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¹ At a meeting co-convened by AWID and Hivos in November 2006

International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs)

PROFILE

International NGOs are large-scale non-profit development and human rights organizations that generally operate from multiple offices throughout the world, funded by individuals, governments and/or other foundations. The largest INGOs have incomes greater than many bilateral donors, are active in more countries and are at least as influential in commanding public and political attention.

INGOs play a significant role in supporting women's rights

Out of AWID's survey sample, 25% mentioned INGOs as a source of revenue in 2005 (up from 20% in 2000). INGOs accounted for 14% of the combined revenue of the survey sample (up from 12% in 2000).

Survey respondents listed the following INGOs (among others) as funding women's rights organizations between 2000 and 2005: Hivos, Cordaid, ICCO (Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation), Heinrich Boll Foundation, Oxfam International Members (including Oxfam-Novib, Oxfam Canada, Oxfam UK), ActionAid International, Terre des Hommes, Kvinna til Kvinna, Medica Mondiale, Misereor International, the Catholic Agency for Overseas Development, and Rights and Democracy.

CHALLENGES

INGOs make complex allies for women's organizations

Inside these mixed organizations, profoundly masculine cultures dominate. Because of their history of charity, humanitarian relief and self-help development, INGOs tend to see problems of poverty and inequality as purely economic. Many are slow to recognize the validity of gender analysis. Answerable to both public and private donors usually in a single country of the Global North, their funding sources keep INGOs subject to shifts in politics and public opinion.

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researchers, and this mix can make them complicated partners. Many communities would lack education, clean water and health services without INGOs. But ought INGOs to finance welfare provision? Or does this facilitate a privatization agenda and contribute to reduced government accountability?

INGOs often pressure grantees to join the global campaigns that, together with fundraising, tend to drive INGO agendas. Many women's rights groups feel used, as they have little say in campaign decisions and implementation. The Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP), for example, mobilized women but has not really integrated a gender analysis, focused on ending discrimination, or addressed reproductive rights.

Many INGOs have retreated from earlier commitments to women's rights

INGOs themselves gave these reasons¹ for backsliding on gender equality:

- the gender mainstreaming agenda took over, with the effect of decreasing staff, priorities and budgets for women's empowerment;
- gender fatigue set in, especially in competition with so many other issues;
- development aid has become more technocratic in general, and gender equality and challenging power relations are hard to 'log frame';
- some development project officers lack the will to employ complex gender tools.

“Core funding is, for me, the litmus test of the trust we have in certain social leaders and their organizations. ... we could let the social leader/organization/artist get on with his or her work. We could give them enough multi-year finance, enough money for overhead, to build a responsible organization with sufficient investment in staff, systems and innovations... Only then are we intelligent funders, who recognize our own role as important facilitators of social change and development, without pretending to be the social transformers ourselves.” (Oxfam-Novib Executive Director, Sylvia Borren)

Meanwhile, INGO staff argue that some stakeholders feel threatened by a strong women’s rights agenda. They report that insufficient measures exist to hold staff and partners accountable for advancing gender equality.

INGOs compete with women’s organizations for resources

Many INGOs fundraise from the country offices they establish in the South, thus threatening local NGOs’ access to resources. In 2005, INGOs received at least three times more ODA than groups based in the Global South. Often, only large-scale INGOs can handle the onerous application requirements for certain resources. In addition, INGO country offices in the Global South are criticized for:

- cherry-picking local organizations’ leaders and staff by offering better wages and benefits;
- repackaging and then claiming credit for the results of long-time struggles by under-resourced women’s groups, which are then sidelined;
- funding their own ideas and campaigns rather than the work happening on the ground;
- positioning themselves as leaders on women’s rights issues, thus overshadowing the political work, stature and fundraising capacity of women’s organizations.

INGOs channel most of the funds (especially ODA) for local organizations

National governments and bilateral donors increasingly funnel money to local NGOs through INGO offices in recipient countries. What value do they add? critics ask. Previously, INGOs matched their ‘focus areas’ with local counterparts. Nowadays, in a significant shift, INGOs tend instead to out-source the running of their own programmes to local groups. Donors stipulate North-South partnerships but INGOS control the funds and therefore the power.

OPPORTUNITIES

An increasing number of INGOs see gender equality, women’s human rights and movement-building as key goals in and of themselves. Inside many INGOs are feminists pushing for institutional changes and better ways to support women’s movements worldwide. In 2006, several INGOs (Hivos and Oxfam-Novib, for example) strengthened their commitment to women’s rights by undertaking to provide multi-year core funding to support NGOs in the Global South.

- Hivos has “gender, women & development” as one of seven core themes and in 2005 spent USD 10.1 million for women’s organizations,

especially those in mid-income range. By 2010, 30% of overall Hivos funds will go to women’s organizations.

- Oxfams collectively allocated just under 10% of their total 2005 budget to women’s and minority rights. In 2006, Oxfam Canada, with a 12-million-dollar budget, committed to making women’s rights its core theme.
- At ActionAid International, women’s rights is one of seven core themes. In 2005, they spent USD 8.2 million on grants to organizations working on women’s rights.
- Of Rights and Democracy (Canada)’s seven “programmes and activities”, one is “women’s rights”. Total spending for that programme in 2006 was USD 2,147,518.
- Comic Relief now funds smaller, local groups via African grant-making organizations including the African Women’s Development Fund.

Dozens of INGO representatives² recommended ways that INGOs could support rather than undermine women’s rights movements:

- INGOs should identify and support organizations and movements that can push a women’s rights agenda.
- INGOs should make a range of different grant sizes available so that both smaller and larger groups can access INGO funds to scale up their work;
- Europe-based INGOs should lobby jointly for women’s rights to be included in development budget lines (not only policies) at country and EC level;
- With regard to global campaigning, INGOs should take a backseat and instead support women’s rights organizations;
- INGOs can and should support national political campaigns of women’s rights organizations when requested;
- INGOs should connect to the women’s movement in the North as well, to form alliances in lobbying Northern governments, to educate and to organize solidarity;
- INGOs should work together to provide more core funding for women’s rights organizations at each level (national, regional and international). ▶

² At the same HIVOS/AWID meeting.