

FEBRUARY 2012 - FEEL FREE TO COPY OR LINK TO THIS WORKING PAPER

Acting Globally - Thinking Globally

Stepping up to govern an international NGO

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Introduction

Congratulations! You have been appointed to a governance role in an international non-government organisation (NGO) committed to making the world a better place. You might have applied for this role, been elected, been appointed by virtue of chairing or directing a member of your alliance², or perhaps you were just out of the room when the critical decisions were made. As Shakespeare's Malvolio observes: "some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon 'em."

However you have arrived, the task is now in front of you and it is a measure of your commitment to the cause of your organisation that you are prepared to take on this additional role. Even if you are doing this reluctantly, squeezed in around other roles, you want to be as useful as possible.

In this paper I describe my impressions of the change from national or functional³ governance to international governance and suggest things it might help you, as a new board member, to think about and questions you might ask to make the transition⁴.

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² I will use the term alliance to cover the range of forms taken by international NGOs, from networks such as CIVICUS through confederations (Oxfam International), federations (Greenpeace International, Plan International), to unified but distributed entities such as World Vision International. For a comparative study of the field see Brown, L.D., Ebrahim, A., and Batliwala, S. (2011) *Governing international advocacy NGOs*, Hauser Center, for Nonprofit Organizations, Harvard University, Cambridge MA.

³ Such as membership of an audit or strategy committee.

⁴ Thanks to the following for the helpful insights and comments received on an earlier draft of this paper: L David Brown, Karen Brown, Ken Caldwell, Stan Cutzach, Burkhard Gnärig, Michael Henry, Monique Letorneau, CK Lo, and Joanna Kerr. Of course, all errors and idiosyncrasies are mine.

There are many resources to help you with governance in general and perhaps to induct you into this particular role in your particular alliance. Here I am focused specifically on the changes involved when you take on an international role and how you might make this change more effectively.

One final point by way of introduction: International alliances are relatively new as functioning global entities. How they are organised is still a work in progress. Most are working to shape and re-shape their governance. L David Brown has researched the ways international NGOs have grown over the past couple of decades and tried to work in much more coordinated ways to achieve their missions⁵. He has tracked the different approaches groups have taken to structure and governance and how this has changed over the period. His conclusion is that there are common trends but there is no agreed or right way to do it. He says each group is having to make it up as it goes along⁶.

In recent years, under the auspices of the Berlin Civil Society Center, there has been annual meeting, called Vision Works, of the chairs and executive directors of 12 to 16 of the largest international NGO alliances. We come together to talk about issues and experiences of international governance and leadership. The ideas in this paper are in part a distillation of my experience of these meetings over the past four years⁷. Many of these organisations have also been active in developing and implementing the INGO Charter⁸ (International Non Government Organisations). The Charter sets governance standards and INGOs report progress against those standards. The Charter is set out in the Appendix to this paper.

I have grouped my thoughts into six sections, each headlined with a question. The stance I attempt with each of these sections is to consider what could a new board member most usefully pay attention to. I end each section with two types of questions: firstly those that a new board member might focus on and, secondly, questions that should be central to the work of the whole board. This second list of questions is not there to overburden the new board member but to flag the sorts of issues you might expect to move onto over time. The six sections are:

1. Where have we come from?

⁵ Presentation to the Berlin Civil Society Center, March 2008. See also Brown, L.D., Ebrahim, A., and Batliwala, S. (2011) *Governing international advocacy NGOs*, Hauser Center, for Nonprofit Organizations, Harvard University, Cambridge MA.

Ken Caldwell's papers on global governance issues for NGOs are also very helpful:

<http://hausercenter.org/iha/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/hotissuesglobgovpub11.10.pdf>

<http://hausercenter.org/iha/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/10WaysNotToBuildAGlobalNGO9.11.pdf>

⁶ This newness may partly explain why so much of the work of international boards seems to be focused on alliance governance, structure, and processes rather than, for example, the changing strategic context or improving the effectiveness of delivering on the mission.

⁷ www.berlin-civil-society-center.org

⁸ The INGO Charter was developed through the workshops of the International Advocacy Non-Governmental Organisations (IANGO). See <http://www.ingoaccountabilitycharter.org/about-the-charter/>. The Charter is appended to this paper.

2. Do we have the diversity we need to govern our alliance and how can we draw these diverse views into an effective whole?
3. What are we trying to become?
4. How do we work at a global scale?
5. What are we accountable for internationally and to whom?
6. What is my role and how might I grow in this role?

1) *Where have we come from?*

It helps to be really clear about where your organisation has come from, its history (or the histories of different affiliates), core values, and commitments. While most of us are involved in relatively large organisations that are active in many countries, our histories are commonly stories of committed individuals and small groups standing up for what they believed, often in the face of ridicule and abuse and sometimes in danger to their lives. Justly we can be proud of our pioneers and of people we have served with.

As we look back from our more institutional perspective it helps to see the ways that our histories have shaped who we are today. One of the reasons Oxfam International values its history as a confederation is because of the importance prior Oxfams have put on being community-based organisations grounded in their own countries. Amnesty International values its elective democracy partly because the organisation puts a priority on human and individual rights and the rights of democratic engagement. It suits Greenpeace International to operate as a federation, and seek to be a more fleet-of-foot federation, because of the emphasis the organisation places on acting decisively with unity, speed, and flexibility.

It helps to see the logic in each of these approaches. It also helps to see that this is not the whole story. Nor is it the only way to organise an international NGO. Others do it differently and for good reasons. We want to understand and honour our histories but not be held in thrall to them. Seeing how others organise helps us to see a wider spectrum of possibilities and to choose more effective ways to organise ourselves in the face of future challenges.

The experience from the Vision Works discussions is that all our organisations are seeking a holy grail of being a more effective international NGO in a much more global world. We tend to be reaching for the same organisational goals (although our missions may be quite different) but each is also both constrained and strengthened by its own history. The more unitary NGOs are trying to decentralise; the more networked and confederated NGOs are trying to be more integrated in their approach while retaining key aspects of their diversity.

Core questions for incoming board members:

- *What relevant history and experience do I bring to this role? How does my experience of the organisation compare with that of other board members? What strengths and constraints does this mix give us as we shape the future organisation?*

Core questions for all board members:

- *What parts of our history and values strengthen us and need to be held on to and built upon?*
- *What parts of our history and values now constrain us and how would it help us to let these go?*

2) Do we have the diversity we need to govern our alliance and how can we draw these diverse views into an effective whole?

There is another aspect to the question of where you are coming from. Does where you have come from give you a broad enough diversity of views around your board table to take on the challenges of being a more international alliance? Is the full diversity of your stakeholders represented? If it is a diverse group already, or working to become one, how is the range of perspectives melded into a whole-of-alliance view that enables the alliance to take effective unified action?

The issues to be addressed in response to these questions are:

- achieving appropriate diversity;
- managing key issues and conflicts; and
- reaching a whole-of-the-alliance view.

I will address each of these in turn.

Appropriate diversity

We may all be trying to be more international but round the board table we tend to display our roots in the 'global North.' We are often still too "pale, male, and stale." OK, 'stale' may unfairly diminish the value of experience for the sake of a cheap rhyme. But, the general need is to more fully include the wide range of perspectives of the worlds we are operating within and to address gender imbalances where they arise. We can no longer change the world with only a small and like-minded group trying to manage the tent.

Many NGO alliances have made efforts to have greater diversity in their governance. This has taken different forms. A network such as Civicus does not have to make special efforts at diversity because that is inherent in its goals of being a broad, inclusive, and participatory network (from the South and North, East and West). Civicus builds in diversity from the bottom up.

Alliances who have originated in the 'North', often with aims of shifting resources to the 'South' and advocating to end poverty and injustice, have had to take deliberate steps to increase their diversity. Action Aid moved its headquarters to South Africa and established more 'Southern' affiliates represented in the governance of the organisation. World Vision is progressively turning its in-country offices into domestic World Vision organisations with local boards. With a large and growing number of affiliates, and the increasing diversity of those affiliates, it has structured its global governance around three leaders from each of seven regional groupings. It now also requires a level of gender balance within the boards of all its affiliates.

A further aspect of 'diversity' is whether we have independent perspectives around the board table. Is the board structured solely as a representative body or are their possibilities to bring relevant independent voices into the discussions?

Managing key issues

Different forms of diversity bring their own challenges. How much are board members there to represent different constituencies? How might differences in money and power be dealt with? How are conflicts best addressed? Having built in necessary diversity you want the spectrum of views to work for your alliance. This can often be very hard, and literally 'disagreeable', work. We pay lip service to diversity yet often underestimate the depth of the differences that exist in culture, values, experiences, and mindsets. To build a trusting and truly diverse board takes conscious and consistent efforts.

Alliances take varying approaches to whether their board members primarily advance the collective needs of the alliance or attend as representatives for the individual affiliates. The extent that an alliance has a representative board can reflect the aspirations or concerns of those who drafted the founding documents. This can also be shaped by the legal requirements of the country where the alliance is formally constituted. In the end, to be an effective alliance the board has to be focused on what is best for the whole alliance. It helps if this need is clearly provided for in the constitutional documents because otherwise the alliance's board will find itself working around the constitution, or at the edge of the constitution, to take effective action on behalf of the whole alliance, with all of the tensions, confusions, and risks this involves.

You might argue that for a board made up of representatives that the point of the board meeting is to bring together each different representative and have them argue out their views until the best decision is reached. There are two constraints on this. Firstly the expectation that each representative is there to argue for their interests can pull board decision making down to making trade-offs and finding the lowest common denominator on many issues. Secondly, representational approaches are limited by the logistical limits on international NGOs.

The slide into lowest-common-denominator solutions severely limits the ability of alliances to achieve their noble aspirations. Yet it is an understandable consequence of good people doing their best in the circumstances. Many of our INGO governance structures pull alliances into trading off the diverse interests the affiliates. The affiliates make up the alliance. The viability of the alliance depends on the viability of the affiliates and this is often interpreted, at least in the short term, as needing to meet the pressing interests of the affiliates.

Board members operating in this context do not think of what they are doing as being particularly sectarian. They think they are working to achieve the overall mission of the alliance, they just see it through a lens of the effectiveness and viability of their affiliate or partner organisation – its outputs, powers, resourcing, the needs of its managers and staff, or other special concerns. What

is good for the German affiliate, or the US, division, or the program section, or West African operations, must be good for the whole alliance.

If we make the big calls for the alliance only when these calls do not compromise the interests of the major players the big calls rarely get made and a wealth of potential achievement is left on the shelf. The alliance becomes a group of people working hard together but a proportion of the hard work involves protecting my interests and making deals between the players rather than taking a view of the whole mission and the needs of the whole alliance. The paradox here is that the alliance depends on healthy affiliates for its own viability (it is highly risky to threaten that viability) and yet particular interests of the affiliates can also hold the alliance back from taking critical steps to deliver on its mission. Managing this polarity, in its many forms, is a core function of the board of the alliance and a healthy first step is to make the polarity explicit.

Some of these polarities or paradoxes come to the fore with the large ranges between the largest and smallest affiliates. Most of the international alliances have one to three really large members. One of the large affiliates might earn more than half the income and the top three might together contribute around 80 per cent or more of income. Then there can be a spread of medium-sized to very small affiliates. Different alliances approach this differently. For some, all decisions are based on one affiliate/one vote; others have forms of weighted voting; a third group mix this up with one affiliate – one vote for the big decisions that may go to a full assembly of members and then structuring a board or executive committee to more reflect the spread of resources in the alliance.

However this is done, and all our agencies value democratic and universal approaches of some form, the informal power can still tend to follow the money to some extent. There is a partial logic for this: in many cases the board is the trustee of the donors' funds and so has greatest accountability to the largest donor members and it also makes sense that if the needs of the largest are not being met then they may not continue to support the alliance. Yet the board is equally accountable to those it serves. These imbalances inevitably create tensions for both the large and the small and it helps to have these issues and tensions be explicit and be worked on in careful and constructive ways consistent with the shared values of the alliance.

The international board is often trying to establish and govern an internal market where different affiliates and groupings bring different strengths and needs: access to money or key governments, closeness to critical communities, research resources, or advocacy capabilities.

Logistics also constrain the functioning of global alliances. Distances and other realities intrude and we need to be frugal. We all have missions of care and we are spending our supporters' money. International boards generally meet less often than national boards, for cost, time, and use-of-carbon concerns, and are also constrained by what is possible on telephone or videoconferences. Given all this, it is harder to build trust and a strong spirit of contributing jointly to solve

the whole-of-alliance issues unless people are well able to hold the worldviews of their colleagues in their heads. The principle is not that different from serving on a national board, except the differences can be more marked on an international board and also less immediately accessible because they can be views that you are exposed to less often.

American folk icon Pete Seeger has observed that by the time you have learnt the words of one of his songs you have got to the end. He quips, “It’s like life really, isn’t it. But with a song you can sing it over again.” It is also much like this being on an international board. Too often by the time we get to a whole-of-alliance view our term is up, people are saying nice words at our farewell, and another newbie is in our seat blinking uncertainly. The cycle of learning begins again. The new board members are thrown into the deep end of an alphabet soup of new abbreviations and acronyms and struggle to get a grip on what is expected of them. The board may struggle at any one time to have a critical mass of members who have got clarity about their roles and can look across the whole of the alliance’s work and take a more global view. These challenges are a key constraint on the ability of international alliances to function effectively as global entities in the ways we now aspire to work.

With the need to enhance diversity and manage multiple interests, conflict is built into our work. How we deal with conflict is critical to our effectiveness as governors and as international change agents. This is a subject for a book or three, yet, while not wanting to be glib, I suggest a useful approach to adopt.

Work toward a ‘sensemaking’ stance. This is a critical move if a board is to change from an approach of balancing each other’s different interests to one where board members co-create a larger future. In most of our interactions with other people (even in NGOs committed to a better world!) we think of them as problems to be solved where my interest is in manoeuvring you or instructing you to get you to do what I think you should be doing. A sensemaking approach assumes that others make sense differently from the ways I make sense and it is in my interests to understand the sense they are making. I may learn things I did not know that are of value to me. I may agree or disagree. But if I disagree I will do so from a fuller understanding of the situation. My decisions will be improved by understanding how others are making sense of things. Our board decisions will be improved when we make sense of the issues together – in all its diversity.

A sensemaking approach builds trust and it supports two other steps necessary to getting conflicts addressed: getting the real conflicts on the table and having them expressed in ways that are about the issues and not the personalities. But beware, a sensemaking approach is simple to describe but hard to practice. It is fundamentally counter-intuitive. In my day job, as part of my leadership development work, I video leaders attempting this approach. Nobody does this instinctively without practice. We are so imbued with a stance of seeing other people as the ‘problem’, even of seeing ourselves as a problem. Watch yourself next time you face a conflict and ask – was I able to make what a colleague has called “the longest walk in the world”, stepping across the room to stand in the shoes of the other person and look at the issue through their eyes? This is not

the same as much of our communication training – how to think about where others are coming from and tailoring my communication to appeal to their thoughts and feelings to convince them I am right. This is about trying to see how they make sense because it may change how I make sense of things or the ways we make sense of things together.

A whole-of-alliance view

A sensemaking approach, whether done consciously or achieved through working in close proximity over time, is central to achieving a whole-of-alliance view. Over time this means being able to hold the spectrum of views represented across the alliance. In my experience, it is relatively easy to say: “Oh, that is the Americans or the Swedes or the South Africans and *they* would say that, wouldn’t they? I know exactly where they are coming from.” What is more useful, but harder, is to hold the way others see an issue without judgement. Holding someone else’s views or holding a range of views is just that: being able to experience their way of looking at things and take it fully into account. It does not mean agreeing, necessarily. But having board members better able to hold the richness of a range of perspectives enables a board to come to bigger and better decisions. It enables two things: firstly, it helps the board to step up to a whole-of-alliance decision and, secondly, to consider how that decision on behalf of the global alliance will be experienced by different members.

A helpful way into understanding the perspectives of different parts of the alliance is to understand the value that each affiliate gains from the alliance or seeks to gain and what they are having to give up to gain that advantage. It also helps to know which are the affiliate’s hot button issues that, because of their particular constituencies or history, it is especially sensitive about.

A final point about lifting the board to a truly international, whole-of-alliance, way of thinking: you need to build for it. Does the way your governance is structured support board members understanding the perspective of each other and working together to achieve a bigger result for the whole alliance or does it hold board members within representational silos? A key role for the board is to reshape governance so that it supports the governors to act for the greater good of the whole alliance in achieving its objectives.

Core question for incoming board members:

- *How do I go about making sense of the key stakeholders and affiliates not as allies to enlist or opponents I need to fix but rather as colleagues who may make sense of situations differently from me, from whom I might have useful things to learn, and with whom I can work to advance the alliance in all its diversity?*

Core questions for all board members:

- *How do we embody the full range of ways of thinking that we need at the board table to be effective as an international organisation?*

- *How well do we understand how each of us makes sense of the work we do, the perspectives and interests of the main affiliates or sections of our alliance, and the value they gain from and offer to the alliance?*
- *How can we build trust and manage conflict more openly and objectively?*
- *Do our constitutional documents clearly require the board of the alliance and members of the board to act in the best interests of the whole alliance? Is our governance structured to enable this, and do we make this an explicit focus of our work together?*

3) What are we trying to become?

This is the central question for the board. The longer version of this question is: How does the organisation need to need to reshape itself in order to achieve its mission through changing times? But all that is a more of a mouthful.

Observers of board performance often point to boards spending too much time on reworking the past and responding to the present and challenge them to instead lift their focus to work on shaping the future. Different advisers suggest rules of thumb of between 60-80 per cent future-focused and 40-20 per cent on the past and present. How would your board ratios compare?

Questions NGO boards need to be focused on include:

- How is our world likely to change?
- What is the role of NGOs in this changed context?
- What do our stakeholders want us to be doing?
- How will our alliance need to change to meet new needs?
- How do we maximise our impact?
- What is our theory of change or theories of change?
- How much might we want to grow and how might we do this?
- How do we improve?

At a national level these can be challenging questions. They get harder when the focus is on international strategy. More factors come into play, the scale of the issues gets much larger, decisions are more removed from the actual implementation and necessarily involve more abstraction.

The elements to support these discussions are also relatively underdeveloped. We are light on theories of change or intervention logics. We often do things because that is the way we have done them in the past or we have observed others doing them with apparent success or our partners or supporters might have been keen on these initiatives.

Continuing to do what we have done well may not be the same as having a 'theory of change' that focuses on identifying the actions that will have the greatest impact on our mission and doing those actions well. For good reasons, we sometimes struggle to clearly describe how if we act in X ways we might

expect Y results and these would contribute to Z desired outcomes⁹. Even where we have some good examples of the logic for the actions we take at the beginning we may not always have clear data on how things worked out in practice. Our uncertainty about the logic of what specifically our actions are going to achieve, and why this is the best course to follow, is matched by a discomfort of saying to donors: “We think these actions will work but we sort of expect effectiveness might probably emerge from the system, if conditions are favourable!”

This latter guesstimate may be the best judgement in the circumstances. We cannot know or control everything from X to Y to Z but a key part of the work of the global board is to help to guide its alliance on this path. While the logic for particular actions may be necessarily uncertain, the board’s job is to work with management and staff to agree on the strategic framework that best shapes the work of the alliance and clarifies the changes in direction that may be required. Because there is inevitably so much uncertainty about the most effective actions we might take, board also needs to be creating a strategic framework that enables learning. This is a weakness in our sectors, as in many others, and we are generally reluctant to fund evaluations and longer term research.

Core questions for incoming board members:

- *Is it clear to me what we are trying to become?*
- *If our direction seems clear, how do I contribute to overseeing the progress we are making on this journey? If our direction is unclear, what questions and understandings can I bring to help to clarify our choices?*
- *How can I use my “I-am-new-here” freshness to help the board address these questions?*

Core questions for all board members:

- *Are we focusing enough on our strategic role, on how the world might be changing and how we might need to change to be more effective?*
- *Do we have a clear logic of change and where are we in implementing this logic and learning from the experience?*
- *How does the next issue in front of us (whatever it might be) help us to move forward toward our strategic goals? If not, should we be focusing on it or can we deal with it in a way that helps us achieve our goals?*

4) How do we work at a global scale?

Burkhard Gnärig, Executive Director of the Berlin Civil Society Center, challenges global board members to answer the question: “what are the GLOBAL decisions my organisation has to take?” and then to make sure that these can be taken from a truly global perspective. The international board needs to be clear about

⁹ In saying X,Y and Z am not implying a numerical or necessarily results-driven approach to development with often spurious aggregation and disaggregation of partial sets of data as we scale up and down through different levels of organisation. I am suggesting that at all levels we need to have thought through more clearly why we are doing things and be reflecting on our successes and failures and keeping our ‘theories of change’ under review.

what the alliance is there to do and what the board of the alliance needs to govern. What value is the international board seeking to add to the work of the whole alliance? What is its role and its reach?

Answers to these questions will vary partly due to the role of the alliance and how its governance is set up. Three scenarios illustrate these differences.

1. *Limited role for alliance and board:* The international secretariat might have a relatively small role in relation to all the work being done across the alliance. The secretariat might be the coordinating body and/or just focus on one or more 'international' functions, such as advocacy, branding, licensing, or coordination of humanitarian responses, in the case of an aid and development agency. The board's role might be limited to governing the work of the secretariat. This is a relatively small scale governance role. The global decisions might be consist of how best to organise these international functions. Here the step from a national to international board is a more limited one.
Or
2. *Broader role for the alliance but with distributed delivery:* The work of the alliance may be delivered mainly through the affiliates but be aligned with international strategies, principles, standards and priorities. Agreeing these is the global role of the board, supported by the secretariat. This is broader than in Option 1 above although the influence of the alliance on affiliates could be strong or light. Complexity arises particularly in the interplay between the interests and operations of affiliates and the alliance. Which parts of the work lie with affiliates, which with the alliance, and how are these most effectively arranged are key decisions for the board.
Or
3. *Centre sets direction and delivers:* The secretariat is the central management body driving the work of the alliance, delivering key programmes, line managing all or many of the staff, and working with the board to set direction. Much of the complexity involved in leading the alliance might be dealt with by management. The global decisions of the board involve building a strategic view that is rich and broad enough for the scale of the work, overseeing management, and ensuring that complex risks are being well enough managed. The challenge is to get the level right and to balance not getting mired in details while grasping enough to understand the likely implications of decisions.

Identifying and making decisions of global scope and significance is challenging for two related reasons. Compared with a national board, the issues become *more abstract* and *more complex* at a global level. Both these challenges take us beyond our comfort zone and we have to work at making these shifts. I will deal with each of these challenges in turn, although they are interlinked.

Challenges of abstraction

Members of a board will usually bring particular expertise and be able to relate the work of the agency to tangible aspects of the work. Board members need to be able to do three things:

1. To connect the board discussion to the 'real' world, and particularly the real world of their areas of expertise and experience;
2. To see a larger system, to hold abstract views of the work of the agency, and to connect these views with the different ways other board members might see these systems¹⁰; and,
3. To simplify these concepts and be able to communicate them to other board members and stakeholders, without over-simplifying them¹¹.

These three requirements pull in different directions, which is part of what makes governance and leadership such a challenge and sometimes such fun! On a global board this stretch is even more pronounced. Getting a view of the whole global system, simplifying it well, and connecting it to reality on the ground is a harder job than doing this for a national board. The work of a global board involves focusing more on 'systems of systems'. This is generally a higher level of abstraction than on a national board. Take three examples: global strategy making tends to be more abstract than at a national level; the board needs to ensure that over-arching systems are in place to achieve the alliance's strategy and these systems will be more complicated and the discussion of them will end up being more abstract at a global level; and, the global board needs to be clear how it wants different parts of the alliance to work together or to instead have the freedom to function independently. Systems-of-systems issues like these include how different international systems interconnect (such as advocacy and delivery and the development of people within the agency) and the intersections between systems that operate across the alliance and those at a national level – for example, how international campaigning or programming priorities affect those within a particular country or region.

¹⁰ As governors it is still important for us to be able to link with the tangible aspects of the work of our alliance, the things we could possibly touch or coordinated programmes of things we could touch – for example a programme to supply anti-malarial bed nets or dig shallow wells or scope out a major advocacy campaign or a programme to support women to increase their control over their lives and the wellbeing of them and their families. Often board discussions can get bogged down in detail. But there can also be a legitimate fear of being removed from considering 'real' work and 'real' results. The work of the national and then the international board is to set the frameworks to enable the achievement of specific, tangible changes in people's lives. We have to be able to connect the global to the regional and local scale but not get lost in abstraction or stuck in the details.

¹¹ We have to simplify in ways that add to our understanding and for those we work with. Many NGOs link the actions of individual citizens and communities to a larger programme of change or to a larger body of people who working for this change. To do this we simplify and try to make more tangible the work we do to make it more accessible to our stakeholders. Whether we are encouraging activist supporters to campaign, developing policy options, or motivating people to commit to a regular monthly donation, we boil down our theories of change into as simple a set of propositions as is reasonable, and sometimes beyond reasonable simplicity alas! We do this to create leverage and to enable our supporters, and those we are seeking to influence, to feel and see how they can make a real difference. We also have to simplify our descriptions of our work for ourselves to be able to manage and govern our activities.

For a national board the focus is more on single systems or the interaction between simpler systems (a similar narrower focus also applies in scenario one above where governance is focused on the limited role of an international secretariat).

The irony is that as we strive for greater reach and effectiveness, and try to wrap our arms around more of the challenge, we get to hold onto less - more aspects of our work elude our grasp or need to be let go of for the governance role to be done well. International board members find themselves trying to hold onto enough to be effective and informed while reaching further afield to be able to see the larger systems at play.

Challenges of complexity

This stretch of increasing abstraction at a global level connects with the second challenge: growing complexity. One useful framework for thinking about complexity thinks about issues as simple, complicated, complex, or chaotic and defines these terms by thinking about the different relationships between causes and effects¹².

There are many simple issues where we can know the answer. Thankfully, the relationships between cause and effect can be predicted and repeated and the trains and planes can usually run on time. Complicated issues are ones where we do not know the relationship between cause and effect but we can find out if we do enough research or apply enough resources or expertise.

For complex issues the relationship between cause and effect is only discovered after the event. Looking back we can reconstruct what happened but it could not be predicted at the time. For chaotic issues a relationship between cause and effect is unlikely to ever be known. As we connect up more parts of our organizations and add in more variables more of the issues we face will be complex because the multiple interconnections will amplify or dampen feedbacks and lead to results we cannot predict. The step up from national to an international board involves a lift in complexity because there are many more factors at play that can introduce variability and uncertainty.

As a general rule the issues boards need to address are either complicated or complex¹³. Simple issues usually lie with the staff to organise and if they are coming before the board then either there is a risk to manage, and things are not as simple as thought; or staff are not taking decisions they need to take; or the board is meddling. International boards are likely to grapple with more complex issues in comparison with national boards. More of the issues coming to national boards are likely to be complicated ones.

¹² For a useful exposition of these ideas and how they can help leaders see the Cynefin framework of David Snowden and others at www.cognitive-edge.com.

¹³ You had also better have a plan for responding when things tip into chaos!

The value of thinking about the nature of issues in this way is that it helps to recognize that different types of problems require different types of responses. It is not much good treating an issue as a complicated one, by pouring more money into trying to research exactly the right solution, for example, if the issue is really a complex one where uncertainty and variability are so large they will almost always defeat the search for *the* answer.

Despite this, for very human reasons we tend to define issues according to the tools we are most comfortable using. As Mark Twain observed, if we have a hammer then all problems look like nails. People who are most comfortable with project management and best practice will try to treat all problems as being able to be fixed with these simple responses. Experts and researchers will tend to call problems complicated, if only we had enough resources and research we could define the problem better and find the right answer. Politicians are more comfortable in the complex space, reacting to issues on the fly and experimenting with what might work in the moment. All these responses are useful ways to deal with particular types of issues but dud ways to deal with other issues. One of the important governance roles for a board is to say “hold on, have we got clear what the nature of this issue is and what an appropriate response might be?”

In this section I have set out three challenges for global board members: identifying the issues that require global decisions; being able to hold increasingly abstract views of the work while linking this to tangible realities on the ground; and, identifying what type of issue is being faced and how to respond effectively.

Core questions for incoming board members:

- *Is the global part of the role clear to me?*
- *Can my naïve approach help me to see patterns and not get lost in the details? How can I get to the essence of this issue? What models can I use?*
- *How do I get the information I need to do this role well? How much detail do I need to understand the big issues?*
- *Can I summarise my perspective easily? Can I summarise the perspectives of others in respectful ways that acknowledge they might be right?*

Core questions for all board members:

- *What are the global decisions our organisation has to take?*
- *How are the boundaries being set for the issue or system we are addressing? How would it help if we expanded or shrank these boundaries?*
- *What feedbacks are operating on this issue or could be designed into a solution? How could we reinforce positive changes or dampen down negative effects?*
- *What is the relationship between cause and effect with the issue? Are we employing the most useful approach to an issue?*

5) What are we accountable for internationally and to whom?

As with national bodies, boards of international NGOs have a central role to play in ensuring the alliance is accountable to its stakeholders. There are many dimensions to this and a number of choices for a board to make. The INGO Charter has been developed to set a standard for the accountability of international NGOs and has been agreed by most of the major alliances. It sets out a framework and principles for accountability and I have appended it to this paper.

The sorts of choices facing boards are to whom do you account and how do you balance the different stakeholders involved. These choices relate in part to the type of alliance it is and what the board wants the alliance to become. For example, if the alliance and board has a limited role across the work of the affiliate members (see scenario one in the preceding section) then the accountability may be most focused on reporting back to the members who make up the alliance. Accountability to a wider group of stakeholders might often be the responsibility of the member bodies although the alliance would still need to produce an overall report.

Where the central management body and the board play a larger role in shaping the direction of work across the alliance, and perhaps also in delivery, (see scenarios two and three above) then accountability is likely to be more comprehensive and focused on the wider group of stakeholders.

The breadth of accountability is one question facing the board. Another is who is the centre of attention? It may be the donors. You may be set up to be the trustees of the donors' funds. You may have a broader remit and be focused on those at the centre of the alliance's mission. This could be partners in receiving development assistance, people living in poverty, people fighting to reclaim human rights, or people and species threatened through environmental destruction. If this is where your focus is, or where you want it to go, then you will want to be clear about how you describe your responsibilities to these 'beneficiaries', how you measure progress and account to them, and how this gets addressed in the work of the board. As it is likely to be some balance across the mix of the stakeholders listed in the INGO charter, the question facing board members is what is the balance that has been struck and how does this fit with the strategic direction for the alliance?

A further area of questions that overlap with issues of accountability is the management of risks and how this is addressed at the governance level. Again, clarity is needed in the governance role in the management of risks. Parts of this might lie with the board or be a focus for committees of the board. Board members will want to know what level of risks is being considered and what systems are in place to have confidence that risks are being managed appropriately. In taking on a role in risk management, board members also need to be clear about the direct and indirect messages they are sending about the ways they do this work: what signals will staff in the organisation be getting about the appropriate balance between risk management and innovation and risk taking and are these the signals the board wants to send?

Core questions for *incoming* board members:

- *Are the approaches the board is taking to accountability and risk management ones that are clear to me? If so, do I feel comfortable with them? If they are not clear, how can I get this clarified?*

Core questions for *all* board members:

- *How well are we performing in relation to the INGO accountability charter?*
- *Which stakeholders do we focus on in our approach to accountability? Why have we decided on that balance and how does this fit with our strategic direction?*
- *How is the management of risks addressed at board level?*

6) What is my role and how might I grow in this role?

As I mentioned earlier, you are on a limited term and by the time you feel able to really add value your time might be almost up. Here I will consider how you might add more value earlier and actions you might take, that the alliance could support, so you can grow in the role and the board can function more effectively.

A friend of mine, with a couple of years on an international board, makes a number of useful points about the experience of joining a new board. He says that before the new board member can identify with other board members as 'we', the new member has to be able to identify a role he or she might play. It could be a personal contribution or arise out of the affiliate's interests. They will need to ask what they can bring to the table and how they might make themselves relevant.

He describes the dilemma he faced when joining an international board as a new member:

"Should I speak from my heart first, before worrying about if that could be counter-productive? In a world of strangers, it's always less risky to reserve frank opinions and try to establish some rapport first. But in the context of an INGO, there really is not much time for board members to establish rapport that is rooted in extensive and intensive interaction."

This is a familiar challenge for many of us. Here are four ways you might make a start on learning the ropes more quickly:

1. It is important for the board to be a safe place for all board members to learn, otherwise the board will not get the improvement in effectiveness it seeks. So allow yourself and your colleagues to try things out and make mistakes. A second way to work to build trust is to recognise that we are all heroes in our own story – whether heroes in victory or in defeat. Go towards the board member who you find most puzzling or aggravating and make it your business to understand how they think about their world and their role on the board – not to convince them of their wrongness and your rightness but simply to understand how the world is making sense to them.

2. Bite off a part where you think you can help. Discuss that with others, including the chair or relevant committee chairs. Make that part a contribution to the international rather than it being a representational contribution. Expand from that part into other things you can contribute.
3. Get help. Use whatever induction process your alliance offers. Get a buddy, or a coach, or a mentor. Have the Chair, or Deputy or Treasurer explain aspects that do not make sense to you. Check things out with your predecessors.
4. Make space between you and your affiliate. Be clear about that with your affiliate board or management. Make sure that they know you are responsive to their perspectives (it is part of the body of experience you bring to the board rather than the views you always represent) and that you are seeking to take a whole-of-alliance view. Help them to see the value that also brings to their work.

Core questions for incoming board members:

- *Who can I ask to help with this role and these questions?*
- *What part of the work could I start by focusing on?*
- *How can I make space between my new international role and my national or functional role and make this clear to others?*

Core questions for all board members:

- *How can we better support the learning of ourselves and our colleagues?*
- *How can we make this board a safer place for all of us to learn and grow?*
- *Do I really understand the thinking of board members I disagree with and, if I did, could I change my mind?*

APPENDIX

International Non Governmental Organisations Accountability Charter

Who we are

We, international non-government organisations (INGOs) signatory to this Charter, are independent non-profit organisations that work globally to advance human rights, sustainable development, environmental protection, humanitarian response and other public goods.

Our organisations are proud and privileged to work across a wide range of countries and cultures, with a diverse range of peoples and in varied eco- and social and political systems.

Our right to act is based on universally-recognised freedoms of speech, assembly and association, on our contribution to democratic processes, and on the values we seek to promote.

Our legitimacy is also derived from the quality of our work, and the recognition and support of the people with and for whom we work and our members, our donors, the wider public, and governmental and other organisations around the world.

We seek to uphold our legitimacy by responding to inter-generational considerations, public and scientific concerns, and through accountability for our work and achievements.

By signing this Charter we seek to promote further the values of transparency and accountability that we stand for, and commit our INGO to respecting its provisions.

How we work

NGOs can complement but not replace the over-arching role and primary responsibility of governments to promote equitable human development and wellbeing, to uphold human rights and to protect ecosystems.

We also seek to promote the role and responsibilities of the private sector to advance human rights and sustainable development, and protect the environment.

We can often address problems and issues that governments and others are unable or unwilling to address on their own. Through constructive challenge, we seek to promote good governance and foster progress towards our goals.

We seek to advance our mission through research, advocacy and programmes. It is common for our work to be at the international, national, regional and local levels, either directly or with partners.

We work with other organisations where this is the best way to advance our individual missions.

The Charter's purpose

This Charter outlines our common commitment to excellence, transparency and accountability. To demonstrate and build on these commitments, we seek to:

- Identify and define shared principles, policies and practices;
- enhance transparency and accountability, both internally and externally;
- encourage communication with stakeholders; and
- improve our performance and effectiveness as organisations.

We recognise that transparency and accountability are essential to good governance, whether by governments, businesses or non-profit organisations.

Wherever we operate, we seek to ensure that the high standards which we demand of others are also respected in our own organisations.

The Charter complements and supplements existing laws. It is a voluntary charter, and draws on a range of existing codes, norms, standards and guidelines.

We agree to apply the Charter progressively to all our policies, activities and operations. The Charter does not replace existing codes or practices to which signatories may also be party, except as specified by them. Its adoption does not prevent signatories from supporting or using other tools to promote transparency and accountability.

We will refine the Charter through experience, taking into account future developments, particularly those that improve accountability and transparency.

Our stakeholders

Our first responsibility is to achieve our stated mission effectively and transparently, consistent with our values. In this, we are accountable to our stakeholders.

Our stakeholders include:

- Peoples, including future generations, whose rights we seek to protect and advance;
- Ecosystems, which cannot speak for or defend themselves;
- Our members and supporters;
- Our staff and volunteers;
- Organisations and individuals that contribute finance, goods or services;
- Partner organisations, both governmental and non-governmental, with whom we work;
- Regulatory bodies whose agreement is required for our establishment and operations;
- Those whose policies, programmes or behaviour we wish to influence;
- The media; and
- The general public.

In balancing the different views of our stakeholders, we will be guided by our mission and the principles of this Charter.

Principles

Respect for Universal Principles

INGOs are founded on the rights to freedom of speech, assembly and association in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We seek to advance international and national laws that promote human rights, ecosystem protection, sustainable development and other public goods.

Where such laws do not exist, are not fully implemented, or abused, we will highlight these issues for public debate and advocate appropriate remedial action. In so doing, we will respect the equal rights and dignity of all human beings.

Independence

We aim to be both politically and financially independent. Our governance, programmes and policies will be non-partisan, independent of specific governments, political parties and the business sector.

Responsible advocacy

We will ensure that our advocacy is consistent with our mission, grounded in our work and advances defined public interests.

We will have clear processes for adopting public policy positions, (including for partners where appropriate,) explicit ethical policies that guide our choices of

advocacy strategy, and ways of identifying and managing potential conflicts of interest among various stakeholders.

Effective Programmes

We seek to work in genuine partnership with local communities, NGOs and other organisations aiming at sustainable development responding to local needs.

Non-Discrimination

We value, respect and seek to encourage diversity, and seek to be impartial and nondiscriminatory in all our activities. To this end, each organisation will have policies that promote diversity, gender equity and balance, impartiality and non-discrimination in all our activities, both internal and external.

Transparency

We are committed to openness, transparency and honesty about our structures, mission, policies and activities. We will communicate actively to stakeholders about ourselves, and make information publicly available.

Reporting

We seek to comply with relevant governance, financial accounting and reporting requirements in the countries where we are based and operate.

We report at least once a year on our activities and achievements. Reports will describe each organisation's:

- Mission and values;
- Objectives and outcomes achieved in programme and advocacy;
- Environmental impact;
- Governance structure and processes, and main office bearers;
- Main sources of funding from corporations, foundations, governments, and individuals;
- Financial performance;
- Compliance with this Charter; and
- Contact details.

Audit

The annual financial report will conform to relevant laws and practices and be audited by a qualified independent public accountant whose statement will accompany the report.

Accuracy of information

We will adhere to generally-accepted standards of technical accuracy and honesty in presenting and interpreting data and research, using and referencing independent research.

Good Governance

We should be held responsible for our actions and achievements. We will do this by: having a clear mission, organisational structure and decision-making processes; by acting in accordance with stated values and agreed procedures; by ensuring that our programmes achieve outcomes that are consistent with our mission; and by reporting on these outcomes in an open and accurate manner.

The governance structure of each organisation will conform to relevant laws and be transparent. We seek to follow principles of best practice in governance. Each organisation will have at least:

- A governing body which supervises and evaluates the chief executive, and oversee programme and budgetary matters. It will define overall strategy, consistent with the organisational mission, ensure that resources are used

efficiently and appropriately, that performance is measured, that financial integrity is assured and that public trust is maintained;

- Written procedures covering the appointment, responsibilities and terms of members of the governing body, and preventing and managing conflicts of interest;
- A regular general meeting with authority to appoint and replace members of the governing body.

We will listen to stakeholders' suggestions on how we can improve our work and will encourage inputs by people whose interests may be directly affected. We will also make it easy for the public to comment on our programmes and policies.

Ethical Fundraising

Donors

We respect the rights of donors: to be informed about causes for which we are fundraising; to be informed about how their donation is being used; to have their names deleted from mailing lists; to be informed of the status and authority of fundraisers; and to anonymity except in cases where the size of their donation is such that it might be relevant to our independence.

Use of Donations

In raising funds, we will accurately describe our activities and needs. Our policies and practices will ensure that donations further our organisation's mission. Where donations are made for a specific purpose, the donor's request is honoured. If we invite the general public to donate to a specific cause, each organisation will have a plan for handling any shortfall or excess, and will make this known as part of its appeal.

Gifts in kind

Some donations may be given as goods or services. To retain our effectiveness and independence, we will: record and publish details of all major institutional gifts and gifts-in-kind; clearly describe the valuation and auditing methods used; and ensure that these gifts contribute towards our mission.

Agents

We seek to ensure that donations sought indirectly, such as through third parties, are solicited and received in full conformity with our own practices. This will normally be the subject of written agreement between the parties.

Professional Management

We manage our organisations in a professional and effective manner. Our policies and procedures seek to promote excellence in all respects.

Financial controls

Internal financial control procedures will ensure that all funds are effectively used and minimise the risk of funds being misused. We will follow principles of best practice in financial management.

Evaluation

We seek continuously to improve our effectiveness. We will have defined evaluation procedures for our boards, staff, programmes and projects on the basis of mutual accountability.

Public Criticism

We will be responsible in our public criticisms of individuals and organisations, ensuring such criticism amounts to fair public comment.

Partners

We recognise our that organisational integrity extends to ensuring that our partners also meet the highest standards of probity and accountability, and will take all

possible steps to ensure that there are no links with organisations, or persons involved in illegal or unethical practices.

Human Resources

We recognise that our performance and success reflect the quality of our staff and volunteers and management practices, and are committed to investing in human resource development. Remuneration and benefits should strike a balance between public expectations of voluntary-based, not-for-profit organisations and the need to attract and retain the staff we need to fulfil our mission. Our human resources policies seek to conform fully with relevant international and national labour regulations and apply the best voluntary sector practices in terms of employee and volunteer rights and health and safety at work. Human resources policies will include procedures for evaluating the performance of all staff on a regular basis.

Bribery and Corruption

Human resources policies will specifically prohibit acts of bribery or corruption by staff or other persons working for, or on behalf of, the organisation.

Respect for Sexual Integrity

We condemn sexual exploitation, abuse and discrimination in all its forms. Our policies will respect sexual integrity in all our programmes and activities, and prohibit gender harassment, sexual exploitation and discrimination.

Whistle-blowers

Staff will be enabled and encouraged to draw management's attention to activities that may not comply with the law or our mission and commitments, including the provisions in this Code.

December 20, 2005

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