

The Role of NGO Support Organisations mediating NGO - Government relations: the case of the Australian Council for International Development

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The relationship between development NGOs and their host governments has been an important issue in both the civil society and public policy discourse for the past three decades. The general view is that development NGOs are dependent on Government for support and approval in a number of key areas including: regulation, funding, and as a source of public legitimacy; and so engage with Government in a generally cooperative manner, and are constrained in their advocacy. This paper uses as a case study Australian Council for International Development as case study of a support organisation, which became a strong advocate on aid issues, leading to tensions both with its membership and with the Government of the day.

This case study, in part, challenges Edwards and Hulme (1997), Jorgen Lissner (1997) and others who argue that NGOs have moved 'to close for comfort' in their relations with Government, and in some ways are beholden to government for legitimacy and increasingly funding. There is also a view that NGOs, as values-based organisations, are often perceived as having problems with accountability to both their supporters, to government, and to the people with whom they work. They are also seen as being: amateurish (or not business like); too restricted in their focus; beset by scarcity (of funds); fragmented; and paternalistic in their outlook (Brown, & Kalegaonkar, 2002; Lissner, 1977). These two views of NGOs are not necessarily in conflict with each other, but it is the latter view of NGOs not being accountable and amateurish, which is seen to hinder developing strong relationships with government and other stakeholders. These weaknesses Brown and Kalegaonkar argue lead to a demand for the development of specialist support organisations that on the one hand share NGO values, but whose primary task is to 'provide services that strengthen the capacities of [NGOs] to accomplish their mission'.

ACFID in its early days 1965-1975 grew up as a support organisation with the active support of government who wished to strengthen relationships with government, and see NGOs as advocates for aid in general. In fact the locus of ACFID's work turned quite quickly to strong advocacy critical of both Government aid and NGO aid, even though it was funded by both in more or less equal portion. A series of tensions emerged in which the support organisation was seen to be getting too far ahead of its constituency and too critical of government, and this came to a head in 1975. The upshot of this experience, however, was that a tone was set that resulted in ACFID taking quite a vigorous approach to advocacy through most of the rest of its history, but generally keeping its membership 'on side', and it is only in the early 2000s (post 9/11) that Government pressure resulted in a more muted approach to advocacy.

The lesson from this case study are that generally in Australia, the relationship between NGOs and government has been more complex, and a model of 'fluid' mutual dependency is a better descriptor of relations between NGOs and Government for over much of ACFID's life. This history, however, was also characterised by

ongoing tensions both with Government, and also within the broader NGO community, around both policy and approaches to development practice.

The paper concludes that the dependency model of NGO relations with government is fairly weak in the Australian context, with the driver of the development of support organisations being as much if not more from Government, than from the NGOs wishing to strengthen relationships with government. This can result, however, in the risk of the consequences of 'biting of the hand that feeds'.