

## Making Aid Agencies work

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*This is a transcript of a podcast discussion between two NGO leaders in Pakistan and India - Sarwar Bari and Manu Gupta - and Terry Gibson, author of [‘Making Agencies Work’](#)*

**Terry:** I’m Terry Gibson: I previously worked at the Global Network for Disaster Reduction where I started to collaborate with both Manu and Sarwar. I now work independently. I have been working for a long time as a practitioner and also as a researcher in relation to civil society organizations and that has led me to write the book we are discussing today. Can I start by asking you both to introduce yourselves?

**Sarwar:** I’m Sarwar Bari working with Pattan Development organization which is a national NGO in Pakistan. We are a part of ADRRN (Asian Disaster Reduction and Response Network) and GNDR (Global Network of Civil Society Organizations for Disaster Reduction). Our organization has been working in Pakistan since 1992 when we had superfloods.

**Manu:** Hi, my name is Manu Gupta and I work for a national organization called SEEDS here in India, I am based out of New Delhi. We have been working on disaster related issues and disaster risk reduction, long term recovery work here in India and in some of the neighbouring countries in the region for about 25 years now.

**Terry:** I have had an interest for a long time in the things which become barriers to NGOs doing the things they really want to do because clearly they are all in it for good reasons. This all came into the headlines in the UK last year and possibly in other countries because there were several widely publicised safeguarding and abuse incidents both in the field and in the offices of INGOs. While these issues hit headlines, they were probably a tip of an iceberg because there were much broader challenges facing civil society and in particular large INGOs. This question of whether there are particular failings that INGOs face, what is your experience?

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**Sarwar:** We have been working in the NGO and INGO sectors since 1992 so we have mixed experiences. One thing appears to be common, the relationship between NGOs and INGOs is a power relationship, it was less so in the 90s but in recent years it has profoundly increased as the donor agencies have started giving money to a business model and as a result of that for-profit organizations have now taken over a lot of NGOs work. The NGOs that used to work with INGOs now it appears to me that they are working for big organizations. The good NGOs that are small and working at grassroots level are losing out because they cannot write glamorous proposals but they are good at working with communities. In my view, the situation has changed.

**Terry:** Really interesting points there about power relations: NGOs who work well at community level struggling to access funding and being out-competed by private contractors and certainly, in terms of the UK spend on international development, most of the organizations at the top of the development hit parade are now private organizations

rather than INGOs. This all seems to track back to funding. Manu, what is your comment on the potential and challenges facing INGOs in your experience?

**Manu:** I will echo what Sarwar just said about the situation in his home country. In India, where we have seen a slightly different form of development, we have moved from relationships which involve co-learning between INGOs and local organizations to an arrangement where INGOs have morphed themselves into National NGOs even though they retain their brand and image as international organizations. What that means is that they have created a very competitive environment in the local space which was earlier only carried out by national home-grown organizations and is now being replaced by them. We have an Indian version of almost every big INGO, it has also started raising funds from within the country and, because they have the support of their international counterparts back in Europe or in other western countries, they are able to bring in higher levels of professionalism in the same kind of activities that traditionally national home grown NGOs were doing. We are left with a situation where an INGO would be reaching out to the same donors within the country and bringing in their decades of experience which casts a very poor light on the NGO in the eyes of the potential donor. That becomes a huge challenge for us.

**Terry:** This is very interesting, let's stay with it. You seem to be describing a kind of shift towards a much more corporate model of organization. That has changed the situation and it clearly is something that troubles both of you. What are its effects on the ability of the system to really support people at the frontline? What are the effects on the ultimate goal of all of this work? Does it have a good or bad effect?

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**Sarwar:** Because of the different family structures within INGOs and NGOs, people who get good experience in local NGOs move to INGOs, UN agencies or USAID. In the last 15 years the local NGOs actually lost their experienced staff and simultaneously, because funding was in decline, working at the local level has suffered. As for people at the grassroots level, if someone has worked with the people and built the capacity of local communities and helped them to enhance their experience, capabilities and organise them, in a way local communities have taken over the NGOs' work which is sustaining the frontline. So, in my view, this is also a blessing in disguise because previously the local NGOs would look towards INGOs for support but gradually, because of the difficult situation, I think that the local NGOs are becoming much more innovative and investing more on local communities rather than on professional people.

**Terry:** That is really interesting. So your first point of migration of staff away from local NGOs, kind of sucked into the international circuit, is certainly something that I have seen happening and that is a real problem, but your second point seems to suggest that there is a kind of divergence, two roads heading off in different directions and in one direction there are local NGOs becoming increasingly concerned to enable local communities to take control of their own livelihoods and that is something more sustainable and less to do with dependence. There is that divergence in one direction, the question is if that is becoming more effective at the local level what is being done by these larger organizations. Is what they are doing having impact or not. Let me turn to Manu, where do you think things are headed?

**Manu:** I think I would also have a mixed response to that. On the upside, communities are becoming more independent and finding new innovative ways of survival and therefore having a greater say in what they wanted to do. At the same time what has happened is it is breaking up the whole system. In the process, the more capable are able to survive where the more vulnerable which are below the poverty line or are affected by disasters all the time are getting further marginalised in this whole process because they did not have the basic threshold to be able to sustain and survive on their own.

**Terry:** You have said that this system may benefit the mid-range less wealthy but it leaves out the marginalised and more vulnerable and obviously, in the growing cities of the world, there is a growing proportion of people in the informal sector who are not necessarily registered, do not own property, barter, and are involved in the informal economy. These are people who are under the radar and have to put up with living on the low lying land, they do not get proper services and have limited access to health, education and so on. It's a vulnerable sector of the population but it accounts for about a billion people in the world living like that, that is a lot of people. Do you think from what you have seen this more corporate INGO system that we are describing is responding to those individuals' needs? If it isn't, why not?

**Sarwar:** I would like to share with you an example of my own: in the 90s we would provide a lot of service delivery to the communities but gradually, we moved to towards accountability. Governance is very poor and there is a lot of corruption, so the best way we decided was to organise people around labour rights and target minimum wages rates. We assisted and facilitated workers to stand up and demand minimum wage implementation. In Faisalabad, the third largest city in Pakistan and as far as the textile industry is concerned, the gap between minimum wage and actual payments is only 10 – 12% while in the rest of Pakistan the gap is 20 – 22%, so a large number of families are now getting better wages and poverty has reduced. 0.6 million people of the population have benefited from that. We will never be able to help the marginalised people on that level working in the traditional NGO model. Of course, no donor is giving money for that kind of activism. It did help a large number of people and it is working much better than before.

**Terry:** Okay, that is really interesting, that you have contrasted service delivery which is to try and meet needs of people with what you describe as “small p” political action, which is to mobilise people to try and claim their rights because that creates transformation of the situation. The work I have been doing is on the contrast between operating as a service delivery organization or as what I have called a ‘change agency’ working to achieve change. Again, a question to you Manu, you have talked about the needs of the marginalised and most vulnerable being overlooked by the system. What do you think are the positive options for addressing that?

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**Manu:** I will pick up from some of the points that Sarwar raised, you called them the informal sector and rightfully so: these are largely people who have moved from rural areas into urban areas. They are small groups of people living in urban slums. They do not have access to rights, they do not have a registered ID and because they do not have these formal mechanisms to be included they are not able to get the benefits so the way to work with these informal communities to find informal ways of community building enabling them to find their rights just in the way Sarwar said. The problem is that the current model of aid that the INGOs and the international system brings does not have the scope of institution building, for example, or for informal ways of engagement with the marginalised because there is no immediate quantifiable change that one can record as output of the investment, so my problem here is then, how do I make a proposal for investing my time into these kinds of efforts which are very necessary in bringing them mainstream?

**Terry:** Sarwar said, 'there is no money for this kind of activism'. This brings us to the question of funding. You mentioned returns on investments, outputs and there are not obvious and quick outputs from institution-building and engaging with the vulnerable. These are things that do not have a neat tick-box at the end of them. How can we address this problem?

**Sarwar:** As far as my experience is concerned, we have nearly 200,000 associations all registered with authorities and these associations represent teachers, nurses, vendors and you can really name any profession and you will find these associations. They are member based associations and the NGOs for a long time - and INGOs as well - ignored this very important section of civil society. By coming into the Sustainable Development Goals, the government is now bound to deliver some indicators every year, and now we are making these vulnerable communities and unorganised sections of society about the SDGs such as "no hunger", "end of inequality" and "a better environment," and now we are informing these communities that these are your rights. We are informing the government that if you wanted to achieve targets you have to work with these communities, you have to listen to them, and each district administration has some target, and they cannot achieve these targets if people are not paid minimum wages. We need to make the argument not only to educate people but also to put pressure on state machinery and then we can improve the entire situation in a better way than in the style of funding.

**Terry:** We have presented a number of challenges there. What are the options for change? What would improve the situation?

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**Manu:** I think it is about where and how decisions are made on the utilization of funds. The more we make it closer to the community for which it was meant for, the better and more efficient the utilisation. That is the power struggle of moving those decisions from the headquarters down to communities. The whole narrative around cash based programming, about local pool funds, these are mechanisms that have been tried as

small pilots here and there around the world and they have worked very well but what it requires is for aid agencies to trust local systems and local informal communities to be able to make decisions to be able to make decisions about how they need to use those funds. If this happens, it will work in the case that I represent, here in East Delhi where we have been able to mobilise citizen forums but they are always looking for funding and looking for ways in which they can influence how those funds can be used within a common agreed objective of resilience building.

**Terry:** I think it has been about four years ago, the UN held the World Humanitarian Summit and that had a number of outcomes under the banner of the 'grand bargain'. One of those was to do with what you are talking about Manu, which was localisation and it started from considerable pressure brought to that summit by local NGOs and networks of NGOs saying only 1 or 2% of the money in the international aid system reaches directly to local level. Most of it travels through these intermediary organizations and INGOs and so on. Are you seeing any change as a result of all those words and ambitions that were stated at the Humanitarian Summit or is it in your opinion that it is still business as usual?

**Manu:** It is business as usual. We are nearing our first of those Grand Bargain targets in 2020, which is that at least 20% of the overall financial aid will be decided upon and used by local organizations. We have not moved at all on that and I do not see that happening in the near future because of these power games.

**Terry:** We started with power and we are still talking about power, and we are talking about the dichotomy between the goals, targets and returns on investment that drives the industry contrasted with transformational change. Do you see options that would shift these power relationships?

*“Whenever we jump in the funding arena, it immediately creates power relationships. There is someone who is giving the money and someone who is receiving the money, somehow there is tension with these relationships.”*

**Sarwar:** Whenever we jump in the funding arena, it immediately creates power relationships. There is someone who is giving the money and someone who is receiving the money, somehow there is tension with these relationships. From my own experience it is that the giver does not want to have a lot of criticism and in a country like Pakistan, India or Bangladesh power relations have been imposed for centuries so often people keep quiet, they do not challenge the institution or the person who is giving money. Therefore, I believe it is much more important to engage with people without talking about money. There is a civil society which is being ignored by NGOs and political leaderships as well, it is important to spend some time speaking to coalitions of the marginalised at district levels to build them up so that bigger coalitions can be formed at sub-national and national levels.

**Terry:** That is really interesting, and it is something that we have seen in a different way in the network all three of us have been a part of, GNDR. The idea of creating coalitions and then growing them more widely is something which I certainly think is more powerful because it attaches to people then claiming rights rather than a kind of passive system which you mentioned earlier. Dependency implies people waiting for things to be provided for them. As you were talking Sarwar, I was reminded of a quote from

someone from Eastern Europe when some of those countries were being liberalised who apparently said: “We dreamed of civil society and they gave us NGOs,” and you can read many things into that quote but it does remind us of what you were saying. Civil society and NGOs are not the same thing. Civil society is that third force which is independent of commerce and of government and is fighting for people and sometimes the NGO sector is a business which is not performing that function. I want to turn to a final point, which connects with all of this which is about learning because we seem to say in a lot of ways that the decision making of larger NGOs is determined by power structures, by requirements for returns on investments, by projects and project outputs and this does not seem to be achieving the social change, which we imagine is the original purpose of this whole industry. I want to start with Manu, we have all been involved in a particular learning project. Manu, you are a professional and an activist, do you feel that learning is something that needs to be prioritised in your work and the broader work of NGOs.

**Manu:** Definitely because I think the lack of our ability to listen and especially listen to voices of community seems to be diminishing by the day and that is where my worry is. A lot is being labelled as professionalism, as the way we organise our system that we are leaving behind much of the wisdom of the community. I think unless we have those kinds of spaces created for co-learning where we can work alongside communities learning from each other, we will continue to perpetuate one system on the other.

**Terry:** You seem to be saying that a critical element is a flow of learning which comes from the grassroots, from the frontline in order to shape the things that are done by civil society and by NGOs more effectively. Sarwar, do you have a comment on that?

**Sarwar:** I sometimes find that there is learning but the issue has been, how can we translate that learning into action because of finding support for that. Of course, there is a learning because we gradually moved to helping people mobilise for their rights. But then talking to the rest of the NGO sector has been very difficult, to convince those people that this is the best model has been difficult.

**Terry:** Thanks to both of you. I think we have travelled an interesting road and we have discovered a divergence of roads between a fairly large corporate system driven by financial pressures and a desire for results, and the nature for a civil society in the broader sense drawing alongside the vulnerable and marginalised, listening to them and enabling them to develop the ability to claim rights and to build sustainable livelihoods. I have one final question and just a very quick answer from you both, if you will? Is there one key thing you would want to say to someone from an INGO listening to this which is something they should take account of if there is going to be change for the better?

**Sarwar:** INGOs must listen to local NGOs and stop behaving like colonial powers.

**Terry:** And Manu?

*“INGOs need to find better forms of partnership. We have to move away from very contract-driven kinds of relationships to where we learn together.”*

**Manu:** I will also say the same in slightly different words. INGOs need to find better forms of partnership. We have to move away from very contract-driven kinds of

relationships to where we learn together, we are flexible about our approaches and we make sure that the most vulnerable who need our support have a seat around the table.

**Terry:** We started with power and we end with listening and learning. Thank you very much.

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