in the field.

Consider Habitat for Humanity International, whose leaders used to define success in a distinctly U.S.-centric way: building single-family homes that individual families could own. As time passed, Habitat’s leaders realized that this metric was frustrating to its international member organizations. In some locations, it was difficult to prove land titles. In others, renovating existing structures was a more effective approach.

Mark Andrews, senior vice president of operations, explained, “We came to realize that the best approach was to partner with other NGOs and find solutions to housing other than the North American single family home. [The shift in thinking] came from our recognition that our real metric should be ‘families served.’”

3. They define complementary roles and responsibilities

among different parts of the networks

Integrators think about the “center” as global and coordinated, but not necessarily in one place. People filling global functions need not be concentrated at “headquarters.” Moreover, the role of the center is not a list of functions performed in “headquarters,” but a set of decisions (made in any number of places) that affect the organization globally.

Organized this way, senior managers are better able to recognize unique areas of strength in the field. When formalized, this recognition encourages field organizations to make the most of their own strengths, and also makes it easy to recognize when they should be working together, and when a given organization should take the lead.

The common theme is “complementarity,” which also means being proactive about decision-making processes: determining where the authority for certain types of decision resides, and when a decision should be made at the center.

Informal relationships among network members are also encouraged. Deliberate attention paid to informal relationships may seem contradictory, yet each branded NGO network we studied purposefully nurtured them, recognizing their importance to the combined organization’s ability to stay relevant.

For example, World Wildlife Federation (WWF) employees working on marine ecosystems in different parts of the Pacific took the initiative in 2002 to form an advisory group to share knowledge. The team included staff from Indonesia, Malaysia, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Europe, and the United States. One evening, while working together on various projects, the team hatched an idea for conserving marine life in the Coral Triangle, a fragile region of the Pacific.

After a series of iterations, WWF leadership adopted this strategy, which caught the eye of the President of Indonesia, multilateral donors such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, and a bilateral donor that awarded a multimillion-dollar grant for the project.

Potential for breakthrough levels of effectiveness and impact

Similar to a jigsaw puzzle in which each piece is different but works with others to create a coherent whole, integrators aspire to blend strengths in order to provide the strongest possible offering, whether that means being able to muster a timely and seamless response to a natural disaster, or bringing together streams of local knowledge and expertise to muster greater influence on the global stage. The integrator approach is in early days; we plan to continue to study integrators, and we encourage others to do the same, and share their thoughts. **MD**