

I am right, you are wrong: power dynamics in NGOs by Pierre Moon

The power relations that exist between the head office, regional office, donors, beneficiaries and other stakeholders are often accepted without challenge, even though they can cause tension and conflict. Pierre Moon gives a personal account of the subtle debate, rarely vocalised, that many working in the sector struggle with on a daily basis.

Anyone with experience of working in an international organisation, dealing with partners, country offices and regional offices, will have experience - knowingly or unknowingly - of what it is like to exert power.

Different teams and offices have different priorities, and with these come various needs that impact on the work of others. 'We have a great opportunity to highlight the problems in South Sudan to a UK audience, could you accommodate our z-list celebrity for two weeks?' the celebrity-liaison team might say; 'I am owed accountability' the donor might insist; 'I need beneficiary-orientated, quality programme cycles and funding' explain the field teams, albeit probably not using these words, often leaving regional staff in the mediating hot seat. Who has the power to say no?

I have spent five years working in regional centres in Africa and Latin America, a lot of time with field and country teams; and eight years working in a head office. During this time I have seen the same problems surface time and time again: the unequal power dynamic between different stakeholders in our organisations how this power dynamic is not always recognised (or is open to abuse) how this can affect what we do and the way we communicate.

Bigger thinkers than me have explored this issue at length, for instance Robert Chambers' charming and interesting recent book Ideas for Development. I am just personalising it into a context many of us will be familiar with.

The need to communicate

Earlier this year, three partners based in Africa told me privately they could not do what was asked of them by the head office nor did they like how it was being asked – they felt pushed into doing things they did not clearly understand, or want to do, but they felt unable to make their feelings heard. Regrettably, in larger organisations, it can fall to the regional centre staff to pass on the messages as they are often better placed to capture the local problems that can't surface in email, documents or even on the telephone.

Fundraisers in particular, and I have been one myself, do not always recognise the influence they have on development activities. I have seen footballs, goats and llamas distributed, and even schools built for people based more on the wishes of donors than the desires of local communities. Keeping donors happy so that they continue to

support the organisation financially seems to be a prime motivating factor. More often than not, these arguments are flawed and programme staff are left to pick up the

pieces of an ineffective way of spending money. Making sure our fundraisers are programme and not target driven in restricted fundraising is a partial solution to this, but many organisations are a long way off from recognising this.

Head office, regional or country staff caught up in these situations are often unaware of, or don't respect, the power dynamic, and the pressure put on the recipients of our communications to comply rather than question; 'we have to do this, the HQ is our donor' and 'we can't discuss this openly or disagree; the HQ is more powerful than us' are direct quotes that I have heard.

Many of us have probably come across this problem of the power dynamic stifling debate and resulting in work that is not best for a local context. It is against most of our principles, but is hard to legislate against. We all have this power; many might even enjoy it. But with power comes responsibility.

Managing power relations

I have deliberately not referenced the large volume of work on the role of power dynamics in international development, or brave solutions that attempt to address the power imbalances in communications. ActionAid, for example, introduced a reporting system which at least gave end users far more creativity and freedom in how they chose to report – such solutions help redistribute the power invested in communications and accountability.

To return to the heart of the discussion; if we want to design programmes that work on the ground and want mutual accountability to be real, our relationships and means of communication, especially 'downwards' are probably the most important tools we have. It is important to discuss the perceptions and expectations within our own organisations, and debate these, rather than always beat each other up over these tensions or create new systems or procedures to channel them.

When writing this, someone suggested that, in organisations with people interacting and struggling for power and information, these tensions and clashes will always happen – and that 'understanding others' realities first' is as true for working with staff anywhere as it is for a beneficiary.

That is a truism and healthy reminder that there is no quick-fix to organisational tensions. But in highlighting the challenges, and suggesting that we have some control over how this power-struggle and the different realities are dealt with, it helps to remind us to think about how, as an individual or an organisation, we can address this.

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