Greater than the “Sum of the parts”?  

- Paper 5 -

Strategic planning for international development and relief agencies—reflections and perspectives

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March 2012;
DRAFT Version 0.70
Overview of the “Sum of the parts” research series:

This paper is the fifth and final in a series of research papers that offer reflections and perspectives on the question: Are large international NGOs delivering a contribution that is greater than the sum of their parts? In other words, are the economies of scale and scope achieved by an international NGO greater than the implied additional costs of management, coordination, alignment and integration? If in doubt, what is a pragmatic way forward to ensure that this is the case? And how can these NGOs maximise the additional value created by being part of a large global organisation?

This series of papers explores these key questions from five different, though complementary perspectives. They are intended to provide food for thought, to provide some lenses to understand and dissect some of the more important issues; and to offer some suggestions and introduce some potential ideas. However, the authors fully appreciate that each NGO has its own history, context and direction, which will make the right recommendations different for each situation.

Outline of the five papers

The first paper, “Getting in Shape”, looks at the question from the perspective of organisational models, structure, power and decision making, as well as management process. How can these large organisations operate in a synergistic, cohesive way, and ultimately in a manner that ensures the whole is indeed greater than the sum of the parts?

The second paper, “The core competence of an international NGO”, takes a step back and explores what NGOs are really good at and what they need to be good at to have the impact they desire.

The third paper is titled “Evolving structures of international NGOs; is there a right answer?” This paper looks specifically at the issue of structure and reviews structural options and variants in the context of evolving thinking on this topic over the past century. It reflects on the learning and emerging wisdom from efforts to improve the effectiveness of organisations in the private sector over the past few decades. It looks at the particular complications of international NGOs today, and examines some structural options and variants that might be considered in the future.

In the fourth paper, “Reinventing the International NGO through New Technology Possibilities”, we explore the possibilities that modern technology provides in rethinking and potentially reinventing the role and contribution of international NGOs, as well as how they work. Can we challenge some of the conventional wisdom around economies of scale and scope, and ways of operating for maximum effect?

This is the final paper in the series, and is titled “Strategic planning for international development and relief agencies—reflections and perspectives”. It is intended to help international NGOs get the most out of a strategic planning process and avoid some common pitfalls. The success factors and approach are based on extensive experience of strategic reviews in the private sector as well as hands-on experience doing major strategic reviews for a number of large international development and relief agencies.
Abstract

Paper 5: Strategic planning for international NGOs

Conducting a global strategic review is a very sensitive and challenging activity for a large international relief and development agency. The nature of the work of these agencies, along with the complex governance and decision-making structures, can make the effective execution of a strategic review demanding. There are a number of pitfalls to navigate on this journey. The prize is great, however, in terms of achieving greater organisational alignment, cohesion and ultimate impact and the resulting strategy should set the direction, focus and priorities of the organisation for the next 5 to 10 years.

This paper is a set of perspectives and reflections intended to help international NGOs (INGOs) get the most out of a strategic planning process and avoid some of the more common attendant hazards. This is the final part of the series, and hence it builds directly on the first four. We believe strongly that a thorough and decisive strategic planning process is a very good opportunity to address some of the issues and ideas already covered, providing a chance to make sure that the whole of the international agency is indeed greater than the “Sum of the parts”.

We begin by setting out some of the important similarities as well as differences between conducting a strategic review in the development/humanitarian sectors, in contrast to similar exercises in private sector organisations. This is followed by some reflections on what strategic planning is for; and importantly, how a strategic review, typically carried out every five or so years, fits into the ongoing management and planning processes for any well run global agency. It is important to emphasise that a new strategic plan should build on the progress and successes of the past, is respectful of existing vision and mission and values as well as goals. In this section we also describe the typical ways by which the decisions and directions, agreed upon during a strategic review, get implemented in practice.

The paper goes on to describe some of the characteristics for a good strategic plan for any large international agency. We offer twelve specific success criteria which are intended to some clarity and challenge. These are based on the author’s extensive experience of strategic reviews in the private sector, as well as hands-on support of strategic reviews at a number of large international development and relief agencies.

One possible approach is set out as an illustration, though fully acknowledging there are many approaches and variations in terms of how to design the process in detail. It explores some variations on that sample approach, with their associated pros and cons. However, the optimum process should always be carefully designed for an individual organisational context and take due account of the findings of the critical pre-project consultation period. The paper concludes with some very practical perspectives on some frequently asked questions.
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