

**STOPPING AS SUCCESS:
TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT**

INDIA: TRANSITION FROM ACTION AID INTERNATIONAL TO ACTION AID

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CONTEXT

India's constitution mandates that the government work toward a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic, upholding the rights of its citizens. Following India's independence in 1947, the government did not initially reach many of its most marginalized citizens living in remote rural areas. Thus, civil society took on a crucial role in implementing development programs and services in areas the state could not reach. Over the years, the state has increased its outreach to remote rural areas (although it is still far from comprehensive), resulting in increasing instances of the government and CSOs coexisting and working in a complementary manner.

In contemporary Indian civil society, NGOs whose areas of work do not directly challenge the government and its political leadership are often perceived as being better able to access funding. Conversely, NGOs engaged in more vocal environmental and rights-based advocacy (for example, Greenpeace in India) have had trouble raising funds either locally or from international agencies.

Civil society in India, especially during the last two decades, has been successful in bringing about

major legislative change, which in turn has impacted policy-making. For example, it was strong grassroots movements that led to the Right to Information Act in 2005, which demands greater accountability and transparency regarding public information and finances.

STORY OF TRANSITION

ActionAid International (AAI) tackles poverty and injustice globally. The organization's commitment to addressing inequality influenced, to a certain degree, its decision to transition. The shift from ActionAid International to ActionAid India – known as ActionAid Association (AAA) – is framed and discussed as representing the organization's values of equality and transparency. As ActionAid International's website states: "... the people whose lives our work affects should decide how we're run."

At the time of the international organization's transition in 2003, staff, according to an AAA interviewee, "... felt we couldn't do what we wanted to by staying who we were." This triggered an organization-wide shift in approach, which became known as ActionAid's "internationalization" journey.

PHOTO CREDIT: POULOMI BASU/ACTIONAID



Securing rights for women in the world of work. Fisherwomen at a fish landing centre in Visakhapatnam district, Andhra Pradesh, India.

The organization is also proud to note it was the first large international NGO to physically and symbolically relocate its headquarters from Europe to South Africa, signaling a shift in governance and decision-making toward the global South.

Although AAA is still a member of the AAI federation, and in many ways did not experience a significant amount of operational transition in 2003, its staff and leadership feel the national NGO is distinctly independent from the larger organization.

KEY LESSONS

It is worthwhile for INGOs to consider a transition in their overall partnership approach role when assessing their mission and relevance. This is in addition to any project or country office transition. AAI found this to be an important distinction during the “internationalization” process. Given civil society (including global civil society, not just “local” civil society) is crucial for states to succeed and – as noted by an AAA senior staff member – “will always be needed,” staff felt a shift in the overall partnership between AAI and AAA was both necessary and strategic. This enabled ongoing support to the newly registered Indian entity.

Strengthening civil society and people’s movements can be enabled by further decentralization, even within a local entity. After AAA was registered, significant strategic visioning was still required to determine how best to support locally led development at the community level. For this reason, AAA has continued to decentralize its staff and projects within India. This decentralized structure places decision-making at the state, district, and local level, in the hands of staff who are also originally from these areas. AAA felt it was best to support citizens’ movements, community initiatives, and state-level NGOs, as this, in its view, is the most effective way of enabling India’s locally led justice and development work.

A strong and inclusive board can be critical during a transition. This was certainly the case with AAA’s transition, which involved a board with 100 percent Indian representation. A senior AAA staff member noted that “... it’s the spirit of democracy they inculcate at that level that flows through the entire organization.”

Feedback from all stakeholders during a transition process can enhance perceptions of local ownership. Feedback from communities, staff, and partners is still used today by AAA’s leadership during strategic planning processes. The process of formulating AAA’s five-year strategy is a case in point of the organization’s bottom-up, inclusive approach toward agenda setting, with a senior staff member noting: “Hiring a consultant to come in and write a strategy is the death of a strategy.”

A successful transition is not simply a technical or programmatic exercise, with a start and end date. Rather, for AAA, the commitment to a transition of power should be something continuously strived toward within the organization.

A decentralized structure may be a useful model for INGOs and NGOs to consider. As a senior staff member at AAA commented: “A federal structure allows for independent thought and no one country or person can dictate how AA functions at a global and national level.”

Complementing, rather than duplicating, ongoing government initiatives that enhance citizen’s rights can support state systems while also promoting an organization’s vision. As a senior staff member at AAA observed: “We need to help the state to delegate their mandate instead of taking up responsibilities assigned to them. If we start doing all the work, then, why do we need the state and what will the state do?”

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Cover photo: Strengthening public education. This village in Chamba district, of Himachal Pradesh, India, has seen a steady increase of enrolment of girls in the primary school. Photo credit: Raul Irani Kirmani/ActionAid