

Breaking down Barriers

POLICY
BRIEF
19

Understanding and accommodating diversity

Southern NGO perspectives on collaboration

Maria Baarslag, Willem Elbers and Margit van Wessel¹

Executive summary

In international development, Northern NGOs commonly work with Southern NGO partners, and also seek to encourage collaborations between these partners. However, Northern NGOs do not always have a clear understanding of actual practices, preferences and already existing collaboration in the South. This makes it challenging to accommodate Southern forms of collaboration and to connect with Southern priorities.

In this brief, we present the results and implications of a case study of NGOs focussing on disability issues in Kenya that sheds light on different motives for, and barriers to, collaboration. The study found that Kenyan disability-focused NGOs interact with a wide range of actors, in a variety of collaborative relationships. Four main motives to engage in collaboration are: accessing resources, learning, profiling and achieving impact. Barriers include a lack of shared mission and vision, geographical barriers, limited resources, lack of trust and a limited focus on collaboration. The study also found that the NGOs in the study tend to work only with other NGOs with a similar core strategy and geographical focus. The findings imply that to build or support effective NGO networks, INGOs first need to have a good understanding of the diversity, priorities and perspectives of their NGO partners to be able to connect the right organisations.

Introduction

In the context of international development, NGOs often work together in networks to pursue common goals. NGO networks have been considered an important means to achieve impact. However, Northern ideas, interests, and perspectives often dominate discussions about NGO networks among practitioners and scholars. Consequently, the reality in the South, as understood by Southern partners, is not always the point of departure. Accommodating Southern forms of collaboration and connecting with Southern priorities can then become a challenge. Northern NGOs are often in favour of their Southern NGO partners working together because it is assumed that this will have various positive effects. However, a clear understanding of actual practices, priorities and already existing collaboration in the South is not always present. This can get in the way of supporting collaboration effectively.

To explore how to address this challenge, we conducted a case study of disability-focused NGOs in Kenya. Two research questions guided this case study: (1) what are the motives and barriers for NGOs to cooperate with *various societal actors*? (2) With which *other NGOs* do those in the study collaborate and why? After discussing the methodology, this policy brief first teases out why disability-focused NGOs in Kenya do (or do not) engage in collaborative relationships with other actors, such as government agencies, communities, other NGOs and donors. The remaining part of the paper zooms in on patterns in NGO collaboration that already exist. The aim here is to clarify with which other types of NGOs those in the study cooperate and identify who matters to whom, and for what. The paper ends with the implications for INGOs in relation to Southern-centred NGO collaborations.

Methods

To capture the various experiences and perspectives of Southern NGOs regarding collaboration, a variety of Kenyan disability-focused NGOs (n=14) was included in the sample². Respondents were selected in two steps. The existing network of the Liliame Foundation was used to access NGOs. Using snowball sampling, these respondents shared contact details of other disability focused NGOs. Respondents were selected based on their organizational differences - big and small NGOs, urban and rural NGOs, variety in strategy (service delivery, capacity strengthening and advocacy) and organizations run by people with disabilities and those working for or with them. The aim was to have maximum variation in the sample.

Online interviews were conducted with fourteen NGO program managers. During two sessions of one hour, respondents were asked to share experiences of fruitful and meaningful collaboration of their respective organizations. Respondents were encouraged to recount activities and explain what happened. This approach ensured that the realities, preferences and experiences of Southern organizations were at the centre of the analysis.

The content of the interview data was analysed inductively. Answers were coded for the types of actors and activities that encompassed collaboration. In addition, the various benefits and barriers of collaboration were coded. Last, coding served to clarify who the 'natural' NGO partners are for the NGOs in the study, and why.

² Eight of these NGOs were not part of the partner network of Liliame Foundation.



Development of manuals for inclusive education. Representatives from NGOs, schools, and government agencies come together to provide input for new guidebooks. PHOTO: RACHEL KITAVI-CDSK



Meeting of parents support group. The NGO and parents meet to address questions regarding raising children with disabilities. PHOTO: GODFREY OBUYA-CDSK

Diversity of collaborations

The Kenyan disability-focused NGOs in the study are a diverse group in terms of size and structure, goals, strategy, capacity, funding, geographic focus and grassroots relations. As such, it does not come as a surprise that they engage in a wide range of collaborative relationships with various types of actors. This diversity, amongst other things, manifests itself in the:

- **Level of engagement:** disability NGOs engage with actors at different levels, from the community and county levels to the national and international levels. Typically, the NGOs have a specific focus regarding their level of engagement, which depends on the scope of the NGOs’ activities and the level at which they seek to achieve outcomes.
- **Types of actors involved:** Kenyan disability-focused NGOs cooperate with a diverse group of actors across all parts of society at different levels. Key institutional actors include government agencies, schools, hospitals, churches and companies, NGOs and donors (including INGOs). In addition to these institutional actors, many Kenyan disability-focussed NGOs also cooperate with individuals such as community volunteers, parents and teachers.
- **Number of actors involved:** some collaborations are bilateral in nature, while others involve a range of actors.
- **Duration and stability:** collaborations are ad hoc, short-term or long-term. Ad hoc relations occur when a sudden opportunity arises, short-term networks may be formed for a specific project or campaign, while long-term networks may be established to address systemic issues or to build lasting partnerships.

In most cases, collaboration is directly tied to the implementation of the NGOs’ distinct strategic activities. Collaborators are typically partners (with whom they work together to achieve joint goals), advocacy targets (whom they seek to influence), or both.

Benefits of collaboration

Kenyan disability-focused NGOs cite four main motives for engaging in collaboration with other societal actors (see Table 1).

The NGOs in the study first seek to gain access to actors that hold specific resources (funding, services, materials) that enable them to achieve their goals and sustain their organisation. These diverse actors tend to be located in the area where activities are implemented. Community-based actors (volunteers, parents, churches) are important for NGOs with a local focus because they can freely donate time and expertise or mobilise community members. Private overseas donors are an important source of income for these NGOs. Collaboration with other NGOs is mainly important for NGOs with an (inter)national focus because they can have complementary strengths and expertise and therefore contribute towards program design and implementation. In addition, governments can make in-kind contributions to projects or sub-contract NGOs to implement disability projects.

Collaboration offers learning opportunities, especially between NGOs with a similar strategy working in the same area. Benchmarking is the practice of learning from the failures and successes of others. This can help organizations avoid common pitfalls and can lead to the development of new and improved strategies. Professional development is about learning new skills or best practices from others. Information sharing occurs in collaboration with all types of actors and allows one to learn about relevant developments in the field - for example, how the Covid pandemic has affected people with disabilities in different areas.

Profiling is about boosting one’s position in a certain field or network. Respondents stressed the importance of being well-

Table 1 Benefits of collaboration

Accessing resources	Learning	Profiling	Achieving impact
Funding	Benchmarking	Contacts	Amplified voice
Services	Professional development	Visibility	Coordination
Materials	Information sharing	Reputation	Access

connected to gain access to funding opportunities, become more widely visible and build relations with crucial stakeholders. Being part of a network can provide information and contact details of other interesting actors. This can be especially important for NGOs seeking to build trust with stakeholders, such as donors, beneficiaries, and government officials. In some cases, network membership (consortia) is a precondition to access funding from donors or the government, illustrating that profiling is closely linked to accessing resources. Profiling mostly happens in networks tied to the geographical area, or level (county, national) where activities are implemented.

Last, NGOs work with others to enhance their impact. For those engaged in advocacy, collaboration can contribute to an amplified voice, providing more possibilities to address stigma or unjust policies. Coordination means that NGOs harmonize their activities with others in the same region to create synergy or avoid duplication. Finally, for NGOs seeking to achieve change through awareness raising and policy change, solid relations are key for exerting influence. This is why many NGOs in the study invest in relations at the community level (community members, parents, teachers) or with governmental agencies.

Barriers to collaboration

The research identified several reasons why Kenyan disability-focused NGOs might refrain from collaboration:

- **Lack of clear benefits:** NGOs do not invest time, energy and resources in collaboration when they do not anticipate a clear benefit.
- **Lack of shared mission and vision:** The NGOs in the study have different understandings of disability issues and how to address them (e.g. charity approach vs. human rights approach). This creates differences in priorities and approaches and can make it difficult to find common ground with other actors.
- **Geographical barriers:** NGOs focus their collaboration on the area where they work and where their outreach is. As many of the NGOs work at the community or county level, the added value of working with others outside their working area is usually not self-evident whilst the distance makes connecting more difficult, costly and time-consuming.
- **Limited capacity:** Disability NGOs in the study can see the value of connecting to other actors, but may simply lack time and resources. They may not be able to allocate staff or lack funding to attend meetings.
- **Lack of trust:** Several respondents noted that sometimes a lack of trust in the intentions, capabilities, or track records of other actors can hinder their willingness to work together.

- **Limited interest in collaboration with other NGOs:** One NGO, for example, had only collaborated once with another NGO because this was donor-initiated. The findings suggest that some NGOs are more outward-orientated and inclined to collaborate than others. One NGO, for example, only had only collaborated with another NGO because this was donor-initiated.

Collaboration between NGOs

An important part of the study consisted of teasing out patterns in NGO collaboration. All respondents in the study were asked with which other NGOs they cooperated to address disability issues, and why they worked specifically with these NGOs as opposed to others. The analysis revealed that the NGOs in the study tend to work only with other NGOs with a similar core strategy and geographical focus. These findings suggest that the expected benefits of collaboration (see above) comprise a necessary, but ultimately insufficient, condition for collaboration: collaboration seems unlikely to succeed without a shared core strategy and geographic focus.

Regarding strategy, NGOs prefer to work with other NGOs whose strategy is similar to theirs, as this is most likely to result in benefits with regard to sharing resources, learning, profiling and achieving impact. In most cases, collaboration between NGOs revolves around concrete interventions, which in turn are rooted in organizational strategies. Examples of interventions include organising disability awareness day and screening camps in remote areas or advocacy campaigns, and workshops about inclusive education.

As a different strategy implies different types of interventions, collaboration between NGOs with different strategies is often not self-evident. It is important to acknowledge here that the choice of strategy is rooted in an NGO's (sometimes implicit) conceptual understanding of disability issues and how it views its own role. Thus, an advocacy NGO that focuses on root causes and unequal power relations may not perceive service delivery NGOs as 'natural' partners. While not mentioned explicitly by respondents, the findings do suggest that ideological differences that manifest themselves in the choice of strategy also stem from whether NGOs work from a social model of disability (emphasising the need to create a more inclusive society), or from a medical model of disability (focusing on individual treatment).

The geographical focus matters to the extent that disability NGOs often have few incentives to work with other NGOs outside their own area or level of operations. In general, community and county-level NGOs do not cooperate with NGOs that work at the national and international levels and vice

Training community health volunteers. The NGO provides training to community health volunteers that help identify and refer children with disabilities in remote areas.

FAUSTINE CHEPCHIRCHIR - CDSK





Campaign for inclusive education. NGOs, the local diocese, and schools march together to campaign for inclusive education. PHOTO: DENIS BUNDI MIRITI - CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF ISIOLO

versa. As collaboration is often directly tied to interventions, cooperating outside one’s geographical area of operation often does not bring benefits in terms of accessing resources (except from international donors), profiling and achieving impact. A few examples of learning from NGOs outside one’s own area or level of operations were encountered, but these were donor-initiated and they did not hold on their own. Advocacy NGOs working at the national level do connect with the community or county levels, but do so mainly via membership-based organisations (Disabled People’s Organisations) as opposed to NGOs. This makes sense as working with DPOs, as opposed to NGOs, lends their national-level advocacy work greater legitimacy.

Conclusions and recommendations

This study aimed to (1) identify the motives and barriers for disability NGOs in Kenya to cooperate with various societal actors, and (2) identify patterns in NGO collaboration. The study found that Kenyan disability NGOs engage in a wide range of collaborative relationships with a variety of actors. Key motives to engage in collaborations are accessing resources, learning, profiling and achieving impact. Barriers include a lack of clear benefits, a lack of shared mission and vision, geographical barriers, limited capacity, a lack of trust and a limited interest in collaboration. A key finding is that the NGOs in the study mostly work with other NGOs whose core strategy and geographical focus are similar to theirs. In other words, strategy and geographical focus largely determine whom NGOs see as ‘natural’ NGO partners. These findings have several implications for INGOs seeking to promote collaboration between NGOs. In the countries where they are active, INGOs tend to work with a range of Southern NGO partners. Hence, they are in a unique position to create added value by connecting Southern NGOs. INGOs seeking to build and support effective NGO networks first require a strategy for maximising the benefits of cooperation whilst

mitigating potential barriers. Regarding benefits, the question at hand is how to promote resource exchange, learning, profiling and achieving impact between collaborators. To mitigate barriers, INGOs may consider providing resources that enable collaboration. Most barriers (overcoming differences in mission and vision, geographical barriers, a lack of trust and a limited intrinsic interest in collaboration), however, can only be mitigated by making sure the right NGOs are being brought together.

While securing the benefits of collaboration and mitigating potential barriers are crucial, these may ultimately be insufficient for achieving meaningful and lasting collaboration. The findings of this study suggest that collaboration between NGOs is unlikely to succeed without a shared core strategy and geographic focus. In some cases, there might still be compelling reasons to promote networking between NGOs that lack a similar strategy or geographical focus. In such cases, however, network-building must start from the assumption that getting the collaboration to work will likely be more challenging whilst requiring more support and attention.

Overall, our research demonstrates that to build or support effective NGO networks, INGOs need to start from the diversity, priorities and perspectives of their NGO partners to be able to connect the right organisations. Rather than bringing organisations together because they all work on disability issues or all happen to be a partner of the donor is unlikely to produce the desired results. Such an approach also works against ideals of locally-led development that start from local understandings, aims and capacities. Taking a supporting, facilitative stance based on how Southern partners see and define the (possible) added value of collaboration and building upon already existing collaboration is likely the most legitimate and effective way forward.

Credits

Picture on the front page: Meeting of Kenyan NGOs. NGOs come together to share updates and knowledge. PHOTO: GODFREY OTIENO - CDSK

About the authors

¹ Maria Baarslag is a Student Researcher in Inclusive Development at Wageningen University & Research. Dr. Willem Elbers is the Principal Investigator of ‘Breaking down Barriers’ at Radboud University. Dr. Margit van Wessel is Associate Professor at the Strategic Communication Chair Group of Wageningen University & Research.

For further reading

Baarslag, M.G.V. (2021). Kenyan perspectives on the added value of collaboration: partners for a disability-inclusive society. MSc thesis. Wageningen University & Research.