

Gordon Global Youth Fellowship

Executive summary

Louis Dorval, September 2008

Policy Issue of Investigation

For the last 12 months, I have been deepening my understanding of the links between organizational learning capacity and accountability structures for NGOs doing the implementation of development projects in rural Africa. More specifically, this research aimed to:

1. Document the different accountability structures that exist, specifically those related to relationships with donors.
2. Document the different organizational learning mechanisms used by Africa-based NGOs.
3. Document the different links, constructive or otherwise, between the above-mentioned structures and mechanisms.

The rationale for this research topic includes:

1. A growing international concern for monitoring and evaluation, in the context of the dialogue on aid effectiveness and accountability of international aid.
2. A growing international concern to increase the collaboration and trust relationships between the different players of international development, as described as mutual accountability in the Paris Declaration.
3. The realization that one of the main functions of development efforts is to learn about the different conditions that lead to poverty reduction.
4. A general lack of understanding from the donor's perspective about the internal mechanisms, often culturally charged, that favor or not organizational learning.
5. The opportunity for EWB to see if it can play a role in helping its partners improve their organizational learning capacity and/or accountability structure.

Note: For the sake of this research, I have defined 'policies' as the set of formal and informal rules that define the relationship between African NGOs and their stakeholders: donors, other NGOs in the sector, the government and their constituency.

Summary of activities

The fellowship allowed me to lead activities that fall in three different categories for each of the objectives they served:

1. Activities to advance my field of policy research
 - a. Review of the literature on accountability for African NGOs and organizational learning in the context of international development
 - b. Set of interviews with 6 African NGOs, partners of Engineers Without Borders
 - c. Meetings with experts on accountability for civil society in international development

- d. Reporting on the civil society parallel forum on aid effectiveness
- e. Writing of an article on my findings
- f. Sharing of my findings with the partners that contributed
- 2. Activities to advance my own learning of policy change
 - a. Participation in a course on Global Public Policy Development at the University of Ottawa.
 - b. A number of semi-structured conversations with my mentor Prof. Alan Fowler.
 - c. Visit of different UK universities to explore options for graduate studies.
- 3. Activities to promote policy change as a focus of EWB's overseas division.
 - a. Writing of a first white paper on EWB's position with regards to donor funding of decentralized government structures in Ghana.
 - b. Meeting with the senior executives of the International Fund for Agriculture Development in Rome and the Gates Foundation in Seattle.
 - c. Creation of a new structure with EWB's overseas program to generate financial and human resources for a greater focus on policy influence.

Summary of key findings and learning

My main findings are the following:

With regards to my field of policy research

- ☑ There is a relationship between accountability and learning. In fact, in all of the NGOs surveyed, the directionality of accountability had a major effect on the directionality of their learning. This is significant because it adds an important argument to the debate about the fundamental flaws of the aid industry: as African NGOs are mostly accountable to donors (who are the only major stakeholder with the power to sanction), their learning was skewed in that direction. This means that for the last 15-20 years, African NGOs have mostly learned to serve 'donor' interests, as opposed to the interests of their constituency or the population they are meant to serve.
- ☑ The climate of the international aid industry is changing. More bilateral and multilateral money will be channeled through African governments as opposed to western/international NGOs and corporations. Since there is a lot of pressure on African governments (from the IMF and the WB) not to increase their staff, they are likely to outsource some of their service delivery to Africa-based NGOs. The change of accountability mechanisms through which this will happen will cause a re-questioning of the directionality of the learning of these NGOs. My prediction is that to survive, NGOs will need to better understand and serve their constituency and they will need to enter in 'mutual accountability' relationships with the government and progressive foundations.
- ☑ There are already many mechanisms put in place by bilateral and multilateral donors for NGOs and beneficiaries to participate in and provide feedback to their development programs. However, these mechanisms are highlight inadequate:
 - 'Independent' consultants generally write what the donors want to hear such that they will be hired again.
 - Log Frame and Result-Based Management frameworks lock implementing agencies into non-flexible activity and input-based contracts that impede learning.

- End-of-project evaluations happen shortly after projects such that beneficiaries are not given the chance to express their only power which is the power of participation and ownership.
- Most other consultation mechanisms are by invitation only and the questions asked are the questions of the ‘developers’, not those of the ‘developed’. This was namely the case for the Paris Declaration process on Aid Effectiveness.
- Related to the above, most of the improvements made to donor projects from one to the other relate to efficiency and effectiveness, and not to the relevancy of the service provided to the target population.
- The disbursement race attempts to speed up learning mechanisms such that most scale-up projects are designed before the pilot has shown any result. Similarly, second phases of projects are created before end-of-project evaluations, proposals for new programs are created overnight to meet tight RFP deadlines, and most activities happen at the end of the financial year with little regard for when they are most appropriate for the beneficiaries.
- ☑ In the process of writing an article, I found myself realizing that there were 2 very distinct types of audiences which made the writing of the article challenging. On the first had, academics want to increase the understanding of the causality between different elements. Data needs to be rigorously collected and analyzed to ‘prove’ this causality. On the other hand, practitioners want to understand phenomenon to the degree that it affects them and often times will be happy with case studies, or speculations on how certain phenomenon affect them. The gap between academia and practice in international development was not the topic of my research, but I found myself in a challenging position having to bridge that gap, especially when it comes to the academic or field-level understanding of the concept of ‘accountability’.

With regards to my learning on policy change

- ☑ The power imbalance in the world that has created mass extreme poverty will need to change if Africans are to escape poverty. Because of the current development of Asia, new markets and cheap labor are unlikely to drive Africa’s economic development. As such, Africans will be better off trying to gain political power by taking their development into their own hands. This will take the form of more or less quiet revolutions of the Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Mendala types, although their battle will need to transcend the borders of their country. This will be made possible by new technologies and developing the African leadership to do this should be one of the main roles of African civil society going forward, and one that can be facilitated by progressive western NGOs and foundations.
- ☑ From a very personal perspective, this experience reinforced that it is very hard to ‘change the system’. Most of the leaders I have met that have changed the system seemed to have sacrificed their ‘out-of-work’ life. Most seemed to have made their living from 9-to-5, and have created their change on evenings and weekends. It takes a very strong commitment to ‘swim against the current’ and not many people can do it for their entire lives. I’m not sure what the implications of this are on me.
- ☑ Visiting UK universities made me realize the particular environment in which one learns when they attend these institutions. Although I felt that the environment there was one where thinking and sharing is made the most efficient, I realized that I wasn’t

interested in influencing policy through an academic career. I felt that my value-add would mostly come from my capacity to lead others and manage organizations.

With regards to EWB as a policy change agent

- ☑ EWB is in a key position to play a larger role as a policy change agent: we understand field realities, we have a large network of trust relationships across Africa and we have the ability to communicate our understanding with key decision makers. That is why I have created a policy unit within our overseas program to take advantage of our capacity to influence the policy environment of our partners.
- ☑ This policy unit will likely have three functions. The first is to evaluate the long term results of large donor projects on the ground. This will give the beneficiary their power back to own and participate in these development projects. The second will be to better understand key components of field-level implementation and behavior change that will help donors design more appropriate technology update and projects. Finally, this unit will help coordinate the voice of local implementation agencies such that they are more powerful in the face of the donor oligopoly.
- ☑ Although it does make sense for EWB to play a role in policy influence over the next couple of years, it seems pretty obvious to me that EWB will also need to develop an African leadership within and outside of its partners such that they too will be able to advocate for their own policy changes. This should certainly be an area of focus for EWB given our demonstrated capacity to create social change leaders in Canada.

Follow-ups

For my field of policy research:

- ☑ I will finish writing this article and get it published.
- ☑ I will share the results of the research on accountability and learning with the partners that participated in the research.
- ☑ I will get to present my fellowship experience and findings at the EWB national conference.

For my learning as a policy influencer:

- ☑ I will keep my relationship with Alan as he will undoubtedly stay a source of guidance for me.
- ☑ I will pursue graduate studies in the fields of economics and business management.
- ☑ I will stay involved with the Gordon Foundation's Fellowship program and keep meeting inspiring individuals tackling different societal changes within different organizations.

For EWB as a policy change agent:

- ☑ I will support the new focus of the overseas team for the next year in the hope that the changes we made this year will be sustainable.
- ☑ I will continue to build my staff's capacity to write articles and influence policy cycles based on the materials covered in the context of the fellowship: the fellowship events and Dr. Hubert's class.
- ☑ I will specifically maintain my relationship with the CIDA, IFAD and Gates offices related to Burkina Faso and Ghana in the hope to change the relevancy of their projects in the region.