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The way to avoid 'dependency' is to maximise the area within which people are able to make decisions for themselves. This means emphasising their strengths rather than their needs. It means, for a refugee population, giving them as much control as possible over the allocation of scarce resources, including food, rather than 'putting them to productive work' and asking them what they would like others to do for, or to, them (Turton, 1993).

Introduction

For people who are living in poverty and on the margins of society, the difference between normal life and what outsiders define as a crisis may be marginal. Poverty and exclusion are themselves a kind of chronic emergency. Even very modest changes in their situation may enable poor people either to increase their toe-hold on survival; or plunge them into deeper crisis. It thus becomes meaningless to maintain rigid distinctions between relief and development assistance, or to define people's experience in terms of a linear progression along a 'relief-rehabilitation-development continuum'. For 'with the terrible exception of genocide, most deaths from war are not the direct result of violence and battle... it is a sad irony that the safest place to be in many of today's wars is probably the army'.¹ The biggest killers even in chronic conflicts are the malnutrition and diseases that arise from the poverty that may well have contributed to the conflict in the first place — but which are invariably exacerbated by it (Ardón, 1997).

To enable men and women not just to survive a critical situation, but also to transform it, aid interventions should support what people and their organisations are already doing themselves, and respect their priorities for change. For 'development' — in the sense of participation in political life,
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economic production, social organisation, the creation of alternative education and health services, forms of cultural expression, and international communication — continues even in situations of acute or chronic insecurity.

... many of the 1980s generation of [Salvadorean] NGOs are essentially the institutional expression of sectors of the urban and rural poor who organised to defend themselves from violence and repression... a concrete manifestation of the energy, creativity, and organisational and negotiating capacity developed by poor people, simply in order to survive (Alvarez Solis and Martin, in Eade 1996b:52–53).

The need for relief aid thus co-exists with the need for other forms of support. Investment in capacity-building can enable poor people to respond to crisis more effectively in both the short and long term.

Crisis may be experienced on various levels, and in different ways. Conflict need not always be negative. An Oxfam study found that:

...so long as the social and political processes provide channels for dialogue, participation, and negotiation (such as community development work seeks to foster), conflict plays a constructive role. Where such channels are blocked, and yet basic needs go unmet, then resentment and desperation build up. The outcome is protest, repression and violence (Agerbak, in Eade 1996b:27).

In its most extreme and destructive expression, a response to crisis may thus take the form of organised violence, armed conflict, or war. This may be associated with a collapse in the state's authority or capacity to function, or with campaigns to take over national power or achieve regional secession. Contemporary warfare also tends to involve efforts by at least one of the warring parties deliberately to destroy the wider social fabric through means such as forced displacement, the gross and systematic abuse of human rights, the devastation of homes and property, and the destruction of markets and livelihoods. Civilians become a military target. Conflict may involve sustained hostility among different sectors within a population, or systematic abuse of or discrimination against certain groups. A major political crisis may be triggered by a natural event. For example, the 1974 earthquake in Guatemala unleashed a campaign of military terror that ended only with the 1996 Peace Accords. Or a single act, such as the assassination of the Burundian President in 1994, may precipitate chaos. Whatever its scale and dimensions, crisis represents a turning point, and change is inevitable.

The vast majority of the emergencies in which agencies such as Oxfam are involved are on a relatively 'manageable' scale in terms of the numbers of people affected, and the dimensions of their interventions. Occasionally, however, a crisis may result in, or exacerbate, suffering on such a scale that all
that can be done is to ensure that survivors continue to survive. The role of the international community in Rwanda in 1994 has been criticised on many grounds (Millwood, 1996). The UN agencies and other official bodies are thought to have done too little, too late. By contrast, many NGOs tried to do too much, and too soon to have been able to assess their role in sufficient detail. Although perhaps as many as a million lives were saved as a result of swift and efficient provision of medical services and clean water, some lives were probably lost or endangered because of indecisiveness and inaction on the one hand, and through misguided or uncoordinated aid programmes on the other.

Where information is lacking or confused, it is difficult to decide how to act in the face of overwhelming need. However, if humanitarian aid is seen only in terms of material inputs, such as food aid, shelter, and medical supplies, vital as these are in many situations, it may weaken and undermine existing local capacities: economies, organisational forms, and self-confidence. There is also increasing evidence showing that humanitarian assistance may not only prolong the violence by feeding a ‘war economy’, but also affect the politico-military outcomes and even reinforce the underlying causes of the crisis (eg Duffield, 1995:24–25 and 27–31; Bryer and Cairns, 1997). In terms of social survival, emergency assistance may be just as critical in ‘non-relief’ areas such as agricultural production, employment, micro-enterprise, education, training, networking, lobbying, organisational development, awareness-raising — even leisure and cultural pursuits. Central Americans called this ‘development for survival’, Eritreans referred to it as ‘bringing strength out of weakness’.

Since resolving a crisis entails negotiation between conflicting interests, the question of who has the power to make and enforce a decision is central. In earlier Chapters, a capacity-building approach to development has been described as one that aims to optimise poor people’s chances ‘to have a say in shaping critical decisions affecting their lives, through open and accountable political structures ... [and so] to be active participants in the process of social change’ (Watkins, 1995:15). Reducing the vulnerability of those who face real or potential threats, or who are marginalised within their societies, is another aspect of capacity-building. This calls for a subtle mix of short- and long-term responses, rather than an artificial division between relief and development assistance.

It is beyond the scope of this Chapter to dwell on the role(s) of humanitarian aid in ‘complex political emergencies’. The principal lessons that concern us here are first, that aid agencies require a high level of understanding of the political, social, legal — and ethical — complexities in order to intervene in a responsible fashion, as well as to monitor the impact of their interventions. Second, that however effective in its own terms, humanitarian
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assistance cannot substitute for political action; and is seldom the most significant factor in ensuring people's security and well-being. And third, that humanitarian aid cannot be 'neutral'. Neutrality may be perceived by one side as opposition, by another as support for its political or military agenda (Thompson, 1996:327); and material aid will to some extent be part of the political economy of war. Far from having impartial observer status within civil conflict, civil society is 'part of the field of battle' (Duffield, 1995:36; Ardón, 1997). This does not mean that civil society organisations cannot be effective channels for the delivery of humanitarian assistance, but that aid agencies need to understand how they themselves, as well as their potential counterparts, fit into the wider dynamics of the conflict (Slim, 1997). (An annotated bibliography to the current literature can be found in Eade (ed) 1996b: 98–109.)

The Chapter's opening section describes in greater detail the Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis (CVA) referred to in Chapter 2. This is followed by a discussion of some of the issues to consider in channelling humanitarian assistance through, for example, government structures as opposed to grassroots organisations. The third section sketches out five areas (apart from their material welfare) in which people are vulnerable to crisis, and where well-designed assistance can be provided to reduce this vulnerability. These areas are: security and protection; information and contacts; social and cultural organisation; access to power and decision-making; and building for a future. The intention is to emphasise the potential to strengthen the capacities of poor communities, even in times of crisis.

Examples are drawn from Oxfam's own experience in supporting humanitarian relief work, though the issues raised are not peculiar to emergencies. Although these focus on assistance at the grassroots level, it may also be important to strengthen local government capacity: this is particularly so in operational programmes, where there is a strong risk of by-passing or undermining local authorities, with negative long-term consequences. Similarly, if assistance is channelled through local CBOs or NGOs, these may also require support for their own organisational development. There is a danger that the availability of resources may encourage them to expand rapidly and in ways that are unsustainable (see, for instance, Zetter, 1996; Goodhand and Chamberlain, 1996; Alvarez Solis and Martin, in Eade (ed) 1996b). Other chapters of this book deal in more detail with approaches to building the capacity of organisations.
Reducing people’s vulnerability to crisis

Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis

In the late 1980s, a major inter-agency project was set up to establish a framework within which to combine development and relief activities (Anderson and Woodrow: 1989). This recommended that aid agencies analyse both the long-term factors affecting people's ability to respond to major political or physical events and their susceptibility to crisis, as well as the resulting needs (the immediate requirements for survival or recovery from a crisis). People's underlying vulnerabilities intensify the severity of disasters, impede response, and continue beyond the crisis. Examples are a lack of resources for subsistence, such as land; or forms of social and economic exclusion. Needs may be immediate and short-term, such as for food or medicine; and also relate to specific vulnerabilities. For example, while an entire refugee population may need supplementary food, the needs of children who were malnourished prior to the crisis may be acute.

... the concept of vulnerability is the starting point — and an important guide — for programming. As we identify certain groups as vulnerable and needing assistance, we must also identify the sources of their vulnerability. Why are these people in this context vulnerable? What decisions and choices have been made — and by whom — that have created the circumstances and put them at risk? (Anderson, 1994:331).

Poverty invariably makes people more vulnerable to the linked phenomena of variable climatic conditions, inadequate or degraded land, conflict, and population displacement. Each of these may be compounded by political questions. In analysing vulnerabilities and needs, it is important to:

- be aware of problems that are likely to arise, and avoid activities that may compound them;
- be alert to how conflict or aid could be used, whether by the state, armed factions, or other governments, to further their own ends;
- know who is providing support (financial, moral, ideological, logistical or military) from within and outside the area.

While this awareness will not enable aid agencies to predict the future, it will enable them to identify potential dangers and interests to be recognised in designing responses to crisis.

A Capacities and Vulnerabilities Analysis (CVA) relates both to material or physical factors, and also to the less tangible aspects of what makes some people stronger or weaker in the face of crisis — for example, their level of social organisation and motivation. In a crisis, a society's vulnerabilities are
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more noticeable than its capacities. Within a given set of people, these strengths and weaknesses vary according to factors such as gender, age, wealth, class, and cultural identity. They also evolve as people adapt to changes in their situation. A capacity-building approach aims to enable people to retain and build on their existing capacities, and to identify and address factors which undermine their security.

*When assistance is provided to people 'to meet their needs' without regard to their existing capacities, very often the capacities that they possess are undermined and weakened by the overpowering presence of the aid giver. When this occurs, vulnerabilities are often increased rather than reduced by aid. An adequate notion of vulnerability, then, must take account of people's capacities* (Anderson, 1994: 328).

CVA stresses the links between a society's past, present, and future. To respond effectively to today's crisis means looking at its underlying causes as well as how a given intervention may affect different people's capacities in the future. Project-based aid interventions (not only in emergencies) have often served to make people more vulnerable in the long term, by encouraging dependency, for example. Or they have strengthened some people at the expense of others, as for instance when men take over responsibility for resources previously controlled by women.

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**Lessons from 41 case studies**

**Programming decisions**

1. To do nothing is better than to do something badly. Agencies should not intervene in a crisis unless it is to support local capacities.

2. There is no such thing as relief projects that are neutral in terms of development. They either support it or undermine it.

3. Indigenous agencies are in a better position to respond developmentally than outside agencies. Outside agencies that are already present are better able to respond than those arriving to deal with the crisis.

4. Agencies that identify themselves as development agencies can provide creative relief in an emergency, especially in areas where they are already involved in long-term work.

5. Development agencies that work in areas prone to crisis should understand the need not only to anticipate the effects of disasters on their long-term work but also to address people's vulnerabilities through that work.
Principles
1 Relief work should be held to development standards. Thus every disaster response should be based on an appreciation of local capacities and should be designed to support and increase these.
2 Development work should be concerned with long-term sustainability. Thus every development programme and project should anticipate and be designed to prevent or mitigate disasters. Thus, they should identify and address the vulnerabilities of the people with whom they work and ensure that these are reduced over time.
3 Both relief and development should be more concerned with increasing local capacities and reducing vulnerabilities than with providing goods, services or technical assistance. In fact goods and services should be provided only insofar as they support sustainable development by increasing local capacities and reducing vulnerabilities.
4 The way that such resources are transferred must be held to the same test.
5 Programming must not be solely pre-occupied with meeting urgent needs but must integrate such needs into efforts that address the social/organisational and motivational/attitudinal elements.

(Adapted from Anderson and Woodrow, 1989.)

Pre-crisis support
...the lives of many millions of poor people are lived out in a state of permanent emergency — families are evicted from their dwellings by force, women are beaten and raped in their own homes, children are abused and exploited by adults. Arguably, if basic rights to representation, to a livelihood and to security are addressed before the eruption of armed conflict, the outcomes may be different (Williams (1995:23).

People may or may not be aware that they are exposed to major hazards, or to situations that place them or their families at risk, or that their rights are being violated. But their lack of power and resources prevent them from either reducing the risks, pressing the relevant institutions to do so, or escaping from an oppressive situation. The most effective responses to the violation of rights will involve a combination of organisational support, education, awareness-raising, and lobbying. In terms of physical hazards, once the risks have been identified (‘risk-mapping’), it may be possible at
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least to reduce them through disaster preparedness and mitigation activities. These could be such measures as early-warning systems to enable economic and logistic steps if food shortfalls are likely; and the construction of dykes or embankments to protect against flooding.

Pre-crisis support can also strengthen people's economic and social capacity to cope with recurring and predictable events such as drought. So-called 'coping mechanisms' or 'survival strategies' are a response to dwindling resources which are both anticipatory (insurance mechanisms) and reactive (disposal of assets). Their effectiveness depends on how well people can guarantee their entitlements to a range of commodities and resources. These strategies and mechanisms may in turn be linked with actual or potential conflict (Keen, 1993; de Waal, 1991), and include:

- **diversification**: of crops, foods, livestock, markets, occupations;
- **exchange**: acquiring cash or goods through sale, barter, borrowing, or charity from richer relatives and neighbours;
- **dietary adjustments**: eating less or poorer quality food;
- **migration and employment**: individual migration in search of work, to increase incomes, decrease the demand on the household's resources, or avoid or avert political repression, such as forced recruitment of boys and men — mass migration is a last resort;
- **changes in intra-household resource distribution**: certain household members (usually women and often girls) eating less, or being given less to eat, in order to protect others' (usually men's, and sometimes boys') consumption.

Such strategies may help to prevent famine in the short-term, but may damage long-term food security, be environmentally destructive, and in themselves involve a degree of suffering. When the next crisis threatens, survivors have fewer assets, and may be in poorer health, and so will be more vulnerable than before (Keen, 1993). The aim of intervention measures, whether economic or environmental, is to support existing strategies in ways that also help to reduce their potentially adverse consequences.

**Post-crisis rehabilitation and reconstruction**

The underlying causes of avoidable vulnerability are generally political and economic — lack of assets, work, land, education, food, markets, or health care; and the inability to press for these needs to be met. Rehabilitation needs may be for help in coping with practical problems, and also support to develop organisational, political, economic, material and technical capacity. This may mean, for instance, simultaneously supporting an organisation of displaced people or returned refugees to lobby the government for housing
subsides to which they are entitled, and funding an NGO specialising in low-cost housing.

The experience of war, as well as its practical consequences, affect people profoundly. Both during and after an armed conflict, reconstruction entails a vast range of adjustments (Ardón, 1997; Chirwa, 1997; Pearce, 1997; Thompson, 1997a and 1997b). New strategies and skills may be needed, because people's previous way of life may no longer be viable or attractive to them. Land titles may have changed hands; savings and belongings may have been lost or destroyed; families and communities may no longer be intact. Most people have experienced loss and emotional trauma; some may be physically disabled as a result of war injuries.

Social relations and expectations may also have changed. Refugees may return with new skills, resources, and attitudes. Children who have never lived in their home country, or outside a refugee camp, must adapt to an unfamiliar reality. Demobilised soldiers (including child-soldiers), ex-combatants, or former detainees must re-adjust to civilian life — and most find this a difficult process (Ardón, 1997; Castelo-Branco, 1997; Tunga, 1997). There may be resentment towards those who were involved in the violence, or towards those who are thought to have escaped it. Further, the 'price' of peace and reconciliation is often to confer amnesty on the perpetrators of human rights violations, as in Argentina, El Salvador or Guatemala. The victim-survivors may see this as a denial of their own right to basic justice, as some have argued in the case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa. Others may argue that the past must be buried in order to move forward. Rehabilitation is not so much a question of returning to normality, as of creating consensus around a new set of norms (Chirwa, 1997). This may pose dilemmas for aid agencies, whose counterparts may be calling for legal action or for reparation, while the government regards this as disrupting a fragile peace. Most post-war societies find that negotiating the transition process itself takes a great deal of time, energy, and diplomatic effort.

Rehabilitation and reconstruction assistance should therefore focus on helping people to function within a new social, economic, and political environment rather than on trying to return to the past. For example, during a war women often develop the skills and experience to fulfil non-traditional civil and economic functions. Among the combatants, women may fight alongside men — in El Salvador as in liberation wars in Ethiopia and elsewhere, there have been women at the highest ranks. As combatants are demobilised, they may not wish to revert to being subordinate to men. However, it is not uncommon for women to be expected in peace-time to return to the home and leave the public domain (with higher status and better paid employment) to men — a line that is often reinforced by pro-natalist state policies in the post-war period. Gender-based conflicts may thus be a feature of post-war reconstruction.
Channels for responding to crisis and conflict

A wide range of inter-related bodies are involved in shaping a response to a major crisis, from UN agencies and peace-keeping forces to national or local government, mandated bodies such as ICRC, specialised NGOs contracted by official agencies, human rights or election monitors, religious structures, independent NGOs, civil society organisations of various kinds, armed groups, and political parties. In addition, there may be numerous NGOs, some highly experienced and others less so.

By 'focusing on the relief activity while eschewing analysis of the external crisis' aid agencies may contribute to a process whereby 'complex situations are depoliticised and presented as technical issues' (Duffield, 1995:23). In highly politicised settings, there are major implications in providing assistance through a government-approved channel as opposed to an NGO that is (or is thought to be) politically affiliated to the opposition, or to a community in a region that is contested militarily. It may make a significant difference to support a provincial or regional government structure, rather than going through central government. A welter of organisations may spring up in response to the availability of funds and material aid. Some of these exist largely in order to 'articulate the infinite local demand for patronage and external resources' (op.cit. p32). Choosing between them on the basis of little or no prior knowledge, and little or no access to the areas in which they claim to work, may present aid agencies with very difficult choices: by opting to channel assistance through a particular institution, a donor or aid agency may be implicitly signalling its own political position with respect to the crisis.

Although civilians are often military targets in contemporary warfare, people usually prefer to stay close to their homes even when this exposes them to danger. Non-combatants may be assumed to have certain political sympathies simply because of where they live, or because of their ethnic or cultural identity. In extreme cases, areas of a country may be closed to outsiders, while 'scorched earth' or 'search and destroy' operations are mounted, with the indiscriminate deployment of anti-personnel mines, to terrorise the local people, or force them to leave the area. If found, they may be tortured, killed, or imprisoned. Atrocities go unwitnessed, unreported, and are denied. Civilians may depend for their survival more on energetic human rights work than on humanitarian relief.

At the same time, these civilians may be in great physical need. Even if crops and livestock have not been destroyed, they may have been neglected as people are forced to move from place to place. It may be necessary for aid agencies to work through trusted intermediaries if they are unable to make first-hand assessments. For instance, during the worst period of the civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala:
Oxfam channelled humanitarian aid for civilians in the conflict zones mainly through intermediary NGOs and church-based organisations (Catholic, ecumenical, and protestant). The basic criteria were that they had unique access to people in these areas, and that they were highly trusted by the affected population. Their analytical capacity and ability to engage at a political level were especially critical during the early 1980s, when Oxfam and similar agencies had virtually no access to the regions in which this humanitarian work was being carried out, owing to the high levels of armed repression (Ardón, 1997:121, my translation).

Armed conflict interferes with existing ‘coping mechanisms’, even when the population remains relatively stable. For example, an Oxfam-commissioned study on Africa found that the disruption of strategies on which semi-subsistence economies depended seriously exacerbated the effects of famine (Keen, 1993). Other research has also revealed the ways in which war and survival strategies inter-relate (de Waal, 1991). Disruption may include restrictions on people’s freedom of movement or right to bring in goods such as seeds, fertilisers, medicines, or household items, making people more vulnerable in the longer term. For instance, farmers may be forced to adopt high-cost and unsustainable agricultural practices since they cannot use methods which require stability, such as integrated pest management. Under fire, their immediate options are to sacrifice sustainability in order to ensure physical survival, or to seek asylum and become dependent on international assistance.

Conflict may also be associated with a breakdown in social norms and sanctions. Rape and sexual abuse is often part of a strategy of terror, humiliation, and social destruction, during and after war — and was deplored as such at the 1993 UN World Conference on Human Rights (WCHR). Long-term conflicts — lasting for decades in Angola, Guatemala, or Lebanon — have left a legacy of social as well as material dislocation that will take decades to heal (Ardón, 1997). But victims are also survivors: resourceful people who engage actively with those around them. Rather than transplanting Western models of individual counselling, aid agencies should:

...aim to augment efforts to stabilise and repair the war-torn social fabric and to allow it to regain some of its traditional capacity to be a source of resilience and problem solving for all. Self-organisation, empowerment, work and training, support to traditional forms of coping and healing: these terms may be truisms in the social development lexicon, but they remind us that people cannot fully regain control of their lives, and recover from war, as mere recipients of charity and care (Summerfield, 1996:30).
Assessing diverse needs

Formal or extensive consultation may be unfeasible in the midst of war, in the initial stages of a relief programme, or where local social structures are weak or non-existent. However, establishing the principle of consultative planning makes it possible to build on imperfect beginnings (see, for instance, Neefjes and David, 1996).

Most adult refugees and displaced persons are women. They have ideas and opinions, even if they do not express these in public. The priorities defined by men may not coincide with what women would identify, were they able to express their views. However, formal or traditional leaders are likely to be men, as are camp officials. Most local government, senior agency personnel, and technical staff are male. Decisions may thus be made by men, even when these concern women’s needs, or areas of work for which women are mainly responsible. A 1993 internal report from by Oxfam’s office in Sudan said:

Approaches to emergencies as they currently stand blatantly hand the power over women’s traditional affairs to men ... running food distribution, water programmes, blanket, jerrycan and other distributions ... re-assigning the women’s traditional responsibilities for food and shelter provision to men.

Women may be consulted about proposed washing facilities, or about their children. But even in ‘normal’ situations, women are not always treated as adults with their own rights, needs and perspectives; much less as active agents of social stability or transformation. Aid agencies may know very little about women’s previous lives; and even less about how these have changed, or will have to change, as a result of crisis (Pearce, 1997). To build on women’s capacities, it is vital to:

- pay attention to their views in assessing an emergency;
- take into account their actual responsibilities, both domestic (household subsistence, health, child care) as well as economic, in determining consultation processes;
- include them at all levels of planning, decision-making, implementation, and evaluation;
- consider the problems faced by women-maintained households when designing and implementing relief programmes;
- consider the situation faced by unaccompanied women, lone parents, and widows;
- identify and address issues of legal, sexual, physical and emotional protection.

Women may also have little free time for meetings, or be unable to read and write, or to speak the national language. Their involvement may be
facilitated by arranging for women-only meetings at a convenient hour, and providing childcare; and by using methods that do not rely on literacy.

Gathering and interpreting information is always a sensitive issue: further, victim-survivors of rape, torture, or other physical abuse may be reticent to confide in others. Indirect ways of allowing their experiences and feelings to be expressed might be in a discussion circle on health, or a mutual support group for widows or lone mothers. Women's concerns may be to do with reproductive health or with fear of abuse or harassment, matters which they would prefer not to discuss with men present. Equally, men may not feel able to talk about their experiences of atrocities in front of women.

Local organisations

Two basic criteria for considering any organisation as a potential channel of relief assistance are, firstly, that it has access to the population that needs help, and is trusted by and accountable to it; and, secondly, that it will offer humanitarian assistance in a fair and efficient way. Existing CBOs or local NGOs are often keen to be involved. While their technical experience may be limited, they know the context, and enjoy the trust of at least some, if not all, of the people in need. They usually have a more sensitive understanding of the situation than have outside aid agencies, and can move around more freely and discreetly than can foreigners.

Such organisations may, however, lack experience in project management, or in handling large budgets, or managing rapid growth. They may need support in the form of office equipment and stipends for aid workers or volunteers. Assistance in training, financial and other planning, project design, and organisational management may also be needed. The aim should be to build on existing skills rather than displacing them with skills and services brought in from outside. It is equally important to avoid building up a resource-driven infrastructure, with no provision for how to 'wind down' or consolidate when the pressure is off (Zetter, 1996). In their study of how donor policies were reflected in the behaviour of NGOs in Afghanistan, Jonathan Goodhand and Peter Chamberlain concluded that 'capacity building should not be limited to “skilling up” organisations, or providing a technical fix. It implies a wider dialogue, based on shared values and ethics' (Goodhand with Chamberlain, 1996:206). This call for dialogue and 'accompaniment' has been echoed by aid workers in other long-term conflicts (Ardón, 1997; Thompson, 1996, 1997a).

Local organisations given a role in distribution may come under considerable pressure to favour certain groups and individuals over others. Any existing biases — for example, in favouring members of a particular political faction, religious faith, or ethnic group — are likely to be intensified with the
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advent of significant resources. Relationships of patronage may develop where they had not existed before.

Community-based solidarity: beyond the assumptions

Oxfam UK/I responded to floods in Bangladesh in 1995 with a programme that reached about 200,000 people. Oxfam consulted and offered assistance through seven long-standing partners, who in turn worked directly at the community level. An internal evaluation conducted by Tahmina Rahman found, however, that the community structures had actively discriminated against those who most needed help; and that the soft-loan programme had unwittingly benefited men, and not women.

Firstly, community groups were asked to identify the people they thought were most vulnerable. A large number of these people who were not in fact receiving assistance were girls aged nine to 15 years, elderly men and women, and disabled children. The community groups recognised that these individuals were the ones most at risk and unable to take care of themselves. They explained, however, that they did not qualify for assistance as they were not formal group members. Existing members felt that they had first claim on any resources because they had put in time and work; while the more vulnerable people did not participate in any group activities because they could not pay subscriptions or attend meetings.

Secondly, soft loans given to women as part of the rehabilitation programme had been used mainly to create economic activities for their husbands and sons, with the women's role being that of intermediary and repayers of the credit. It is doubtful that these loans helped to empower women. Further, the loans set up dependency patterns (for example, on women's capacity to negotiate loans for the benefit of men) that outlived the short-term relief component of the programme.

(Based on a summary of Tahmina Rahman's report in Links, June 1996.)

Supporting relief work through local organisations enables them to gain experience which will be of use in the future, and may reduce the risk of inappropriate action by foreign agencies that are working in an unfamiliar environment. It also defuses the resentment that may arise when local people are disregarded by outsiders confident that they know best how relief should be organised.
However, we should not always assume that local organisations are necessarily the most appropriate intermediaries, just because they are indigenous. Building relief programmes on bad development leads inevitably to bad relief!

**Local authorities**

In the case of so-called natural disasters or catastrophes, government and civil authorities usually have formal responsibilities to undertake relief work, coordinate operations, and protect the affected population. For instance, following major earthquakes in Mexico and in India, the respective governments insisted that the civil authorities handle the immediate search and rescue phase, and coordinate the subsequent relief efforts. International agencies were expressly requested not to intervene at this stage. Sensitivities over the causes of the crisis, and over the official response to it, may be heightened by media attention and international pressure.

Although they may welcome international aid, local authorities may resent NGOs which operate autonomously. Equally, NGOs may be frustrated by regulations, delays and restrictions hampering what they believe to be urgent work. Where feasible, NGOs should at the earliest opportunity consult the competent local authorities and establish working protocols and scope for collaboration in order to avoid undermining their capacity and authority (see Chapter 2). Government departments, for instance, often have trained professionals who could be offered secondments to assist in the relief programme. However, when they offer better salaries and career opportunities to experienced and qualified government staff, agencies should reflect on the overall impact of reducing the number of high-quality personnel in government departments, and consider ways to meet this deficit. Looking to the impact of relief assistance in the longer term, and particularly in a post-crisis period, there are often creative ways to strengthen the capacity of government departments. As Oxfam found in Zambia, even something as simple as facilitating direct contact between government officials and grassroots groups can make a difference to the way in which the former perceive the problems (Pushpanath, 1994).

Clearly, there are many situations in which it is inappropriate to coordinate humanitarian relief programmes through local authorities or government structures. In the case of civil war or a counter-insurgency campaign, where the government is one of the warring parties, it may be impossible to work on both sides of the conflict, or even to work openly at all. The main concern for a humanitarian organisation must be to identify the channels that offer the best hope of reaching people in need. In some settings, that may mean working through organisations that are directly or indirectly in opposition to the government.
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Specific vulnerabilities in crisis

Personal security and protection

Crisis may involve actual or threatened infringements of people’s basic rights and fundamental freedoms as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) and subsequent Protocols and Covenants (see Eade and Williams, 1995:pp 27-46). States bear the ultimate responsibility for guaranteeing these rights. However, it is frequently states and governments themselves that either fail to provide adequate and equal protection to every individual, or curtail, abuse or violate the rights and freedoms of some citizens.

Refugees are by definition people whose rights are not guaranteed by the government of their country, and who have a ‘well-founded fear of persecution’. Every human being has the right to seek asylum when faced with such a fear. In doing so, refugees appeal to the international community (often via UNHCR) to protect their rights and well-being. Persons displaced within their own country have no such automatic right to international protection, since this raises issues of national sovereignty. However, UNHCR may, and often does, seek a mandate to work with people ‘in refugee-like situations’, including those who are internally displaced or who are returning to their country or place of residence after having been forced to flee.

This protection entails, among other things, attention to physical welfare and provision of legal protection and documentation. Refugees and displaced persons may not be able to produce important personal papers such as birth or marriage certificates, or passports, or other proofs of identity. Often such documents are held by or in the name of the male ‘head of household’, who may not be present. Registration or ration cards may not be issued to adult women, but to their husbands or partners. Without documents of their own, women and children become more vulnerable to harassment or exploitation. Without proof of identity or qualifications, it may be harder to find paid employment or to travel within a country, or across borders. Children born in exile may become effectively stateless — denied the nationality of their host country, and without papers from their parents’ country of origin. While the UDHR stipulates that every person has the right to a nationality, for refugees and displaced persons this right is easily eroded in practice.

The right to seek asylum is also one that is easily disregarded, as governments focus on what they perceive as their right to stem immigration. The number of asylum-seekers arriving in industrialised countries rose sharply in the late 1980s and early 1990s: almost ten times as many people applied for asylum in the UK in 1991 as in 1985 (though this number had almost halved by 1996). This period also saw increased restrictions on immigration, particularly in the USA and Western Europe, and ever harsher treatment of asylum-seekers.
The EU enacted legislation placing the burden of responsibility for asylum on the country of 'first safe arrival'. Airline companies have become subject to government-imposed fines if they carry passengers whose documents are not in order. In the UK, asylum-seekers must establish their claim on arrival, and face serious hardship because their rights to housing and social benefits were all but removed by the former Conservative government. In 1996, only six per cent of applicants to the UK were granted asylum; many of the remaining 94 per cent are likely to be caught up in lengthy and expensive appeals for years to come.

Until recently, another disregarded protection issue was that of sexual violence. The systematic use of rape and sexual violence in contemporary conflicts has brought a greater awareness of the extent of a problem that has always been a fact of war — not only before and during flight, but also in the very place of refuge. Victims are usually women and girls; the extent to which boys and men are subjected to sexual torture by their captors is little known (Large, 1997). Refugees most at risk are unaccompanied women, lone female heads of household, children who are unaccompanied or in foster-care arrangements, and anybody who is held in detention or detention-like situations.

Sexual violence covers 'all forms of sexual threat, assault, interference and exploitation, including molestation without physical harm or penetration' (UNHCR, 1995: 3). It can involve the use or the threat of force, including that of forcing a person to witness or participate in acts of sexual violence. As a form of torture, it is intended to 'hurt, control and humiliate, violating a person's innermost physical and mental integrity' (ibid, p 3). Fear — whether of reprisals by the assailant(s) or of ostracism by the victim's own community — feelings of shame and guilt, or the knowledge that the perpetrators will not be prosecuted, contribute to under-reporting. Apart from the physical and emotional damage for any victim of sexual abuse, the consequences for women may include unwanted pregnancies, and for both sexes the risk of STDs and HIV/AIDS.

The perpetrators of sexual violence are almost always men. They may be members of the security forces in the country of origin or of refuge; smugglers who assist refugees in exchange for sexual favours; camp or international aid officials; members of the local community in the host country; other refugees, or members of their own family. In addition, 'coercive prostitution' or sex-trafficking may occur (ibid, p 5).

Surviving sexual violence

Amina had had to cross the border [into Bangladesh] with her children as the members of the Burmese paramilitary force 'Lone Htein' started raiding their villages to collect the able-bodied people as forced labour.
'Lone Htein' were not happy with only able-bodied men, they took the women as well in their camps for 'household' work. They targeted women-headed families as the easiest sources when they were looking for young girls to take advantage of. First they asked for money in lieu of male labour, then livestock, then poultry. If nothing was available, they would take a girl. This happened to Amina. First they took her life-savings of 500 kyats, two goats, and gold earrings. The second time, when she had nothing to offer, they asked her to hand over her 12-year-old daughter just for two or three days. 'I refused and cried. Then they took me to their camp and they kept me there the whole night. Next day they released me but took me again the following day for another two nights.'

Many of the women arrived with a history of rape, and came from divided families with lost husbands or children. They may have been unaccompanied, possibly pregnant or with VD, but they had little hope of being treated sympathetically by male doctors. They have found themselves in camps where the space for them to lead anything but the most restricted lives is unavailable, and where the level of curiosity at what they had been through made them the object of unwelcome attention from the media and local population.

It became very hard to find a safe place for women who suffered at the hands of the forces on the other side of the border; the same vulnerability followed them like a shadow, even in a friendly country. We have heard allegations of harassment of women by security forces at the water collection points, and regular sexual abuse of refugee women by the security forces has also been reported. It is not easy to address these problems in a situation when all the camp officials are men and they work through the — mostly male — Mahjhis. (Wahra, 1994:47).

UNHCR stresses the role played by its own protection and legal officers as well as health workers in sensitising the refugee and local population and the security forces to the issues, in order to create a climate which does not tolerate sexual abuse, in which victims can trust that their needs will be met sensitively and confidentially. Once the reality of sexual violence is recognised, it is easier to take steps to reduce its incidence. UNHCR has found that community self-protection is critical in every respect: from involvement in ensuring that the location and layout of a camp enhances their physical security (for example, by not grouping women-headed households together unless they can be adequately guarded, or ensuring that women's washing and toilet facilities are near to their homes, and that paths to them are well-lit),
to finding mechanisms for discussion and settling disputes, providing opportunities for work and leisure, taking steps to combat drug and alcohol abuse, or running public information campaigns and training sessions.

These approaches both depend on, and reinforce, a level of organisational capacity among the refugee or displaced population — men as well as women. In this way, addressing the source of people's vulnerability can also become a way to build their capacity to organise to protect their interests.

Information and contacts

The lack of access to reliable information concerning one's current situation or future options is profoundly disempowering. At best, it undermines people's capacity to determine their own interests; at worst, it leaves them prey to rumours or to the deliberate manipulation of information for political or military purposes. Rwandan refugees in former-Zaire were in this situation, with propaganda and disinformation being used to spread fear and division among them (Lumisa Bwiti, 1997).

Further, when people are ignorant of their legal rights, it is easier for these to be denied or blatantly violated by others. Repressive régimes will go to great lengths to maintain certain population groups (such as detainees or marginalised minorities) in ignorance, and to isolate them from the outside world. People who know what their rights are, and which national and international organisations will defend them, are in a better position both to insist on these rights and to denounce violations. The committees of families of the 'disappeared' throughout Latin America, or of war widows in countries like Peru and Guatemala, are extraordinary examples of how 'ordinary' people have mobilised around human rights issues.

Access to information and contacts is thus not only a need, but also a powerful tool for mobilising and effective response to crisis.

Alliances for advocacy

In Colombia, indigenous organisations in conflict areas had excellent community and regional organisation, but weak national alliances and no international relations. They were capable of strong opposition, in their region, to large extractive projects which threatened to dispossess them of their land and livelihoods. However, they were unable to get negotiations with the national government and élites who were determined to gain access to the oil, gold, and hardwoods which the indigenous land held. This heightened tension was leading to increased
use of violence by élites. By expanding their contacts to a Canadian indigenous organisation (who had a weak organisational base but strong national and international presence), the Colombian organisations gained significant international profile, including press and seats at the UN to denounce their situation: this forced the national government to negotiate. (Bloomer in Buell, 1996: Appendix B.)

The importance of information for refugees is overlooked by aid agencies, who may initially be more concerned with extracting information from those affected than with providing it to them. Information may also be filtered by outsiders who decide what refugees 'need' to know. They may be given details about a feeding programme, but not be able to find out what is going on in their home country, or internationally. Rationing information in this way can deprive people of the right to make their own political judgements.

Similarly, aid agencies are often sought out by the media and by international bodies, to speak 'on behalf' of the affected population. Their motives may be tactically sound: if an aid agency can help to resolve a crisis by acting as an advocate for those affected by it, it should of course do so. But in strategic terms, it should also ask how far speaking on behalf of others actually empowers *them* to speak out for themselves — and what more could be done to enable this to happen.²

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**Information and empowerment**

Oxfam's approach to the 1992–93 drought in Zambia also showed that when local people steer their own campaigning and advocacy work, the results are more far-reaching than if this had been organised on their behalf by international aid agencies:

Communication is a vital component of relief work, and ... our investment repaid positive dividends, in helping people to gain greater control over the relief efforts. The voices of ordinary people were heard, loud and clear, placing those in power under pressure to respond quickly and sensitively to their demands.

Villagers and civil servants for the first time experienced the power of the media and other communication channels to influence events and bring about positive change for the benefit of disadvantaged and voiceless people. It was a significant departure for Zambian NGOs to see, appreciate, and make use of these opportunities. ... The way in which the
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district volunteers were dealt with by the village participants in a recent workshop, especially by the women who stood their ground in wanting direct dealing with Oxfam, is a case in point. Their new-found self-confidence had come from the actual experience of doing things, having access to information, confronting those in positions of superiority, and removing those who obstructed the smooth running of the programme. All this does not mean that villagers have for ever overcome their powerless and silence, and will never revert to the obedience and meekness of the past. Rather, the experience has shown that there are alternatives, and has given them confidence to believe that these are possible. That is perhaps the most important lesson to learn from this experience (Pushpanath, 1994:88-90).

Social and cultural organisation

Forms of social and cultural organisation are dynamic. They develop over time, and in response to external change. In situations of crisis, existing organisations, such as co-operatives or unions, may collapse or even become the target of attack. Alternatively, they may be reinforced as people seek security within them, as were the Christian Base Communities in El Salvador throughout the 1980s. New forms of organisation may emerge in response to the crisis. Tradition may sustain certain aspects of a society, while rapid adaptation to change may also be a survival mechanism: if most refugees and displaced persons are women and children, they must necessarily take on new or untraditional roles, including those previously undertaken by men.

Organisational capacities may already exist, which may be adapted to enable men and women to deal with change constructively. People may simultaneously be taking on new roles, and needing to cling to old traditions, such as customs related to the status of elders, special forms of clothing, initiation rites, or other ceremonial acts. 'Moving on' may be possible only if some cultural certainties remain. New social structures (for instance, the formation of zonal committees in a refugee camp) may be overlaid on others. This is in part what happened in the case of the Sudanese refugees in Uganda described in Chapter 3 (Neefjes and David, 1996). A delicate balance may need to be struck on whether and how to support those organisational structures that are oppressive for a significant element of the community, but which may also enable that community as a whole to maintain a sense of integrity and continuity. The case of the male-dominated Councils of Elders in Somalia provide a good example of the dilemma (El-Bushra and Piza-López, 1994: 53).
While conflict and its aftermath may open up new opportunities for women, and enable them to challenge limiting sexual stereotypes, these changes have generally been a temporary 're-arrangement' of gender roles rather than a transformation: 'In Eritrea, for example, women are concerned about the assumption by male leaders that they should now return to their traditional gender role' (ibid, pp 30–31). Changes and structures that emerge as a response to crisis will usually be sustainable in the long term if their benefits are to everyone's advantage.

Organising for survival

One of the major achievements for Saharawi (refugee) women has been their empowerment within the context of camp life, and the development of women leaders in many fields. During their time in the camps they have built up an impressive schooling system for girls as well as boys, and run literacy classes for the whole camp population. Many women have themselves undergone skills training and are now teachers, nurses, and clerical assistants within the camps.

Saharawi women found that they had to take on the running of the camps because the men were absent, and they have risen to the challenge and become managers — running schools, clinics, agricultural projects and neighbourhood committees. This... was an entirely new area for women.

These women have survived by organising: their lives, the distribution of aid, work, and responsibility. They have organised in such a way as to include everyone, to ensure no-one feels marginalised or excluded. This has built up social cohesiveness, in a context where conditions could so easily have fragmented the entire community (Wallace, 1994:51–53).

Power and decision-making

Crisis may exacerbate existing inequalities, and reinforce top-down or authoritarian power and decision-making structures. On the other hand, a response to crisis may also be to provide mutual support and solidarity, or to co-operate across previous divides. However, the ways in which humanitarian assistance is offered do not always encourage the participation of the affected population in deciding the priorities or how they should be met. It is not uncommon for refugees to be excluded from policy and decision-making processes that deeply concern them. To be thus marginalised is an affront to
people's dignity. In a self-fulfilling fashion, their disempowerment is also likely to intensify the passivity and dependency that then provide another pretext for continuing to exclude them from the decision-making processes.

It is always problematic to identify organisational structures that can adequately and legitimately represent people's interests. As in the case of the Elders' Councils in Somalia, and the community groups in Bangladesh, existing structures may favour certain groups at the expense of others, or be run on authoritarian, patriarchal, or paternalistic lines. New structures may be regarded as less legitimate than the traditional ones; or be simply a mechanism for getting access to relief assistance. Thus, if an aid agency supports projects that provide credit to women, men may push their wives and sisters forward. Survival and aid become intertwined, but in a more complex way than aid agencies necessarily realise.

In a crisis, aid agencies may suspend some of their declared commitments, for instance, to gender equity or participatory approaches. Speed of response, while on occasions important, should not outweigh all other considerations. Promoting equality between women and men should not be seen as something that can be put off until after the crisis, but as a dimension of that crisis and of its resolution. Similarly, instead of seeing broad participation by the affected population as a way to overcome obstacles, it is sometimes perceived almost as a threat — something to be kept under strict control. Yet it is far harder to introduce gender-fair criteria into a context in which patriarchal structures have become consolidated via control of resources. And it is difficult to encourage people to take responsibility if their dependence has been fostered and rewarded by unconditional access to resources. As one Nicaraguan NGO worker commented, the international aid agencies helped to promote dependency, especially among the displaced populations, and yet will not share responsibility for the consequences (Ardón, 1997). Far better to seek ways to enable the affected population to develop its potential, acquire new skills, and build for its future.

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**Refugee self-management**

In the early 1980s, as a brutal civil war swept through El Salvador, thousands of poor and illiterate rural people sought refuge in neighbouring Honduras. About 9,000 formed a camp at Colomoncagua, 5 km from the border.

It was clear that these refugees wanted to keep their enforced dependence to the very minimum. Within months, six experienced tailors were busy altering the old clothes that had been donated. Soon,
with a couple of sewing machines and material given by a local church agency, they began teaching others how to make shirts, trousers and dresses. Nine years later, every single item of clothing — including underwear, hats and shoes — was manufactured within the camp, in collective workshops which boasted 150 semi-industrial machines and 240 trainees, virtually all of them women and youngsters.

The pattern repeated itself across a comprehensive range of activities — building, carpentry, tin-smithing, hammock-making, car mechanics, literacy, administration, horticulture, and health care, as well as teaching and communication skills. On the eve of their return to El Salvador in 1990, their numbers included 350 health workers, and over 400 teachers and trainees.

From the outset, the refugees insisted that their survival depended on more than mere material welfare. Investing in the future of their community was essential to their human dignity and sense of purpose. For many of the international relief agencies, however, this vision could not be reconciled with their own priorities and ways of working. Accustomed to delivering relief programmes, they were unable or unwilling to hand over any management responsibility to the ‘beneficiaries’. In one extreme case, a relief agency withdrew rather than change its way of working. Donors too made sharp distinctions between relief and development: giving out second-hand clothes was acceptable, supplying fabric for refugees to make their own was not.

The implicit message was that to qualify for relief assistance, the refugees had to remain both dependent and disempowered — a message that this group resisted and overcame. But why is relief given in a way that weakens people’s resolve, and undermines what limited capacities they possess to control their own lives? (Eade, 1995:20).

Forms of organisation and approaches to decision-making vary greatly depending on the cultural and social context. The way these Salvadoran refugees organised themselves depended on a combination of very unusual circumstances; such a degree of self-management is rare even in ‘normal’ circumstances, but nevertheless shows what can be achieved even in adversity.

**Building for a future**

Crisis affects the future: the present is unsustainable, and the need is to ensure that change brings about something better. Yet ‘crisis management’ is concerned primarily with the present, with damage limitation: what must be
done now to ensure that the situation does not get any worse? A sudden and major crisis — an earthquake, an epidemic, an industrial accident, an air-raid — demands a swift and decisive response. Other crises may be very long drawn-out, and their resolution remote.

However uncertain their future, people still have their own ideas and aspirations. A capacity-building approach to development in crisis involves helping people to act to bring about positive and sustainable changes in their situation. The experience of acquiring new skills and abilities, and being able to organise more effectively and make common cause with others, may in itself inspire people to see themselves in a new light, relate to others more confidently, and so envisage a different kind of future.

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**Reading for the future: The case of Bhutanese refugees**

Both the Bhutanese Women's Association (BWA) and Oxfam staff were sensitive to the fact that women were suffering stress from both pre-flight atrocities and post-flight insecurities in a new environment, but culturally had difficulty in meeting with others and sharing concerns. In Bhutan mobility was fairly restricted for most women. The Non-Formal Education (NFE) compounds provided a 'semi-public space' that most men found acceptable for their wife and daughter to use, giving some of the women their first taste of interaction with a range of people outside their own homes...

Literacy skills enabled women to communicate and express themselves better; it meant that they were able to write simple letters, read sign-boards, medicine labels, newspapers, bulletin-boards, do simple calculations and distinguish currencies. For the first time in their lives women were in a position to tutor their little ones at home. All this made an enormous difference in the way refugees, particularly women, perceived their future. For instance Shila Rai and her group wrote in an essay: '... if possible women should move forward. We want to have equal rights with men. We have now become literate and we want to participate in the development of our country ...' (Rahman, 1996: 29).

Belief in a better future for themselves and their children can help to sustain people through the most desperate situations. Instead of passively waiting until their situation is more certain, people can come to see crisis as an opportunity to expand their horizons, envisage their own future, and take positive steps to realise their aspirations.
Building the capacities of others: questions for donors

*Where donors are the major source of income, and where these donors set the rules by limiting their interventions to short-term, package-oriented, single-intervention project grants, the flexibility to change and improve is severely hampered. Where donors pay scant regard to the capacity building requirements of the grantees themselves, and prefer to disregard the most basic requirements of organisation like sustained funding for administration costs, the game becomes largely self-defeating* (CDRA, 1995:19).

**Introduction**

This Guideline has stressed that, for Oxfam, capacity-building is an approach to development that is based on respect for all dimensions of human rights, and hence on the just distribution of resources. In a more equitable world, diversity would be a source of strength rather of privilege or oppression. Relationships among the many individuals, groups, organisations, and agencies involved in development — in North and South alike — would centre on mutual learning and growth, rather than being dominated as at present by the one-way transfer of resources. This approach would foster participation and responsibility, both individual and collective; and promote human creativity and solidarity, instead of reinforcing power and patronage.

It has also been emphasised that efforts to build the capacities of poor people so that they can participate fully and fairly in shaping their vision of a healthy society, need to start not by focusing on their perceived weaknesses, but by identifying and reinforcing their existing strengths. Analytical, social, organisational, and motivational capacities are vital. Similarly, more tangible achievements — such as learning to read and write, earning a better income, or winning a place on the municipal council — may be important practical
gains, and can motivate people to persist in their efforts even in the face of relentless hostility. Capacity-building is a process of shared growth and learning through people’s attempts to create societies in which their needs are met and their interests fairly represented. Specific inputs, such as training for one group, or transport costs for another, make sense only if these are likely ultimately to ‘shift the centre of gravity’ in favour of those who are poor or excluded. This approach calls for a long-term vision and commitment, not one that is project-bound and anxious simply to claim ‘results’ within a period of grant funding.

Most development professionals at whom this Guideline is aimed work in aid agencies and NGOs that support development and capacity-building activities; or in organisations that are directly involved in capacity-building for development. Some readers, particularly those whose job it is to allocate grants and report on how these are spent, may see capacity-building as something that others need to do, but that they and their organisations are somehow ‘above’. In fact, nothing could be less true. Agencies promoting gender or racial equality, empowerment, and participation must expect to be judged on the extent to which their own organisation and performance demonstrate these values. How many would pass the test? Yet an organisation that does not itself possess certain qualities and capacities cannot realistically promote these in others. An agency’s ability to learn from and respect the experience of the women and men it aims to serve may be the most important capacity of all.

Yet, as we have repeatedly seen, the donor-recipient relationship is not one that lends itself to reciprocal learning. The structures and bureaucratic mechanisms an agency requires to administer funds are often quite different from (and even inimical to) those needed in order to identify and act on critical insights from the recipients of those funds. Financial and project management systems are for controlling resources; capacity-building is concerned to establish sustainable relationships of trust and solidarity that do not revolve solely around the transfer of money. To become a ‘learning organisation’ would require a major transformation in the culture of most funding agencies:

... staff need to feel secure that in making time and space for reflection and learning they are not going to be punished; learning has to be legitimised by senior managers and the necessary resources protected. Learning has to be built into job descriptions (for senior managers as well as for front-line staff), and rewards for experimentation and inquiry should be built into staff appraisal systems, rather than (as is common today) action being taken to get rid of those who are seen as disruptive or subversive (Edwards, 1996:9).

Agencies may deal with the tension by separating the learning function from the everyday business of raising, spending, and accounting for money.
Building the capacities of others: questions for donors

But in this way, ‘institutional learning’ becomes compartmentalised, instead of being a central part of responsible development work and an institution-wide responsibility. Learning is seen as an ‘optional extra’, which can be cut when money is tight. Indeed, many NGOs (Northern and Southern) fear that their donors or constituencies may not regard ‘learning’ as having anything to do with development.

Similarly, ‘administration’, which includes information gathering, storage, retrieval, and analysis as well as the monitoring of resource flows, is generally seen as something to be kept to a minimum. This pressure leads to debates within NGOs about whether to classify their fieldwork as administration or as part of their programme. An underlying problem here is that NGOs have made such a virtue of their supposedly lower costs and greater efficiency at delivering aid, that they have helped to create the misleading impression that development can be done cheaply.¹

A vicious cycle may be set up, whereby aid agencies compete against each other to keep their overhead ratios down, rather than working together to educate their donors and constituencies about the costs necessarily involved in trying to reach those who are on the margins of society. This also affects the agencies’ counterparts. Southern organisations complain that no-one will fund them to spend time on reflecting on what they are doing; and that they are then penalised for their failure to prioritise or update their thinking (see, for instance, Ardón, 1997).

If there is no mechanism for feedback, and no obligation to distil and disseminate lessons from practice, and if systems for recording information remain poor, and efforts to analyse it under-valued and under-resourced, the institutional memory becomes fragmentary and short-lived. Any link between past experience and future practice is weak or non-existent. As a result, its broader policies and practice remain only partially informed by experience.

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Disincentives to learning in NGOs

The regular reporting system in most large NGOs is shaped by demands for information which pass down the structure from upper to lower levels, starting from the board or senior management, and terminating with the staff in the programme offices. A good deal of financial data is required in the form of budgets, monthly accounts, and annual audits. There is also quite heavy demand for more narrative accounts of past or proposed activities, which may be satisfied through programme or annual reports, and strategic plans. Information may be needed for a variety of purposes, including reporting to donors and trustees, keeping
managers abreast of developments, presenting the organisation’s work to
the public in order to raise funds, or by policy makers who seek to distil
wider lessons ...

The primary purpose of these exercises is generally seen by
programme staff as satisfying the demands emanating from higher up in
the system. There is thus a bias towards what those lower down perceive
that those higher up want to hear. Achievements tend to be highlighted
rather than problems, in the process filtering out some of the more
valuable lessons ... Even where a format makes specific provision for
problems to be discussed, the emphasis tends to fall on difficulties arising
in the environment, of which admittedly there may be many, rather than
on those inherent to practice or strategy. In all this, it is unusual for any
additional analysis and syntheses to take place which could provide new
insights to inform programme management. \textit{Formal reporting, in other
words, does little to facilitate a learning cycle at this level}
(Howes and Roche, 1996:4–6).

As we have seen, downwards accountability (to recipients and ultimate
beneficiaries) is far less developed than upwards accountability (to donors
and trustees). In reality, changes are more likely to occur through pressures
exerted by the agency’s domestic constituency (both internal and external)
and donors, than through feedback from the distant and often unknown
recipients of its assistance. This is particularly evident in the case of large-
scale emergency programmes, which are likely to be funded by official
donors, and must conform with their extra reporting requirements. But it is
also broadly true of an agency’s relationships with Southern counterparts.
‘Short-term, package-oriented, single-intervention project grants’ described
in the opening quotation by a South African NGO, often create avoidable
dependency rather than build capacity.\footnote{1}

This Chapter draws out some of the things that development agencies
should consider if they are serious about taking a capacity-building
approach. It starts by looking at a characterisation of the various kinds of
learning that NGOs might adopt for different purposes, and then explores
some of the organisational and cultural constraints that NGOs (particularly
NGOs that are also acting as funders) experience in trying to promote
capacity-building among their counterparts in the South. Returning to some
of the ideas outlined in Chapter 3, it concludes with some reflections on how
NGOs might develop more collaborative and long-term relationships.
Learning to learn: a pre-condition for capacity-building

In his work on NGOs as learning organisations, Michael Edwards identifies five types of learning that are especially relevant to them. Each meets a different need, and has distinct requirements in terms of human and financial resources, and timescales. He argues that while participatory learning 'is the bedrock of any NGO learning system', and is by definition owned by the people who generate and will use it, other forms of learning may be needed for other purposes. Some of the basic questions to ask are:

- Who learns in the organisation and how?
- What kind of learning is rewarded?
- To what degree are errors admitted and analysed?
- What forms of knowledge are legitimated and how?
- How does information flow in the organisation?
- How is institutional memory constructed, and how accessible is it — to whom?
- What changes occur through self-learning as opposed to other influences?
- How does the organisation react to learning which challenges its assumptions ('dissonant information')?
- What changes are being made to the organisation's learning systems?
- Will these equip the organisation to anticipate and adapt to external changes?

The five types of learning he identifies are: participatory, project-based, policy-related, advocacy-related, and scientific research or visionary thinking (Edwards, 1996). The main points about each are summarised below:

Participatory learning in the field

- Lessons from grassroots experience are fundamental for development NGOs. Practitioners (in field offices, in projects, in counterpart organisations) should be encouraged to reflect on their experience in an analytical way.
- Such reflection need not necessarily be presented in written form. For example, a workshop or exchange visit may be of more direct practical use than an elaborate report.
- The purpose of such learning should be to bring about change *at the same level*. Providing information to the NGO's headquarters (eg for advocacy work, or case-study material) is a secondary aim.

Project-based learning

- Projects are still the main currency of NGO practice, and learning in the form of monitoring and evaluation of projects is necessary, in order to
develop a body of institutional knowledge about good practice. This in turn should shape the development of operational policy.
• At an organisation-wide level, project-based learning must be backed up with adequate systems for recording, storing and retrieving analysis of local experiences. These systems need not be sophisticated, but they must be accessible if they are actually to be used.
• NGOs must invest in creating opportunities for field staff to systematise and share their knowledge: for example, through secondments, sabbaticals, transfers, or contract extensions.
• Further training and support may be required in order for field staff to develop 'the depth of analysis required to pull together the lessons of project experience and synthesise them into a form which is usable'.

Policy-related learning
• Policies will be influenced by project-based findings only if these are sufficiently generalised to have wider application. Yet it is difficult to make valid generalisations about situations that are intrinsically diverse, dynamic, and uncertain.
• Ways of developing general lessons from localised experience include: establishing common elements in patterns of experience, rather than aggregating the experiences themselves; focusing on experiences that challenge the 'norm'; exploring differences in interpretation of the same experience among stakeholders, to find out more about what is happening and why; making a strategic selection of project-level experiences, to try to reduce bias; and bringing together long-term project experience and local research, to build up a richer interpretation.
• NGOs may select policy issues in a top-down way, and then gather project-related material in a systematic and rigorous fashion. There is a risk of bias ('selecting information that proves the case while discounting other evidence'), but there have also been examples of influential work, eg by Save the Children Fund (SCF) in collaboration with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex. There is a danger that, while the research is academically respectable, the findings and outcomes are not 'owned', and therefore may not be used, throughout the organisation.

Advocacy-related learning
• NGOs wishing to use lessons from their experience in advocacy and campaigning work must be able to make useful generalisations, but be able to support these with specific examples.
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- Since advocacy is by definition concerned to argue a particular standpoint, it is vital that NGOs check these 'lessons' against external sources. No NGO can rely solely on its own sources if it wishes to be a credible advocate.

Scientific research and visionary thinking

- Scientific learning and research is not the natural preserve of NGOs, who lack the resources to carry it out. Nevertheless, 'methodological standards and notions of rigour' do influence the world in which NGO learning and policy development take place.
- Since international development assistance is declining, and is not the only (or even the major) way in which development is promoted, NGOs must consider how their own roles might change. To do this may involve establishing new relationships in new territories; and envisioning alternative value systems and forms of international solidarity. NGOs may not 'dream up alternative futures on other people's behalf', but should engage in 'dreaming of new worlds, thinking the unthinkable, and learning outside of the normal parameters of NGO roles, interests and agendas'.

Within Oxfam, for instance, a greater concern with capacity-building is itself generating a more systematic approach to learning, backed up with a Cross-Programme Learning Fund (CPLF). A range of methods include focused desk research, to develop a more grounded understanding of the theory behind concepts such as 'democratisation' and 'civil society', and to learn more about what Southern counterparts and other NGOs are thinking and doing. Field research is planned 'to develop methods and tools to appraise and assess organisations and their potential impact on poverty in ways that strengthen their own ability to assess their impact' (Roche, n.d.). This would draw on contemporary approaches such as PRA and Participatory Organisational Analysis, revive older techniques such as Theatre for Development, use secondary data more systematically, and test different combinations of these.

There are many different ways of learning, though there needs to be a high level of commitment to it if learning is to take place throughout the organisation. Within Oxfam's CPLF, three ways of promoting learning are:

- The 'Wandering Minstrel' approach, whereby an individual has a brief to focus on a particular issue in several countries, and to convene meetings and workshops to discuss the findings. The advantages are a sense of ownership among the participants, the opportunity for 'cross-pollination', and some agreed outputs. Oxfam's Regional Offices in Latin America and the Caribbean developed this way of working in the 1980s, as a means of ensuring region-
wide coherence in areas such as popular education, human rights, and work with refugees and displaced persons. More recently, the approach has been adopted in East Africa, involving three separate Country Offices (Birch, 1996)

- **Informal learning packs** which bring together writings from practitioners as well as discussion papers from inside and outside the organisation, and bibliographies on a theme of current concern. Oxfam's *Gender and Development Packs* started doing this in the mid-1980s, when it was important to involve as many programme staff as possible in what was then a new debate. In 1996, *Exchanging Livelihoods* was a learning pack on urban issues bringing together contributions from Oxfam's field staff. In 1997 a pack on food security is being developed. Learning packs are flexible (both in production and in terms of how they are used), and serve to validate the ideas and experiences of staff whose opinions might not otherwise be heard outside their immediate working environment. For contributors, they may seem less daunting than a formal publication.3

- **Bringing people together** through inter-project or inter-programme exchanges and workshops has always been part of Oxfam's approach to development: the current guidelines on exchange visits have changed little since they were drafted in 1975, though the visits themselves are now often on a larger scale. The wider institutional interest in promoting inter-regional learning has also encouraged a more systematic approach to linking activities. The most ambitious of these were the South-South Linking Projects associated with Oxfam's 50th Anniversary in 1992 (see Chapter 5, and also Reardon, 1995; Sweetman (ed) 1995; de Wit, 1995; Nelson, 1995). While the links did not generate networks that outlived Oxfam's funding, some lasting relationships have nevertheless evolved at national and regional levels.

Oxfam is hoping that such learning processes will generate 'data on organisational change over time, which would then be correlated with changes in material poverty, social relations, and vulnerability as assessed by local people' (Roche, ibid.). Related work would involve collaborative research with other NGOs, training, and a range of activities to disseminate the findings, such as workshops, publications, and conferences.

**Information, learning, and impact**

Traditionally, learning within Northern funding agencies has not really been about themselves, but about the organisations and work they fund. When things go well, the agency congratulates itself. When they go wrong, it is as likely as not to be the local staff who are seen as having 'failed' to assess and
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monitor the situation; while Southern counterparts may be penalised by not having their grants renewed.

Learning depends on information, but information in itself does not guarantee learning. Nor do organisational changes necessarily take place on the basis of what has been learned (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 7 for more discussion on the conditions that will encourage change in response to feedback or learning). In international aid agencies, demands for information about projects or other funded activities — more commonly in the name of accountability than of learning — emanate from the top. As higher levels of official aid are being channelled through Northern NGOs, relationships between them and their Southern counterparts are changing (Powell and Seddon, 1997; Ardon, 1997).

The question here is not so much whether 'partnership' is possible between unequals, but whether the relationship that exists is based on values and trust, or on contractual obligations. The language of partnership may remain (though some agencies use terms such as 'client', 'user', and 'provider' instead) but the reality is shifting. The spectrum of attitudes, and layers of information demands on NGOs (Northern and Southern) is summarised by Rick Davies as follows:4

**Laissez-faire:** Funded NGOs should be trusted to do what they say they will do and not be harassed by donors.

**Minimalist (defensive):** Donors' demands for information can distract and undermine an NGO's effectiveness and should be minimised.

**Minimalist (self-interested):** Donors are too busy to read and use information about project activities and impact, and so do not wish to ask for much more than they already receive.

**Apologetic or realist:** Donors have obligations to their own donors and must, unfortunately, ask for information.

**Facilitating:** Information is needed from funded NGOs so that others might learn from their experiences and support other activities, such as development education.

**Interventionist:** The process of supplying information can have a positive impact on a funded NGO's institutional development, defined in terms of the ability to relate and respond.

**Hard-line:** Funded NGOs have signed a contract with their donors and so have an obligation to produce the goods.

Difficulties that NGOs face in becoming 'learning organisations' include, then, a mismatch between the organisation's own structures, obligations,
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and priorities, and the experiences and insights of those whom they support, and from whom they must learn. These are compounded by the problems in translating experience from one setting to another, across major social, political, cultural, and often linguistic divides. Yet without some effort to monitor and learn from experience, there can be no genuine evaluation. And without evaluation, all an agency can do is carry on and hope for the best (Riddell, 1996).

What transferable lessons can be drawn about capacity-building and how can it be measured? Impact assessment is notoriously difficult, particularly where there are multiple and dynamic objectives. Even in more straightforward cases, the input of a single NGO seldom leads to one clear outcome. Further, capacity-building for development is both an end in itself and a means to achieving a world in which all human beings can fully exercise their rights and responsibilities.

Proving and measuring impact is hazardous even when information is easily gathered, and where there are unambiguous links between inputs and outputs or outcomes. Processes — such as capacity-building, empowerment, organisational development, or networking — are not usefully defined just in quantitative terms. Clearly, development agencies cannot justify supporting any vague activity on the grounds that this will somehow 'build capacity'. There needs to be agreement between those involved about what each hopes to achieve through collaborating, and how they will review progress — a process of negotiation and trust-building that takes time and effort. As was stressed in Chapter 7, it may be counter-productive to seek fixed definitions of, for instance, 'poverty' or 'exclusion', since people's perceptions of these may well alter in part as a result of the activities in which they are involved. In addition, the likelihood of proving causal links between, say, assertiveness-training for community leaders and a successful public campaign for constitutional reform, is remote. It is more realistic to employ the tests of 'probability, observation, and the balance of evidence' based on the perception of those directly involved.

Together with Oxfam, the Ghanaian NGO, IDOSEC has developed the following principles for impact-related research or information-gathering. This should:

- not be an extractive process, but should generate insights for the communities and individuals involved, as well as for the NGOs;
- not demand a disproportionate amount of time from NGO staff, community groups, or individuals;
- seek the views of those not involved in community groups, and those least able to promote their opinions in the normal course of events;
• actively seek the views of men and women in every aspect;
• cross-check findings through different methods, respondents, and researchers where possible, as well as verify them with respondents, key informants, and community groups;
• attempt to avoid raising expectations regarding future funding or projects;
• allow multiple perspectives to be compared, and similarities and differences — among men, women, and children as well as group and non-group members — to be explored; and also allow for negotiation and agreement to be reached between different groups, and differences of opinion and perception to be expressed and recorded (Kamara and Roche, 1996:10–11).

This approach means that funding agencies need to accept the existence of diverse, and contradictory, perceptions of the impact of their support; and be willing to draw conclusions on the basis of 'optimum ignorance' rather than incontrovertible evidence. Intuition and interpretation may be as important as factual evidence.

Building mutual capacities

Do Northern aid agencies have the skills and qualities to recognise and build the capacities of others, particularly those from different cultures? A survey of European NGOs into their views on how to strengthen Southern NGOs, revealed how far most were from defining appropriate roles for themselves, and admitting to their own limitations (James, 1996). While the survey focused on Northern NGOs, the insights apply equally to Southern NGOs, and to official aid agencies. This section draws out the findings, pointing to areas in which agencies might go about self-critical examination of their own practice.

Roles and functions

• Given the tendency for Southern organisations to follow the demands and agendas set by their Northern donors, the latter should separate funding and operational roles in capacity-building. In general, Northern NGOs and donor agencies should fund the process, not direct it.
• Few NGO staff have formal training in organisational management, and rely largely on empirical knowledge. Such knowledge is highly valuable. However, an organisational process and its outcomes can only be properly managed and interpreted by people who understand it.
Information and skills

- If an agency's central role is to 'strengthen the capacity of their partners (as many European NGOs have now redefined their core purpose)', then it must recruit and train staff in matters concerning organisational behaviour and management. This should be backed up with clear policies: for as those working on gender know only too well, occasional workshops will not alone shift the dead-weight of an agency's thinking and practice.

- The 'depth of engagement in terms of quality of information and level of trust' needed if an agency and its counterpart are serious about capacity-building, cannot be provided just through completing project application forms and observing rigid management controls. Formal systems of organisational assessment are seldom used in the NGO sector. However, 'as the organisational strengthening needs change dramatically over time, this does not fit easily into one-off Logical Frameworks' or other 'off-the-shelf tools now prevalent among NGOs. This points to a need for training in appropriate assessment and monitoring techniques.

- As is clear from experience in gender training or policy-related advocacy work, it is vital to develop a strong local or regional capacity for training and supporting local organisations. This both provides the possibility of a sustainable relationship, and helps to ensure that the advice and methods used are culturally sensitive.

Programme strategies

- Capacity-building is demanding. No NGO can maintain uniformly intense and long-term relationships with hundreds of counterparts worldwide. Relationships also evolve, and are affected by staff changes. One strategic option is to concentrate on fewer counterparts, and make a far longer commitment to them than the standard annual grant. For example, in Senegal Oxfam supported the gradual evolution of local peasants' organisations over many years, until they became a strong, national federation (see Chapter 3).

- Organisations cannot understand each other by means of 'rushed field-visits and bland project proposals'; nor can outsiders easily assess the potential sources of support that are available in the country or region, or how these might link up together. The cost of maintaining locally-based staff is great, particularly for agencies that work in many countries. Nevertheless, some kind of sustained 'presence' is needed, in order to facilitate two-way communication.
Funding procedures

• DfID (formerly ODA) in the UK, and USAID, calculate that organisational strengthening may take over a decade, though this depends on the scale of the organisation, and what it is expected to achieve. The strategies for strengthening a national institution, such as a civil-service bureaucracy, or a union for small farmers, are clearly very different. However, there is a huge mismatch between the aim to build the capacities of some of the poorest people in the world, and the method of giving one-to-two year grants that is common in the NGO and official aid sector. NGOs urgently need to review creative ways to make multi-annual commitments, and alternatives to the project grant. Financing mechanisms that offer the possibility of longer-term stability are endowments and guarantee funds.

• While the project-bound approach is inappropriate for capacity-building in all but the most limited sense (e.g., a one-off programme or activity), NGOs have traditionally raised their funds through ‘selling’ projects to their supporters and donors. It would be more consistent with a capacity-building approach to raise financial support for programmes, within which a range of activities could be supported. This was part of the thinking behind Oxfam’s PROF experiment, referred to in footnote 2 in this chapter.

• It is a common lament among Southern NGOs that their Northern counterparts are reluctant to fund their core costs, such as administration, recurrents, and certain capital costs (such as purchase of premises). Yet if these costs are not met, the NGO is forced onto a ‘project treadmill’, which in turn impedes its capacity to act strategically. Overcoming this reluctance may enable Northern NGOs to project their own administration costs in a more positive light.

Collaborating for change

Competition among agencies may be good for their institutional profile; but does not necessarily translate into ‘better’ work on the ground, and may discourage learning and capacity-building, because it appears to rule out the possibility of collaboration. For instance, if NGOs are assumed to be ‘better’ than governments at channelling assistance to very poor communities, this may have the effect of undermining a government’s capacity to provide essential services — and also foster antagonisms that make collaboration and mutual learning more difficult.

Second, a competitive environment means that agencies necessarily risk seeing themselves as being at the centre of the development stage, rather than as just one actor among many. This may reinforce the tendency to see their dealings with counterparts in one-dimensional ‘project-bound’ terms,
rather than as part of a web of relationships. Yet it can be extremely damaging if agencies fail to consider the cumulative effect of their actions as a sector. Most development workers have witnessed the 'honey pot' syndrome, whereby several agencies are buzzing around the same small set of 'fundable' local groups. Many Southern organisations have been damaged by over-rapid, donor-led growth. Yet agencies seldom take individual or collective responsibility for this (Ardón, 1997). Conversely, agencies may also leave their 'partners' in the lurch when they decide to re-order their funding priorities. Since Northern agencies are likely to be responding to similar pressures (shortages of funds, or competing demands), it is not surprising that they make similar decisions; but if half a dozen agencies decide unilaterally to close down their programmes in a given region, the total impact may be devastating (Parasuraman and Vimalanathan, 1997).

Finally, a competitive environment tends to breed opportunism rather than long-term solidarity. Agencies may thus be more susceptible to funding a given project because it promises to yield what their donors and constituencies will recognise as results, rather than for moral considerations such as 'keeping faith' with a local organisation during difficult times, or 'accompanying' its slow process of growth. As has already been stated, major official agencies consider that capacity-building may take a decade, not just a couple of years; ironically, some of the pressure on NGOs to demonstrate tangible impact is perceived as coming from these same quarters.

In Chapter 3, we stressed the importance of seeing the whole picture. Here, we would reiterate similar points. For development agencies do not and cannot stand alone. They are part of a complex and dynamic web of relations both within 'civil society' and with the state. Thus, to have an effect on inequality and injustice, they must be prepared to collaborate with each other and with other sectors, on several levels. And they need to develop a common sense of what constitutes good practice.

The only way that we can retain a holistic, multi-faceted, and diverse approach to capacity-building — and develop the specialisation and skills required for particular purposes, such as micro-finance, community-based coastal resource management, research, or para-legal work — is to work more in partnerships and alliances with like-minded agencies, where the whole is more than the sum of the parts.  

In other words, rather than trying to be all-embracing in their scope, agencies would do better to concentrate on their own areas of strength, and complement these by teaming up with others. While this happens occasionally, agencies seldom collaborate both among themselves and with their counterparts to develop a coherent set of long-term activities. For example,
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one NGO might concentrate on micro-level support, or on the 'pump-priming' role of building and supporting local movements; another might work with organisations that were already at some level of maturity, helping them to develop their skills. Maintaining such partnerships and alliances would entail a larger investment in negotiating, planning, and managing a range of groups and inputs. Agencies would need to overcome fears of losing flexibility, in order to take on long-term obligations. However, the potential benefits would be in two areas. Local organisations would learn to handle a wider set of relationships, and call on support from different quarters as needs arose, while also being released from the 'project treadmill'. Meanwhile, the agencies providing financial and technical assistance would together develop a more global picture of the complex working environment, within which the contribution of each would be recognised and respected, and also be subject to peer scrutiny. While concentrating resources in this way might mean working in fewer areas, it is likely that the quality both of the agencies' work and of their working relationships, would be enhanced.

This more collaborative way of working might also inspire greater levels of trust among co-operating organisations. National and international NGOs could make fuller use of their experience and expertise. Northern NGOs have the responsibility to help their donating publics to see the links between their own societies and the forces of poverty and disempowerment, North and South. Southern NGOs have a similar role to play in raising awareness, particularly in societies whose internal divisions foster profound ignorance about the lives of those who are marginalised, whether because they are rural, or slum-dwellers, or unemployed, or from oppressed castes or ethnic groups, or simply because they are poor.

It has often been observed that those countries which actively foster social cohesion, equality, and solidarity at home, tend also to show greater solidarity on an international scale — not only in terms of aid flows, but also in terms of political action and awareness. The challenge facing development NGOs is both to contribute to helping those who are excluded to become full and active citizens in their own societies, and so to promote informed and responsible world citizenship.