NGOs in Global Governance

ANNUAL WORKSHOP 2015

Bond's recent report, *Fast-Forward: The Changing Role of UK-based INGOs*, was the subject of a workshop held by the British International Studies Association NGO Working Group on June 15, 2015. The workshop brought together representatives of Bond and INTRAC with academics and NGO practitioners to discuss the main findings of this thought-provoking report.

Fast-Forward charts the risky and complex terrain that NGOs will have to navigate in the coming decades. The need for evidence-based policies in this highly uncertain environment has never been so pressing. Academics can help NGOs address important gaps in knowledge, but need better awareness of how they can assist. That is why workshops such as these provide crucial opportunities to foster mutual understanding, and forge networks and collaborative relationships.

The day opened with presentations from four academics who reflected upon the ways in which their latest research spoke to the key policy recommendations outlined in the report:

- Dr Tom Davies of City University London drew upon his historical research to raise some cautionary points about the extent to which 'lessons' can be drawn for contemporary practice from previous experience of NGOs in international governance research.
- Dr Vincent Keating of the University of South Denmark suggested that some attempts by NGOs to enhance their legitimacy - for example, by abiding by accountability mechanisms - may have the unintended consequence of eroding their perceived trustworthiness.
- Dr Maryam Z. Deloffre from Arcadia University proposed that recent events regarding the outbreak of the Ebola crisis suggested that we may be witnessing the emergence of a transnational human security community.
- Babatunde Olawoore from the University of Portsmouth presented an overview of his field notes from Nigeria, which illustrated the beneficial outcomes of the rights-based approach to partnership employed by ActionAid and Oxfam.

The second half of the workshop was devoted to presentations by NGO practitioners:

- Anders Hylander and Rose Longhurst from Bond began by providing further insights into the policy conclusions outlined in Fast-Forward.
- Hugh Salmon from Family for Every Child provided a fascinating account of the closure of EveryChild, and the transfer of its income and assets to a new global alliance of member organisations. This ambitious process raised fundamental questions of responsible exit and sustainable impact.
- Clare Doube from Amnesty International provided fascinating insights into the manifold challenges faced by the organisation as it undergoes radical restructuring in order to acquire a greater presence in the global South.

The day concluded with discussion on the ways in which academics could usefully collaborate with NGOs to help them address the challenges they face in the context of a rapidly shifting global order. It was felt that there was much potential for mutually beneficial research partnerships as long as both parties were sensitive to the demands of one another's working environments. Academics should endeavour to design research with policy-relevance. They should avoid taking an 'extractive approach' to research, by ensuring that they relay the results to their NGO partner so that both parties can benefit from the findings. Academics primarily publish in peer-reviewed journals that are only available via an expensive subscription, which typically means that practitioners cannot read and learn from the research outputs. It is therefore important for academics to maintain good lines of communication with NGOs after they have collected their data, but also to ensure that findings are published in freely-accessible outlets; for example, through blog posts, or policy briefings on personal webpages. At the same time, NGOs should be sympathetic to the pressure on academics to meet publication targets to secure tenure and receive favourable assessments in research audit exercises. This will sometimes mean that it can be difficult for academics to share findings until a paper has been formally accepted for publication in a journal. NGO practitioners should also be appreciative of the professional constraints that prevent academics publishing results in a short timeframe. NGOs understandably would like findings produced as soon as possible, particularly if the research project relates to a topical and fast-moving policy debate. However, academics have to abide by formal processes of ethical approval and peer-review to ensure the credibility and quality of their work, which can considerably slow down the research process (often to the frustration of academics and practitioners alike!).

The day concluded with a consensus that clear expectations need to be established at the beginning of any research project to ensure that the partnership evolves in ways that are fruitful and satisfactory for both parties.

Angela Crack

For further details on the workshop discussions, please see Maryam Deloffre's informative blog-posts on the Duck of Minerva website:

Fostering Partnerships Between Academics and NGOs:
http://duckofminerva.com/2015/06/fostering-partnerships-between-academics-and-ngos.html

NGO Power Shift 2.0: http://duckofminerva.com/2015/06/ngo-power-shift-2-0-3.html

Angela Crack has also blogged about the event on Bond's website:
http://www.bond.org.uk/blog/106/putting-theory-into-practice