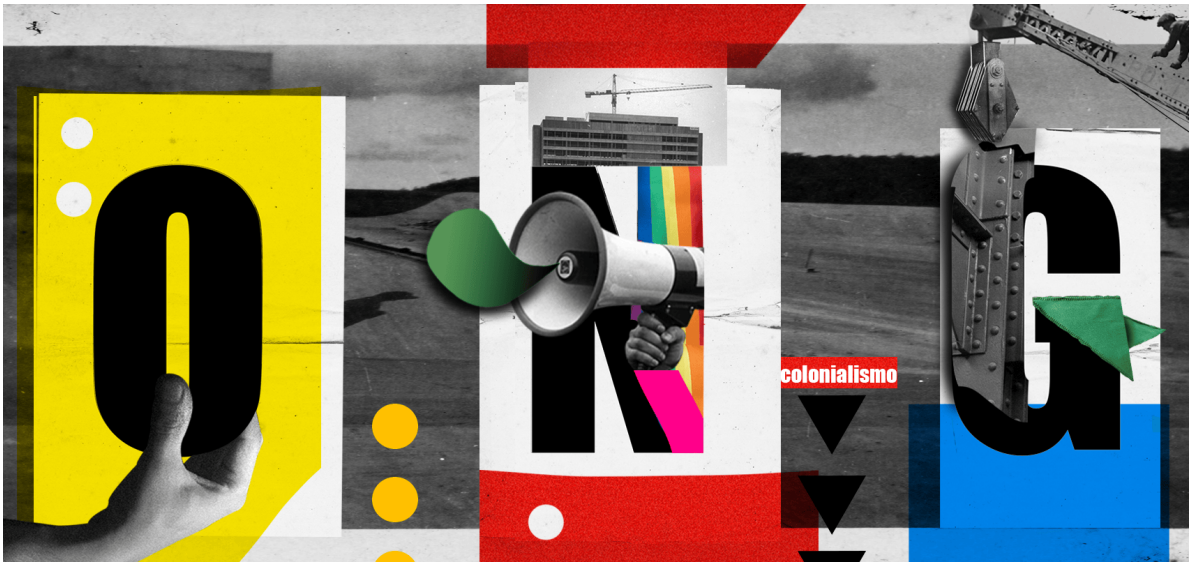
DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION ACTORS

The future of International NGOs in a Post-Pandemic World

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We are at a critical juncture that calls for us to reflect on the role of International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGOs) and our ability to respond to the global development challenges that lie ahead. The pandemic has left us stunned and disconcerted, but more aware than ever of the importance of public policy, of our interdependencies and fragility as a global society. For the first time since 1990, human development has regressed. We're facing an unprecedented health, economic and social crisis, which is destroying many of the social advances achieved over the last decade and substantiating the collapse of an economic model that condemns millions of people to live in precariousness and poverty, deprived of their rights. In countries already affected by extreme inequality, wealth is accumulating to an even greater extent at the cost of public services and equal opportunities for all.

It's time to establish a new social contract that puts people at the centre and leaves the abuses and disasters of neo-liberalism behind. A change of model that reverses inequalities, distributes well-being, guarantees rights and puts us on the path to total decarbonisation, ensuring environmental sustainability. These challenges cannot be tackled by a single government or by an isolated organisation. Instead, they require a sum of efforts and collaborative work between governments, international organisations, companies, NGOs and committed individuals. The systemic nature of the challenges forces us to work in an articulated and connected way, between local, national, regional and global levels.

Faced with this challenge, international NGOs can act as a lever of change by playing a key role in that articulation between levels, as a connector of actors and a catalyst for synergies. But to do this, we must understand that the models and methods of working that have helped us so far will not necessarily serve us to address the future. To generate impact in an atomised, polarised world in a state of permanent and accelerated change, we need to improve our institutional agility, collaboration and experimentation and shed our arrogance, bureaucracy, rigidity, prescription solutions and inertia.

> As International NGOs, we need to rethink our legitimacy by amplifying the action of local agents through horizontality and recognition

We also need to exercise self-criticism and rethink our legitimacy by reducing our direct international presence and focusing instead on supporting and amplifying the action of local agents through horizontality and the recognition of their leadership. Lastly, we must strengthen our credibility, become more transparent, listen and enter into dialogue with society, and review our institutional practices and internal governance structures.

A world in shock

Our future as a society is not written, but we have enough data and evidence to understand that, during the next decade, we will have to respond to substantial planetary challenges of immense complexity, urgency, scope and impact: economic, social and environmental challenges marked by increasing economic, racial and gender inequalities that trap billions of people in poverty and injustice. Even today, 3 billion people survive on less than $5.50 a day. However, it’s true that, in recent decades, we’ve made substantial progress with a significant decrease in poverty levels [1] increases in educational levels, access to drinking water, maternal healthcare, advances in the fight against tuberculosis, AIDS and malaria and a decline in infant mortality.

But at the same time, even before the pandemic, our world was facing enormous challenges which have now been accentuated: conflicts, restrictions and violations of human rights; concentrations of power, the closure of spaces and democratic deterioration; the advance of populisms or neo-conservatisms that threaten the rights of women and LGTBQIA+ groups. We’re seeing growing economic inequalities; increased levels of food insecurity; the undermining and dysfunctionality of global governance structures; an increasing number of forced displacements [2], a climate crisis and a loss of biodiversity that holds a sword over the planet’s head, and an economic model that benefits the few and oppresses the vast majority. The pandemic has wiped out many of the advances achieved and exposed the gaping inequalities in our societies, further exacerbating existing disparities within and between countries. Inequalities that rolled out the red carpet for coronavirus this year.

Nowhere has been spared from the effects of the pandemic, but yet again, it has been the most vulnerable populations –women and girls, young people, migrants, refugees, indigenous peoples, visible minorities, informal workers– the most impoverished communities have been disproportionately affected by its consequences, according to an Oxfam report [3]. In planetary terms, we're talking about a setback of more than a decade in the fight against poverty [4]. But in some countries, more than twenty years of work has been undone.

> The COVID-19 pandemic also presents us with a unique opportunity to change course and recover without leaving anyone behind, breaking with the doctrine of economic growth as an end in itself

However, this situation also presents us with a unique opportunity to change course and recover without leaving anyone behind, breaking with the doctrine of economic growth as an end in itself, united in the race against climate change and equal fundamental rights, fighting with determination against poverty and inequality. As part of this change of course, social movements and civil society organisations, in all their diversity and richness, are pushing for a profound debate about the world that can and should emerge from this crisis. The same grassroots organisations, movements and associations that over the last year have shown, yet again, that they are more needed than ever.

This is a time for the brave: challenging power and defending rights is a risky battle

During this last year of the pandemic, we've had to stand by and watch, helplessly, as many countries used emergency measures to limit essential freedoms, exercise censorship and police violence, accelerate authoritarianism or restrict rights; freedoms and rights that are still too fragile in too many places on the planet. In Spain and Europe, we've also seen a growth in markedly selfish, xenophobic discourse and hate speech.

This regression of rights and the closures of civil society spaces are nothing new. During the last 15 years, we've seen how space for freedom is being increasingly limited in many places on the planet, year after year. According to CIVICUS [5], right now, 109 countries in which 82% of the population lives are considered spaces of repression or obstruction. Defending the planet is becoming increasingly dangerous: leaders are assassinated, attacked, imprisoned or defamed for their work. In 2019 alone, four environmentalists were killed every week, reaching a record number of 212 murders. Yet, far from being daunted, it has been citizens –alongside activists and organisations– who've taken to the streets to confront repression and demand change in many parts of the world. Myanmar, Thailand, Chile, Guatemala, the #BlackLivesMatter movement, the mobilisation of thousands of farmers in India against the agricultural reforms of the Modi government, the protests that forced a repeat of the elections in Malawi.

We see how a growing number of people –led by women, young people, visible minorities and racialised groups– demand transparency and responsible action from their governments. The hyper-connectivity that technology affords us and the possibility of massively sharing real-time information allows activists, social movements and organisations to use all the facets of social networks and technology to demand and propose transformative changes.

> Achieving change means challenging power, taking risks and protecting and supporting the organisations and individuals on the front line

Achieving change means challenging power; it means taking risks and protecting and supporting the organisations and individuals on the front line. It also means being, as organisations, capable of offering new alternative frames of reference [6] that counteract extremely effective negative populist narratives- broad brushed, full of “fake news”, based on prejudice, fundamentalism, stigmatisation and fear-. It’s an arduous task, but also one that will be critical in times to come, and one that INGOs must keep in mind.

Self-criticism and changes to maintain impact

For decades, international NGOs have worked in the most remote and risky places on the planet to provide basic needs and humanitarian assistance to millions of people. We have defended and protected fundamental rights and played a key role in speaking out against injustice and advocating for a better life for people. The essence of our mission and our commitment to society remain valid, and our role in the future is more crucial than ever before. But no one could deny that the world of today has little to do with that of 25 years ago, which was when the vast majority of international NGOs such as Greenpeace, Oxfam, Amnesty International, and Save the Children grew and developed, becoming actors of reference for governments and the international community.

Since then, we have evolved, but the reality is that it’s difficult for us to change [7]. At the same time, new social movements and a new generation of NGOs and social enterprises have emerged, born in the digital and networked era, a vibrant ecosystem that has been brought up differently and responds in new ways to development challenges. We’re also seeing an incipient and genuinely responsible private sector that can play a pivotal role. In this renewed ecosystem of actors, demands and expectations, INGOs run the risk of becoming an obsolete and irrelevant player on the chessboard of social transformation.

As actors in a global civil society, INGOs can play key roles in creating a countervailing force against processes that exploit and exclude millions of people, whether by reporting and reorienting debates, amplifying political agendas and demands from frequently excluded collectives, protecting the rights of the most vulnerable, building bridges;

escalating and connecting solutions, movements, and causes or demanding accountability from governments, corporations and economic institutions. However, in recent years, many international NGOs have come under increasing scrutiny and criticism. A legitimate and healthy debate has been opened on our use and distribution of power, our legitimacy and efficacy [8].

Our teams and partner organisations confront us about the hierarchical relationships and distribution of power between our “headquarters” –in some cases still in the North– and the teams in the Global South. They ask us for substantial changes in our relationships, which are now more oriented to fulfilling pre-established conditions than to collaborating and working among equals. The disproportionate access to financial resources of large INGOs is called into question when compared to the limited direct access that local organisations have –less than 2% of all humanitarian aid goes directly to local NGOs [9]–. The salary differences between international and national staff are challenged, as is the lack of diversity in leadership positions. Also being questioned is the lack of inclusivity, diversity and representation in our governance structures.

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Citizens and social movements view us as slow, stagnant, rigid actors, drowned in bureaucracy and internal processes. Despite the harshness of the diagnosis, many INGOs, such as Amnesty International, WWF, Oxfam and Action Aid, are well aware of these criticisms and have already taken steps in the right direction. In-depth reforms have been initiated in the governing bodies, decision-making has been decentralised, new members from the South have been incorporated to make them more global and representative, and recruitment policies have been changed to ensure greater diversity in their teams. Even so, we urgently need to revolutionise the sector and accelerate the transformation processes already underway, with a fresh and detached view of what “we were and are”, moving beyond technocratic responses to approach our transformation as a political and a power redistributing challenge. To accomplish this, we must address three broad dimensions.

1. Rethink our way of supporting, campaigning for and achieving transformative social changes

We need to rethink our intervention strategies, recognising the leadership role of citizens themselves, both in the South and the North, and work out how to redraw our relationships with increasingly forceful and restrictive governments and a business fabric that has increasing social, economic and environmental weight and impact –as part of the problem, but potentially also as part of the solution–.

For years, INGOs have focused on “projects”, designed, managed and implemented –sometimes– by us. These projects are often confined by an endless list of tools and logical frameworks, increasingly shorter time-scales linked to financing cycles, and ever-more cumbersome and demanding reporting conditions that distract us from what is paramount: focusing on impact and social transformation. Working on the basis of projects has limited our ability to push for systemic, profound and lasting changes; reduced our ability to adapt to changes in context and support external movements, individuals and ideas; and absorbed the bulk of our energies and financial and human resources.

If we really want to work with the local people trying to achieve the change in which we both believe, we will need to do less “us” and more “together”, which involves:

- Finding our space within the ecosystem of actors, co-creating with others and connecting local action –led by local and regional organisations– with action, research, mobilisation and advocacy at international levels.

- Trusting and valuing the experience, contribution of solutions and capacities of communities and organisations in the global South, transferring decision-making and providing them with more resources, affording them greater flexibility in their use and taking on more significant risks.

- Expanding our horizons and working with a much broader range of actors in relationships based on ethics, humility, respect and dialogue. We also need to work with feminist, anti-racist and youth social movements who pursue change and know exactly what they want.

- In the “North”, working from the perspective of shared challenges and interdependence: fighting against the inequalities and poverty that also exist in the societies we form part of.

- Exploring new business models that allow us to experiment and gain scope, impact and scalability efficiently and creatively.

- Prioritising the autonomy and sustainability of local organisations. As INGOs, this transfer and increased access to resources implies making ourselves smaller.

Working differently also entails reconnecting with citizens in the countries we’re based in, including those in the “North”. The growing crisis of confidence in traditional institutions over the last decade also applies to large international NGOs. To counter this, INGOs must:

- Improve accountability and become more transparent about what we achieve, what we cost, and who we work with. The digital age offers us a huge range of ways not only to connect and interact but also to measure and account for our actions; to become more trustworthy.

- Open dialogue and connect with new generations. Our communication is still overwhelmingly one-directional and usually directed at the most like-minded people. We need to listen to more and more people, get out of our “echo chambers”, and generate new forms of adherence, collaboration and activism that give us strength and legitimacy. We need an action-oriented dialogue that improves our connection with the realities and demands of citizens. Rather than occupying the space currently occupied by the movements, it’s about learning from them and connecting with them, complementing our own work and pooling efforts to achieve social changes.

2. Integrity, trust and the redistribution of power: change starts from within

It seems no NGO or international organisation is immune. In the last 3 years, organisations such as Save the Children, Oxfam, Amnesty International, MercyCorps and others have been implicated in scandals involving sexual abuse and other forms of power abuse and harassment. In response, we’ve mobilised our resources to create “safe” work environments and uproot these types of behaviour.

Having the appropriate mechanisms to prevent and manage these behaviours requires a holistic approach, which includes designing policies and processes, complaint systems, specialised teams, resources and training, and above all, a profound transformation of all areas of the organisation, with integrity and the use of power as central axes. Change starts from within. We need to review our own institutional culture and our working methods. For example, how do we use power? What leadership models do we promote internally? How do we materialise our institutional values in our daily actions and decisions? How representative and diverse are our teams and our governance structures in the communities we work with?

> Change starts from within. We need to review our own institutional culture, the use of power and the representativeness of our teams

Furthermore, to reinforce relevance and impact and adapt to these new roles, INGOs must explore new, more agile and horizontal ways of organising ourselves with a higher level of autonomy. We must become more porous, inclusive and deliberately diverse organisations, be willing to experiment, take risks, accept our mistakes and failures, and then reflect and learn quickly and continuously. We need to understand how to work in a network of peers, fostering collaboration and making alliances grow.

3. Protect and reform the space for international cooperation

These are not good times for international cooperation and internationalism. With some of the wealthiest countries in the OECD allocating just 0.3% of their GDP, Official Development Assistance (ODA) is far from the 0.7% target that many people took to the streets to call for long ago. In many countries, international development agendas and investments are at the service of their security and trade agendas. The current ODA continues to respond to the North-South, or even colonialist paradigm, which we international NGOs in some ways also perpetuate. To tackle global challenges, we need a different perspective, with feminist and decolonial cooperation. It implies abandoning the "Aid" paradigm in favour of new mechanisms of social justice, and far-reaching institutional reforms of the governance and coordination structures, based on symmetrical relationships.

Resources are drying up and being diverted to other actors, and institutional donors have become increasingly prescriptive and risk-averse, demanding quick results as a condition for funding along with a long list of legal requirements and increasingly drawn-out and complex accountability mechanisms. INGOs want to change; we want to innovate, take risks and have the opportunity to work with grassroots and front-line actors. But the current financing model not only fails to incentivise that transformation, it makes it virtually impossible [10].

At the same time, in the global South, the most restrictive and authoritarian regimes have passed laws that limit the presence of internationally funded actors in the country and prohibit reporting and advocacy work. Many INGOs have been faced with a refusal to renew our operating permits, had our bank accounts frozen, visas blocked or been directly accused of going against the interests and needs of the population and its development.

If we are to respond with determination and efficiency to the tremendous economic, social and environmental challenges and recoup our progress towards the 2030 SDGs, we must provide the system with the necessary resources to achieve that. To do this, we will need to reinforce and redesign cooperation policies, instruments and multilateral systems and push for sweeping international tax reforms to prevent capital flight in developing countries and ensure companies pay tax in the countries where they operate and generate value.

> We have a critical decade ahead of us. A decade in which the future of humanity is at stake. We need to pull together to move forward

We have a critical decade ahead of us. A decade in which the future of humanity is at stake. In order to be able to offer solutions and challenge governments and companies, we need solid and influential organisations that can pull together to move forward, combing our work on a local and global level. And in this collective construction, there must be room for everybody: individuals, movements, grassroots organisations, local and international NGOs, and responsible companies. Together, we must strengthen the ties of internationalism and

capitalise on our diversity, strengths and complementarities.

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Franc Cortada is the General Manager of Oxfam Intermón. A part from his training as a civil engineer, he has more than twenty years of experience in the field of cooperation and civil emergencies. For almost 8 years, he was the head of Oxfam Confederation's programs and led campaigns of development and humanitarian action in 90 countries. Prior to this experience, Cortada was already part of Oxfam Intermón for almost 11 years: his career started in the institutional fundraising team until he took over the management of the International Cooperation Department. Additionally, he has worked as an engineer in several contexts such as Latin America, the Balkans and Senegal. He also worked together with Action against Hunger in their humanitarian response to the 2001 earthquake in El Salvador. He is also a board member of the World Animal Protection organization. Besides, he has collaborated with several universities as a professor, including the Universitat Politècnica (UPC) and the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC).