1 Introduction

The international development community is at last attempting to 'mainstream' the idea of supporting and strengthening local organisation. Capacity-building and organisational development are not only buzz-words, they are emerging as primary objectives for some aid programmes. More than a means to an end, strengthening local organisation is gaining currency as an end in itself. Instead of local organisation being the means for sustaining projects, projects are now seen as means for strengthening local organisations.

There are good reasons for this trend, which have been well documented elsewhere (e.g. Clark 1991; Edwards and Hulme 1996; Eade 1997; IFCB 1998a, 1998b; Fowler 1997), but three points are worth noting. Foremost is the evidence that when people are able to set their own priorities and design locally appropriate solutions, with a high sense of ownership and personal investment, they will be more supportive of the process and more likely to sustain the results over time. In short, organisation can reduce dependency and increase sustainability.

Second, if problem-solving and innovative capacities are well instilled, there will be greater local responsiveness to *new problems* that might arise after the aid programme has moved on. Local capacities to network, seek technical help or mobilise resources (whether local or external) can enhance resilience and self-reliance. And these capacities are often best nurtured and reproduced through some sort of local organisation.

Third, local organisation is seen as a vital and often weak strand of the institutional fabric required for equitable and democratic development. The now fashionable concepts of civil society, advocacy and the third sector, all reflect this recognition that the power of the market and the state should be balanced, augmented or held accountable by collective social forces. Strengthening local organisation is seen as one good way to do this.

Strengthening Local Organisation
"Where the Rubber Hits The Road"

Jethro Pettit[*]

While there are worthy debates about what civil society and social capital really mean, and to what extent they are truly synonymous with local organisation (whether formal or informal, etc.), most would agree that for development purposes, having effective local organisation at the grassroots level is now considered a good thing, that there should be more of it, and that hopefully it should endure beyond the lifetime of discrete projects.

2 Strengthening Organisation in Practice

The real challenge today is not so much in theory, but in implementation. And the learning curve for organisational development appears to be steepest not so much at the national level, where southern NGOs are developing strong competencies and track records, but at the grassroots level where user groups, membership organisations, social movements and local development organisations are struggling to take root. This is 'where the rubber hits the road' in efforts to strengthen civil society. A key question to ask is whether conventional systems of aid and partnership are helpful or harmful to the emergence of local organisation.

What does it really mean to foster or strengthen effective local organisation for development? What are some pitfalls and key elements of success? What lessons have been learnt? Are single-sector or integrated programmes more effective in catalysing organisation? What kinds of development activities are most conducive to collective action? And what do these lessons imply for redefining partnership and aid among the various actors in development?

These questions will be considered through the field experience of one international non-governmental organisation (INGO), World Neighbors (WN), with whom the author has worked for six years. The article begins with an overview of WN, and looks at policies and practices related to local organisational development. Four examples of efforts to strengthen local organisation are then shared, from WN's rural programmes in Africa, Asia and the Americas. Finally, key lessons are drawn from the case studies and some implications for partnership are explored.

The central thesis of this article is that in marginalised rural areas, local organisation is best catalysed through a highly responsive, capacity-building approach that permits people to define their own priorities and organise themselves around contextually appropriate solutions and structures. While single-sector activities such as agricultural innovation can serve as good starting points for mobilising participation, creating and sustaining strong local organisations that can outlive the 'projects' they serve requires a much more integrated, multi-sectoral and synergistic approach.

The implications of this hypothesis for policy and partnerships within the international aid community are profound. If donor agencies seriously want to strengthen local organisation and problem-solving capacities on a long-term basis, and wish to make the growth of civil society as important as meeting and measuring sectoral objectives, there will need to be some fundamental changes in the way aid funds and partnerships are negotiated, structured, timed and assessed.

The term 'local organisation' is considered here to include grassroots membership organisations, self-help groups, farmer associations and community-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) located in or near their areas of operation. Also included, to some extent, are informal and traditional systems of leadership and collective action. Some of the cases are volunteer-driven social movements or user associations, some have paid staff, and some are mixed. While the emphasis here is not on larger, more professional southern NGOs, they are also invaluable institutional players.

3 Organisational Background

World Neighbors is a non-sectarian, people-to-people development organisation founded in Oklahoma, USA in 1951. From the beginning, the organisation was unusual in several respects. First, its founder espoused a philosophy of self-help and respect for the inherent dignity of all people. This led to an approach that placed people at the centre of the development process and looked foremost to local leadership, knowledge and resources rather than the transfer of goods or technologies from abroad to solve problems.

Second, WN is entirely supported by private sources of funding, mostly from individual

contributors. This policy provides a relatively high degree of freedom from donor conditionality and trends. Today, individuals continue to provide the largest single source of revenue, although grants from private US foundations are growing and running a close second.

Partnerships between WN field offices and Canadian and European donors have allowed modest access to bilateral funding, usually through other INGOs. But no government contracts are entered into, and US government funding is still neither solicited nor accepted. A few small multilateral grants have been negotiated with the World Bank and various UN agencies.

WN's field operations in 18 countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America are now staffed almost entirely by country nationals and enjoy a high level of autonomy in planning and decision making. Indeed, many country offices function very much like southern NGOs and are registered both as national and international NGOs. This feature enables some unique funding relationships with North American, European and multilateral donors.

A global process of strategic planning, about once every three years, brings programme and headquarters staff together to evaluate progress and to define common goals, strategies and objectives. It was this process, in the early 1990s, which coalesced into a global consensus on the need for more intentional strategies for community capacity-building and local organisational development.

3.1 Strengthening local organisation at World Neighbors

World Neighbors, like many INGOs, took some time to recognise fully the importance of strengthening local organisation as a central programme objective. While WN has a people-centred philosophy and strong emphasis on local leadership, this has not always translated into strategies for local organisational development or broad-based community capacity-building.

Until the late 1980s, most WN programmes were concerned with reaching individuals and families through people-to-people diffusion of agricultural and health innovations. Self-help groups, user groups and committees were not uncommon, but these collectives were usually bi-products rather than intended outcomes. Little support was given to creating organisational sustainability, to federating user groups, or to building specific capacities and structures for addressing wider needs and issues beyond the explicit content or goals of the WN project.

Historically, where organisational development was addressed by WN, it was often as an afterthought, discussed with local leaders when it was time to begin thinking about phasing out. In those instances where local organisations were fostered earlier on, the capacities developed were primarily those required to implement projects, but not to cultivate sustainability, accountability, effectiveness or adaptation to new challenges.

For WN, the main thrust (and assumption) over time has been that *strengthening leadership* is the key to ensuring long-term impact. In some cases this has produced remarkable and unexpected results, including the widespread diffusion of technical innovations through informal networks of farmer leaders, health volunteers or midwives. But time has shown that such leaders and networks are not sufficient in themselves, and that they need the supportive framework and continuity of local organisation.

More recently, in the course of strategic planning and self-assessment, programme staff embraced the idea that organisational development and capacity-building should be more visibly integrated into programme goals, objectives and strategies from the outset. Staff affirmed that WN's central purpose should be 'to strengthen the capacity of marginalised people to meet their basic needs, and to determine and sustain an equitable and inclusive development process' (World Neighbors 1993 and 1996).

New strategic goals have emerged from staff and board deliberations. These aim at developing 'an agency-wide understanding of the process required to strengthen community organisation and local institutions' (World Neighbors 1994) and at putting into place 'effective approaches for understanding, strengthening and assessing community capacity' in all programmes worldwide (World Neighbors

1996). An 'Action Learning Group' was created within WN in 1995 to backstop and facilitate programme learning, analysis, documentation and wider influencing.

The growth of WN's interest in local organisation was partly a response to economic and political realities. As governments were being rolled back by structural adjustment, local organisation was expected to fill the gaps left by central budget cuts and to engage in planning and partnerships with newly decentralised local governments. The growing impact of global and national policies on communities in marginal areas also raised the need to strengthen local capacities to negotiate and advocate for basic needs and rights.

WN's primary concern, however, was with sustainability and adaptability of programme impact. The people WN works with live, by and large, in marginalised rural areas with limited formal infrastructure and weak organisational fabric. The challenges they face are diverse and dynamic. To design a programme and build capacity around one or two specific outcomes might have immediate benefits, but can fall short when outside support ends or when new, unforeseen and possibly more complex problems arise in the future. Local organisational capacities for problem solving over the long run may be more important than capacities to meet short-term 'project' goals.

4 Case Studies

These challenges will become clearer in the four case studies that follow, and in the lessons and implications drawn from them afterwards. These cases have been selected to represent geographic and organisational diversity: Haiti, Peru, Mali and Nepal.

4.1 Haiti – the emergence of a peasant organisation[1]

In the 1980s WN attempted to 'replicate' its successful model of farmer-led sustainable agriculture from Central America by partnering with other INGO-supported programmes in Haiti's central plateau region. In the early 1990s WN initiated a new strategy and formed a Haitian branch called *Vwazen Mondyal Ayiti* (VMA). A small 'training and development unit' of Haitian agricultural, health and community promoters made their services available to existing grassroots development efforts in the plateau. At the same time they created a pilot operational programme in an area called Ivwa.

The primary objective of this team from the outset, both in its partnerships and in the Ivwa pilot project, was to identify, create and strengthen grassroots organisations. The team provided technical training to address agricultural, health and livelihood needs, but these project activities were seen primarily as vehicles for strengthening local capacity for collective action, rather than the other way around.

In Ivwa, adapting from the successful strategies of some other Haitian peasant federations, VMA formed *gwoupman*, small groupings of eight to fifteen people from the same hamlet or village who unite around economic livelihood, agricultural and public health goals. Women and men joined together to form these groups in roughly equal numbers, some in mixed and some in single-gender groupings.

Agricultural innovations such as soil and water conservation and agroforestry were adopted and spread by the *gwoupman*, but *economic* livelihood activities gave structure and momentum to the organising process. Tool banks, seed banks, saving and credit groups, and the storage and marketing of crops were the most popular components. All were aimed at breaking a widespread pattern of usury and dependency upon middlemen and better-off landed farmers. The agricultural activities were closely linked to these asset-building strategies; for example, a *gwoupman* starting with a seed bank or a tool bank would receive training in seed selection and improved cultivation methods.

Within a few years, through a strategy guided heavily by VMA, clusters of *gwoupman* joined together to form 'blocks,' and the blocks federated into a grassroots peasant organisation called OPD-8. Comprised of nearly 90 *gwoupman* from 11 villages in the Ivwa area, OPD-8 represents an organised population of about 850 direct participants, sometimes more than one from the same family. Indirect participants (family members) are estimated at close to 4,000 people.

Collective enterprise linked to agricultural innovation is still the driving force of the structure, coupled with a strong ethos of group solidarity and reciprocity extended from the *gwoupman* culture to the larger organisation. OPD-8 is taking on wider community development goals, such as health, education and infrastructure, and has learned to negotiate with local government and other institutions to gain access to outside resources.

VMA has adhered to a strict principle of providing very limited material support to the *gwoupman* and their emerging organisation, insisting upon volunteer leadership and mobilisation of local assets and resources. Only minimal incentives were provided to capitalise the *gwoupman*. Training and organising were the largest input, with close attention to ethics of leadership and accountability (political and economic power are strictly segregated and widely shared, for example).

VMA is now redefining its partnership with OPD-8, gradually reducing its training and support, transferring responsibilities, and strengthening the capacity of OPD-8 to sustain the local development process autonomously. A new development effort in a nearby area is being initiated by VMA, and OPD-8 will help mobilise the new villages by providing training and hosting cross-visits.

4.2 Peru – phasing out and creating a local NGO[2]

In the mid-1980s WN decided to phase out its operational presence as an INGO in Peru after nearly 15 years, due to the escalation of civil conflict. The programme had been driven by teams of farmer-promoters using people-centred agricultural development methods with indigenous peasant communities in the Andean highlands and in the Amazonian jungle. Soil and water conservation, improved crop varieties, the use of cover crops and other improvements were widely diffused through farmer-to-farmer extension and field days, with significant impacts on yields and income. While men comprised the majority of participants, training programmes with women were also initiated in the areas of gardening, health, nutrition and handicrafts.

This overall approach in the Peruvian highlands, dating to the early 1970s, is one of the primary examples of WN's successful, people-centred approach to sustainable agriculture, documented in the classic book, *Two Ears of Corn* (Bunch 1982). Some key elements of this approach include the use of 'a simple technology that meets a strongly felt need, requires no external inputs … is easy to understand, involves low risk, entails no increased labour or time to apply, and produces immediate, visible results' (Gubbels 1997:221).

In Peru, collective work among participating farmers was encouraged as a means of extension. However, strengthening local organisation was never an explicit goal (except in the Amazon, where WN supported an indigenous organisation to advocate for land rights; and in Lima where a successful crafts cooperative was started by urban poor women). In the highlands, which formed the bulk of the programme, indigenous traditions of shared labour greatly facilitated the extension of new farming methods. But enhancing either traditional or modern forms of organisation was not stated as a programme objective. The emergence of the Shining Path revolutionary movement in the 1980s also made peasant organising of any kind a delicate issue, and one best avoided.

When civil conflict forced an exodus of many INGOs and a rather abrupt process of phasing out, WN decided that, rather than abandon its programmes and staff, it would create a wholly independent Peruvian NGO called *Vecinos Peru* (VP). The organisation was lead by a small professional staff and a team of seasoned farmer-promoters, and its board of directors included some long-term promoters loyal to WN's people-centered approach. WN agreed to reduce its funding in increments over a five-year period, while at the same time helping to broker new support for VP from other institutions.

In retrospect, the process may have been too rapid and lacked sufficient attention to organisational development and sustainability. The enduring political crisis had also reduced the level of INGO funding in Peru, so VP began looking to government and multilateral sources. This in turn required changes in methodology, sectoral emphasis and administrative systems. VP succeeded in negotiating some ambitious rural development and infrastructure projects, effectively recasting the

organisation as an aid contractor and dramatically altering its mission and values.

This transformation was guided not by VP's board or grassroots leaders, but by a small, tightly knit professional management team with little accountability to programme staff or to the board. When a concerned group of directors voted in a new secretary-general, they were purged from the organisation. Staff and leaders who departed from VP have joined or started other organisations more in keeping with their values. While positive impact in many communities and institutions can be traced to WN and VP programmes in Peru, little in the way of local organisational fabric endures.

4.3 Mali – catalysing village and inter-village associations[3]

WN began working in the Sanando region of Mali in 1986, after the devastating Sahel drought. The initial focus was on testing and promoting short-cycle crop varieties, adapting from WN's minimalist, low-input approach to agricultural innovation (Bunch 1982). The programme spread quickly from four to twenty villages by 1991, and all villages were strategically selected for their potential to influence neighbouring villages. As early as 1987, the scope of the programme was expanded to include gardening, agroforestry, literacy, seed production and grain banks, drinking water, child and maternal health and literacy. The primary long-term objective was to strengthen the organisational ability of peasant farmers to meet basic needs. Agricultural production and food security through farmer experimentation and extension was the 'entry point' into an integrated community development programme.

The programme was driven by a small team of Malian promoters from the region, called SAFADR, created and supported by WN. Their approach from the beginning, as stated in their 1986 plan, was 'to promote and strengthen local structures at the village level and on the inter-village level so they will become more effective in undertaking self-development projects in … agriculture and other sectors.' But after four years there was still a high-level dependency on staff. The SAFADR team recognised a need to fold organisational development more intentionally into their strategies.

In the early 1990s SAFADR and the communities identified a set of key 'capacity areas' needed to achieve autonomy, and developed methods both to strengthen and assess these capacities. In brief, the eight capacities were: (1) to identify, develop and extend improved technologies and practices; (2) to mobilise local human and financial resources; (3) to negotiate with external agencies; (4) to coordinate among villages; (5) to manage programmes; (6) to organise and have appropriate structures; (7) to have broad-based leadership; and (8) to make democratic, transparent and representative decisions.

Rather than address all the capacities at once, a phased approach was adopted for the gradual 'transfer of competencies' from programme staff to community-based structures. Three phases of organisational development were later identified, and subsequently expanded into five stages that could be illustrated by the life-cycle of a tree: embryonic, emerging, growing, well-developed and mature (Gubbels and Koss 2000).

A local organisational structure evolved from this process which took into account, and respected, traditional village structures and leadership, but broadened it to enable wider consultation and accountability in decision-making. Village development committees were formed that usually included a mixture of traditional and elected leaders. However, there was no traditional structure for inter-village coordination, and in time it became clear that many problems could not be tackled at the village level alone, such as negotiating with outside agencies and accessing external resources.

To address this challenge SAFADR began bringing village leaders together in annual and semi-annual meetings. The team also concentrated its support to 14 'motor villages', selected for their potential to influence four to five nearby villages. By 1993 the motor villages had formed an inter-village association called *Yèrènyèton* with the goal of eventually reaching a total of 70 villages in Sanando. The association gained legal recognition, formed links with other peasant organisations, began relating directly to government and non-government agencies and donors.

At the same that time these capacities were being strengthened and responsibilities transferred from SAFADR to *Yèrènyèton*, WN was supporting a similar process of organisational development with SAFADR. The Dutch INGO, Novib, a strong partner and co-funder of WN throughout the later stages of this process, developed direct funding relationships with both *Yèrènyèton* and SAFADR. By 1999 SAFADR had been reconstituted as a local Malian NGO called *Siginyogonjè* (meaning 'World Neighbors' in Bambara), and was reducing its support to *Yèrènyèton* and exploring new geographic areas in which to begin working.

4.4 Nepal – self-help groups and community-based NGOs[4]

WN began working in the middle hills region east of Kathmandu in 1975, at the invitation of the Family Planning Association of Nepal (FPAN). This unusual partnership was intended as an experiment to expand FPAN's clinic-based services to include broader social and economic improvements, with the idea that improved livelihoods would increase family planning acceptance (PRB 1994).

After consulting with communities and learning that livestock nutrition rather than reproductive health was their highest priority, WN introduced agroforestry methods and leguminous trees species that quickly increased the supply of animal fodder. Rapid improvements in animal health ensued, increasing local welfare and income. This was followed by community-led drinking water, sanitation and irrigation projects, which in turn spawned the creation of local user-groups to manage them. Credit and savings groups and other income-generating self-help groups soon followed.

As economic conditions and public health improved, interest in access to health and family planning services increased. FPAN decentralised its delivery of health and family planning through trained community health volunteers, small rural clinics, and mobile (walking) clinic days in remote areas. Significant increases in family planning use and other health indicators were achieved and maintained (PRB 1994).

The process of forming self-help groups became, for WN, a highly effective strategy of collective action to achieve and sustain health and development goals. It allowed a more targeted focus than broader 'community-wide' strategies (which were also tested) and was especially effective at reaching women and the poorest families and socially excluded groups. Women's literacy and encouragement of girls' education were also taken up by many of the women's groups.

To support the proliferation of self-help groups and the network of local clinics, WN encouraged the formation of small, community-based NGOs in 11 sites. This became easier with Nepal's legalisation of NGOs in the early 1990s. By 1995 the project area had expanded to nearly 50 villages in two districts, with a total population of 163,000 people. WN continued to adapt and extend the model with FPAN and other NGOs in five more districts.

Today the programme works in ten districts through more than 20 local NGOs and hundreds of self-help groups, including over 100 women's savings and credit groups. In one district 35 women's groups are legally registered as cooperatives and are in the process of federating as a credit union, managing over US$35,000 in assets. For WN, a primary objective is now the strengthening and sustainability of the local NGOs, who in turn form and strengthen the self-help groups that have become such a central force for local development (e.g. health, drinking water, income generation, literacy, and advocacy). To accomplish this, participatory training, monitoring and self-assessment tools have been developed using local indicators of capacity, for use both with local NGOs and with the self-help groups.

5 Lessons Learnt in Strengthening Organisation

While there is a wide variation in the four case studies presented here, in terms of geography, culture and forms of local organisation, some common patterns and lessons can be drawn. This synthesis is greatly aided by the fact that one of the case studies (Mali) was part of a multi-country research effort led by Mick Howes to assess the impact of NGOs on local organisational development (Howes 1999; Gubbels 1997). The framework and conclusions arrived at in this research provided a useful basis for comparison and validation among the four case studies.

5.1 Listen to the people

Where communities were encouraged to analyse and define their own needs and priorities, even if it required going beyond WNs initial areas of expertise and support, local organisation has been more likely to take root and sustain itself over time. WN has learned to be responsive and 'scratch where it itches' rather than to arrive with predetermined activities or technologies. If genuine needs are being addressed, people will be more likely to organise themselves and sustain solutions over time. To achieve this requires strong, committed field workers who relate to local language and culture.

5.2 Integrated vs. single-sector strategies

In Haiti, Mali and Nepal, group formation and local organisation were strengthened, over time, by a diversity of livelihood and health activities: savings and credit, asset-building, food security, maternal and child health, livestock, drinking water, agroforestry, literacy, etc. All four programmes were *initiated* with simple, single-sector interventions, an approach often considered key to generating local organisation (Tendler 1976; Bunch 1982; Clark and Johnston 1982; Uphoff 1986). But in all three cases where strong local organisations emerged, they gradually engaged in a broader mix of activities in response to community needs. This conclusion was noted prominently in Howes' multi-country study (Howes 1999; Gubbels 1997).

5.3 Limits of people-centered agriculture

Sustainable agriculture alone, even where the innovations yielded quick results and served as compelling entry points, did not seem durable as vehicles for creating local organisation (although they certainly improved food production and self-reliance). This was particularly true in Peru, but was also evident in the diversification that took place in the other three cases, most notably in Mali (Gubbels 1997). It was when agricultural innovations were *combined* in synergistic ways with economic activities such as savings and credit groups, seed banks, grain storage and marketing, that they played a vital role in strengthening local organisation.

5.4 Synergy

To be effective, integration should be more than a random collection of sectoral interventions. Where a genuine synergy between activities was achieved, local organisation appears to have benefited. In Nepal, for example, planting leguminous trees contributed to soil and water conservation and provided a needed source of animal fodder, while saving women's time. Better animal health led to higher incomes and interest in human health and family planning. The introduction of drinking water systems afforded more time to women for literacy classes and savings and credit schemes, and further reinforced their interest in accessing reproductive health and family planning services.

5.5 Building income and assets

Among the diverse initiatives found in the integrated programmes, *economic livelihood strategies* involving credit, savings and asset-building appear to have been particularly effective as a basis for local organisation. In both Nepal and Haiti self-help credit groups created a compelling incentive for members to cooperate (and to attend meetings regularly, so that they can make and receive payments and hold their peers accountable). In Mali the creation of 'community chests' to fund things like wells, pharmacy boxes and midwives' kits helped to legitimise the emerging village committees and the peasant organisation charged with managing these funds.

5.6 Integration and gender dynamics

The integrated programmes seem to have afforded greater opportunities for women to participate and to form all-women or mixed-gender user groups. Experience in Nepal shows that women tend to be more accountable with loan funds than men. Poorer and landless families in Nepal and Haiti also joined livelihood activities that did not require ownership of, or access to, land. In Mali, where traditional gender roles are perhaps the most pronounced, a separate women's organisation has emerged within the inter-village organisation and is running its own functional literacy training for women, which in turn is linked directly to skill-building for managing livelihood projects.

5.7 Protecting members' interests

In Haiti, Nepal and Mali, small self-help and village groups formed the building blocks of larger organisations. The smaller units were able to keep their economic assets and benefits self-contained, avoiding the problems of appropriation or free-riding by non-members. This is another widely noted element of successful collective action (Uphoff 1986, quoted in Howes 1999; Clark and Johnston 1982). What is fascinating about the three WN case studies is that many of the self-help groups have federated and, through their larger organisations, have preserved their economic interests, while at the same time engaging in broader community projects that include and benefit others.

5.8 Keep it simple

While integration is important, the range of activities cannot be so diverse or complex that local NGO staff and promoters lack the skills to provide technical support. In all of these examples, WN and the communities identified a fairly limited menu· of appropriate activities that could be supported, and cultivated the capacities to do so. These activities were always introduced in a manageable sequence (not simultaneously), and were tried out on a small scale before being extended or integrated with other activities. The initial activity should generate quick, tangible results to participants, but should not remain the only activity (Howes 1999). The key thing to remember, contrary to some of the literature, is that *simple does not have to mean single-sector*.

5.9 Stay decentralised and accountable

In Haiti, Nepal and Mali local organisation was strongly decentralised. Leadership responsibilities were widely shared, and mechanisms were in place to prevent co-optation of resources. In Haiti, economic and political leadership was segregated at all levels. In Peru, power was quickly concentrated in the hands of a few leaders with little transparency or accountability. One valuable lesson is that responsibilities should be transferred from one organisation to another in a gradual and phased manner, as the capacities of the emerging organisation develop (Gubbels and Koss 2000). This issue leads to a broader consideration of the need for responsible approaches to partnership on the part of INGOs and other donor agencies.

6 Implications for NGO Partnership

This section looks at some implications for partnership at two levels: between the INGO and its donors, and between the INGO (or national NGO as the case may be) and local organisations. Many of the following implications apply, with some minor adjustments, to both kinds of partnership.

6.1 Learn about existing social structures

Almost every community already has both traditional and modern systems of organisation, both formal and informal, and has past experiences with collective action, both positive and negative. An understanding of existing social and organisational patterns, and their strengths and weaknesses, is critical to any organisational development effort (Howes 1999). By doing background research and using participatory methods, these underlying structures and experiences can be quickly identified and used to help shape local organising strategies (Gubbels and Koss 2000).

6.2 Let people design their own organisations

A common error is to import 'models' of organisation that ignore the local context, culture and historical moment. In Haiti, Nepal and Mali both the grassroots organisations and the national programme teams that support them operate within the culture and norms of their respective societies. Much was invented, at least in the prototype stages, by the people themselves. INGOs too often seek to clone themselves, and are prone to export their organisational norms, values and management systems while ignoring existing conditions. In Peru, for example, no alternative models of organisation were offered beyond the creation of an NGO.

6.3 Choose supportive funding partners

Three of the cases involved funding partners beyond WN's individual donor base in the US: Novib in Mali, Lutheran World Relief·in Haiti, and the Ford Foundation in Nepal (in more recent years). Without funding partners that shared the values and principles of WN, and showed a willingness to support an integrated and process-led development approach, the local organisational outcomes would have been very difficult to achieve.

In Peru, support from like-minded INGOs was only sustained for a few years after the departure of WN. An increasing reliance on local government and multilateral sources appears to have had a negative impact on the local organisation, coupled with a 'phasing out' process by WN that was too rapid.

6.4 Don't spend too much

Everywhere WN staff are amazed by the levels of spending within official aid programmes. The problem is so severe that some people and communities are considered 'lost' because of their expectations of what donors will pay and do 'for' them. *Money is the perhaps the greatest enemy of collective action.* The investment level in these examples was extremely low by most aid standards. The average annual budget for a WN country programme is less than US$100,000, which is at times supplemented (often doubled) by grants from other INGOs and foundations. Most of the WN budget pays for trainers, promoters, workshops and transportation. Communities and local organisations are expected to mobilise local and external resources to the greatest extent possible. Other studies agree that local organisations will be stronger if external support is 'episodic, not sustained' (Uphoff 1986:56–68, quoted in Howes 1999).

6.5 Be flexible and innovative

The foregoing lessons about what is conducive to the emergence of local organisation point strongly to the need for a process-oriented approach to development, in which sectoral priorities, timelines and outcomes *unfold in consultation with the community.* Programme strategies, expectations and indicators need to be flexible and responsive to local conditions. This has sobering implications for donor agencies with rigid project cycles, single-sector goals and pre-set conditions and indicators. Most conventional project, funding and evaluation systems will need to be radically changed to accommodate the process-oriented demands of local organisational development. In evaluation, it is especially important to assess organisational capacity over time, as an integral part of impact assessment and in a participatory manner (Gubbels and Koss 2000). Not only new tools and methods, but new attitudes and behaviour are required to accomplish this change.

7 Conclusion

If stronger local organisation and civil society are truly seen as desired *ends* of development programmes, rather than as *means* for meeting sectoral project objectives, there is need to take heed of the key lessons and best practice in organisational development at the grassroots level. Too often support for institution-building is concentrated at the 'national NGO' or governmental levels, and there is too little (or the wrong kind of) investment at the level of membership organisations, self-help associations and community-based NGOs.

The four case studies examined here shed light on some important lessons for best practice. In marginalised rural areas, local organisation seems to take hold more firmly where a process approach is used, allowing people to define their own priorities and organise themselves around appropriate solutions and structures. Integrated, synergetic programmes that include economic elements such as credit and savings tend to yield stronger local organisations than single-sector or technology-driven programmes, and are more likely to include women and the poor. Sensitivity to context, flexibility and adaptability are among other key variables.

The wider implications of these lessons for policies and partnerships within the international aid community are far reaching. If donor agencies are serious about strengthening local organisations and enhancing citizens' problem solving and livelihood capacities on a long-term basis, there is a need for fundamental changes in the way aid funding and partnerships are understood, negotiated, structured, timed and assessed. The aid system must be transformed from a top–down 'chain' to a more adaptable and mutually accountable *system* of relationships among key actors. Projects and partnerships need to be designed around organisational development goals, and not the other way around. Without these changes, the vital process of nurturing local organisations through flexible, adaptive and synergetic interventions over longer periods of time is unlikely to take hold.

Notes

1   This case study is based upon three visits to Haiti and programme documentation provided by Cantave Jean-Baptiste and Steven Brescia, to whom the author is grateful.

2   This case study is based upon a review of programme files, interviews with former staff, two field visits to Peru and meetings with current and former *Vecinos Peru* staff and board members.

3   This section is abstracted from an in-depth case study by Peter Gubbels (1997), which formed part of a multi-country study of NGO promotion of membership organisations (Howes 1999). Two visits to Mali and conversations with Fatoumata Batta and Salim Toure enriched the analysis. Lessons from this and related action research have recently been developed into a World Neighbors field guide on organisational self-assessment (Gubbels and Koss 2000).

4   This case study is drawn from extensive internal documentation and several external reports, and on two site visits to Nepal. Thanks are due to Tom Arens and Jagdish Ghimire for their input.

References

Bunch, R., 1982, *Two Ears of Corn: A Guide to People-Centered Agricultural Improvement*, Oklahoma City: World Neighbors.

Clark, J., 1991, *Democratizing Development: The Role of Voluntary Organizations*, London: Earthscan.

Clark, W. C., and B. F. Johnston, 1982, *Redesigning Rural Development: A Strategic Perspective*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins.

Eade, D. (ed.), 1997, *Development and Patronage*, Oxford: Oxfam.

Edwards, M. and D. Hulme (eds), 1996, *Beyond the Magic Bullet: NGO Performance and Accountability in the Post-Cold War World*, London: Earthscan.

Fowler, A., 1997, *Striking a Balance: A Guide to Enhancing the Effectiveness of Non-Governmental Organisations in International Development*, London: Earthscan.

Esman, M. J. and N. T. Uphoff, 1984, *Local Organizations: Intermediaries in Rural Development*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Gubbels, P., 1997, 'Strengthening community capacity for sustainable agriculture' in L. van Veldhuizen, A. Waters-Bayer, R. Ramirez, D. A. Johnson, and J. Thompson (eds), *Farmers' Research in Practice: Lessons from the Field*, London: Intermediate Technology Publications:217–44.

Gubbels, P. and C. Koss, 2000, *From the Roots Up: Strengthening Organizational Capacity through Guided Self-Assessment*, Oklahoma City: World Neighbors.

Howes, M., 1999, 'NGOs and the institutional development of membership organisations,' *IDS Research Report*, No. 36, Brighton: IDS.

IFCB, 1998a, *A Synthesis of Consultation and Surveys*, International Forum on Capacity Building, New Delhi: Society for Participatory Research in Asia.

IFCB, 1998b, *Strengthening Southern NGOs: The Donor Perspective, Vol. 1*, International Forum on Capacity Building, New Delhi: Society for Participatory Research in Asia.

PRB, 1994, 'Nepal: the Boudha-Bahunipati family welfare project,' briefing paper from a series on Combined Delivery Models and Other Integrated Approaches, Washington: Population Reference Bureau.

Tendler, J., 1976, 'Inter-country evaluation of small farmer organisations in Ecuador and Honduras: final report,' *Program Evaluation Study*, Washington: USAID.

Uphoff, N., 1986, *Local Organisational Development: An Analytical Sourcebook with Cases*, Connecticut: Kumarian.

World Neighbors, 1993, *Report on World Strategic Planning Conference, 1993*, Oklahoma City: World Neighbors.

– , 1994, *Report on World Strategic Planning Conference, 1994*, Oklahoma City: World Neighbors.

– , 1996, *Report on World International Planning Conference, 1996*, Oklahoma City: World Neighbors.