NGOs on Coronavirus Mode: The Risks of 'Business as Usual'

https://www.e-ir.info/2020/04/27/ngos-on-coronavirus-mode-the-risks-of-business-as-usual/

DANIEL A. DíAZ, APR 27 2020

A non-governmental organization (NGO) operating in the United States had had difficulty getting some of its collaborators to connect from their homes to do telework in the scenario of the COVID-19 global pandemic. The implemented solution was fast and effective: they distributed iPhone devices to the whole team. It seems that what dominates is a rush to react is such a way that we can continue to operate as if nothing happens. In other words, "Business as usual" approach. This story heard a few days ago in a webinar that addressed the use of technology to sustain operations in NGOs is useful to examine the situation on NGOs in the global south, and how the "Business as usual" approach might result not only less feasible but also inappropriate and even risky for the NGO sector.

NGOs, along with being recognized as important actors in civil society, face strong demands for efficiency, results and limited operating costs (Cornforth and Brown, 2013; Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Tacon et al., 2017). They are organizations that face a "social market" where they are called to compete for funds, a dynamic where philanthropic organizations have contributed to the creation of an ecosystem of social innovation where so-called social entrepreneurs try to do their best to put their ideas in the eyes of funders (Giridharadas, 2019; Maclean et al., 2013; Reich, 2018). The temptation for the "Business as usual" approach emerges when NGOs in the global south feels that they need to show sheer efficiency, all in order not to lose their attraction and to continue playing in the third sector scenario imbibed in what has been described as a *culture of action* (Lewis, 2014). Is in that overarching cultural environment that NGOs might feel the rush to go ahead with process of change to prove their supposed ability to continue their operation. That is why tools and techniques related to organizational change appears so precisely fit for purpose.

Organizational Development and Organizational Change tools and frameworks have the aim of enhancing organizational skills to deal with complex contexts of social demands amidst continuous change. This situation appears common to any organization regardless of its nature and purpose (Bartunek and Woodman, 2015; Todnem, 2005). NGOs are no exception (Amagoh, 2015; Lewis, 2014; O'Dwyer and Boomsma, 2015; Rusare and Jay, 2015). Using a look from the Organizational Change literature, I want to propose three fields to observe the current process: drivers, organization capabilities and purpose of the change. To close with some reflections about the elements that we should put on the table in these extraordinary times when NGOs needs to react to the swift changes that are unfolding.

Drivers

When studying organizational change processes, it is common to try to locate what motivates the change (Austin and Bartunek, 2012; Cummings and Worley, 2009). When they are external motivators, we usually talk about structural adjustments of a political nature or new legislation. From the economic point of view, it may be a matter of galloping inflation or the cutting of subsidies. They can also be socio-cultural changes such as immigration or the me-too movement. And of course, technology, such as the emergence of new technological advances that contribute to the work being done. When the drivers of change are internal to the organization, we may be talking about modifications in the structure of the operation, new stakeholders that can alter the political environment. It may also be that the motivations of the people who are part of the organization have changed, or that a set of skills is required that were not central or that simply did not exist. It may even be that the same organization is seen in a different light by its members. And at the process level, it may be the case that the usual ones are simply not able to deliver the expected results.

Moreover, it is common to observe that a process of change in an external or internal domain triggers the need for other changes to occur. Thus, for example, structural or strategic changes will require some degree of adjustment in all areas of the system. As well as modifications in technological conditions or economic resources will trigger needs for change in other domains.

It is sufficient to review the aspects mentioned to note that virtually all of them are active at this time. And they are active not only for one particular organization but for all of them. While this situation remains active, it is naive to speak of a “new reality”, as if it had already been fixed, and even less to speak of “adapting” to it, since we simply lack the parameters to appreciate if such a supposed adaptation occurs.

The approaches to organizational change are based on the assumption of having some degree of control over what is happening, and predictability about what we want to achieve. We are currently observing a disaster in slow motion. Of vast proportions and unknown scope. And worse, with an uncertain end. All of which makes such assumptions difficult to sustain.

Organizational Capacities

Each organization plans its work from certain assumptions that are assumed fixed and known: characteristics of its beneficiaries, location, conditions of effectiveness of its intervention, skills and abilities of the team that are aligned with the intervention. These, and other elements, establish the conditions of possibility for the organization. None of this is necessarily valid in the current situation.

It is essential to recognize that the capacity to react is taken to the limit since all the actors become in a condition of objective risk and of unknown scope that sows all kinds of uncertainties. The problem is that in a “business as usual” approach, decision structures are not only expected to maintain their effectiveness and scope but also to increase their efficiency and incorporate dozens of new and unprecedented aspects into their role. At the same time, each of the members may be dealing with a variable degree of personal challenges that might have to do with not having a private workspace in their home, dealing with parental and home-schooling roles, unreliable internet connection, food supply and cooking, and all along with looking after their health and that of their loved ones in a situation of confinement that may be extreme.

In organizations that provide social services, the person of the caregiver or provider is central. And it is assumed that his or her usual tasks already cause personal and emotional wear and tear (Ben-Porat and Itzhaky, 2014), so it is not necessary to point out that the usual care strategies of professional teams are likely to be insufficient. One need only thinks of applying any scale of risk assessment, and the situation certainly looks dramatic.

Purpose of Change

In the race to react to the epidemic, and in the face of social networks, it seems that some organizations are “taking advantage” of the crisis to show their capacities for adaptation and flexibility. In that scenario tech firms are thriving offering “integral solutions” for teleworking and home office. The main caveat that should be brought to the fore is that there is no way to visualize that scenario at the end of the tunnel to which it would be necessary to adapt. As it is still an ongoing process, all, literally all the pieces are moving. Even many of the characteristics of the disease that causes Covid-19 are still unknown. Any measure involves assuming a certain scenario, with the certain risk that such a scenario may change every night.

Is there a proper way to react?

In summary, there is a triple uncertainty in the current situation. Uncertainty regarding the understanding and control of the drivers. Uncertainty on the organizational capacity to react. And uncertainty on the scenario to which we are being moving to. Thus, the "business as usual" approach is not only unrealistic but can be deeply damaging in a context of enormous personal, family, social and international tension. This entail risks such as underplay the complexity through technocratic solutions; assume that the regular leadership mechanisms would be able to cope with this constant stream of abnormalities; and impose expectations of regular performance to team members in the oddest of the conditions.

It is, therefore, necessary to recognize this situation and understand that it is a "state of exception" that puts in suspense almost everything that we consider "normal". And this includes the logics with which organizations in general, and NGOs in particular, have been designed, conducted and evaluated. And this is even clearer when we talk about NGOs facing chronic precariousness in their operations and continuous risk in the global south.

Any approach that wants to be sensitive to these conditions requires a systemic reaction that involves as many actors as possible in a process that is still ongoing. From a systemic perspective, organizations are an intricate balance of interconnected and interrelated components, which are involved in a continuous adjustment process (Senior and Swailes, 2010). Is precisely that process of continuous adjustment the one that requires to be active.

At the external level, it is necessary to involve public and private donors and regulators in analyzing changes in operating conditions and the short-term viability of established objectives. Regarding the leadership and governance team of the organizations, they need to remain available and willing to be active in establishing an open and honest dialogue with their teams and their current or potential beneficiaries. Therefore, it must be recognized that the usual decision-making mechanisms will not be sufficient and that they need to be strengthened. While it is true that any organizational structure seeks to promote stability and predictability of results (Donaldson, 2009; Parsons, 1956a, 1956b), the current situation forces contingency management that is capable of observing and processing in a sustained manner an organizational environment that is far from stable. That aspect needs to be included in the communication with the team members, so they can be aware of what is being done on the leadership level, and the necessity of upward information on any emergent situation that might require an immediate response.

There are no proven recipes in dealing with a completely unknown situation to every organization worldwide. Therefore, the challenge is to gain in reflexivity through an exercise of active observation and assessment, to generate situational responses that need to be constantly assessed. In terms of available interventions, Austin & Bartunek (2012) argue that approaches such as Learning Organizations or Appreciative Inquiry respond to what they name third-generation approaches. These encompass components that promote participation, shared exercises of self-reflection, continuous action research in a capacity style; and also make use of narratives as a making-sense part of the intervention.

In summary, it is a matter of recognizing that the feasibility of reducing uncertainty, the stability of certain assumptions that were considered given, and even the ability to think of solutions and approaches with lucidity are necessarily altered by the current situation. That realism may seem extreme, but here I argue that it is more a case of an open management style that will be able to react appropriately to situations that are proving impossible to foresee. Some academics have called for NGOs to be able to make a difference (Bebbington et al., 2008). And they do not refer only to their work with the supposed beneficiaries, but also in the area of how they operate, how they make decisions, or how they observe their link with society. Perhaps this is an opportunity for them to escape the temptation of "business as usual" and emerge with new alternatives in a scenario that is still unfolding before our eyes.

References

Amagoh, F. (2015), "Improving the credibility and effectiveness of non-governmental organizations", *Progress in Development Studies*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 221–239.

Austin, J.R. and Bartunek, J.M. (2012), "Organization change and development: In practice and in theory", in Schmitt, N. and Highhouse, S. (Eds.), *Handbook of Psychology, Vol. 12: Industrial and Organizational Psychology* , Vol. 12, John Wiley & Sons, New York, pp. 390–411.

Bartunek, J. and Woodman, R. (2015), “Beyond Lewin: Toward a Temporal Approximation of Organization Development and Change”, *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 2 No. 1985, pp. 157–182.

Bebbington, A., Hickey, S. and Mitlin, D. (2008), *Can NGOs Make a Difference: The Challenge of Development Alternatives*, *Can NGOs Make a Difference? The Challenge of Development Alternatives*, Zed Books, London.

Ben-Porat, A. and Itzhaky, H. (2014), “Burnout among trauma social workers: The contribution of personal and environmental resources”, *Journal of Social Work*, Vol. 15 No. 6, pp. 606–620.

Cornforth, C. and Brown, W.A. (2013), *Nonprofit Governance : Innovative Perspectives and Approaches*, Routledge, Abingdon.

Cummings, T. and Worley, C. (2009), *Organization Development and Change*, 9th ed., South-Western, U.S.A., available at:https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107415324.004.

Donaldson, L. (2009), “Design Structure to Fit Strategy”, in Locke, E. (Ed.), *Handbook Od Principles of Organizational Behavior*, 2nd ed., Wiley, Sussex, pp. 407–427.

Edwards, M. and Hulme, D. (1995), *Beyond the Magic Bullet : NGO Performance and Accountability in the Post-Cold War World*, Kumarian Press, New York.

Giridharadas, A. (2019), *Winners Take All : The Elite Charade of Changing the World.*, Allen Lae.

Lewis, D. (2014), *Non-Governmental Organizations, Management and Development*, 2nd ed., Routledge, Abingdon.

Maclean, M., Harvey, C. and Gordon, J. (2013), “Social innovation, social entrepreneurship and the practice of contemporary entrepreneurial philanthropy”, *International Small Business Journal*, Vol. 31 No. 7, pp. 747–763.

O’Dwyer, B. and Boomsma, R. (2015), “The co-construction of NGO accountability”, *Accounting, Auditing & Accountability Journal*, Vol. 28 No. 1, pp. 36–68.

Parsons, T. (1956a), “Suggestions Approach to a Sociological Theory of Organizations-II”, *Administrative Science Quartrly*, Vol. 1 No. 2, pp. 225–239.

Parsons, T. (1956b), “Suggestions for a Sociological Approach to the Theory of Organizations-I”, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 1 No. 1, pp. 63–85.

Reich, R. (2018), *Just Giving: Why Philanthropy Is Failing Democracy and How It Can Do Better”*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.

Rusare, M. and Jay, C.I. (2015), “The project implementation profile: A tool for enhancing management of NGO projects”, *Progress in Development Studies*, Vol. 15 No. 3, pp. 240–252.

Senior, B. and Swailes, S. (2010), *Organizational Change*, edited by 4, Pearson, Harlow.

Tacon, R., Walters, G. and Cornforth, C. (2017), “Accountability in Nonprofit Governance: A Process-Based Study”, *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, SAGE PublicationsSage CA: Los Angeles, CA, Vol. 46 No. 4, pp. 685–704.

Todnem, R. (2005), “Organisational change management: A critical review”, *Journal of Change Management*, Vol. 5

No. 4, pp. 369–380.

About the author:

Daniel A. Díaz is a PhD candidate in Development Policy and Management at the Global Development Institute at the University of Manchester, UK. He researches corporate governance, leadership, non-governmental organizations and organizational behavior.