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NGOs, Aid Withdrawal and Exit Strategies

RACHEL HAYMAN

1. Introduction

Civil society is being profoundly affected by a rapidly changing global environment, where economic recession in some parts of the world and economic growth in others is transforming the aid landscape and the nature of partnerships between northern and southern organisations. However, contradictions are also emerging. Civil society organisations have negotiated new roles in dialogue over development issues at the global level, such as the post-2015 framework, and development effectiveness. Several major donors are producing policies to enhance how they support civil society in development, demonstrating its recognised value (Hayman 2012). Development assistance channelled through or by non-governmental organisations continues to grow (OECD 2013a; RoA 2014). Yet, civil society organisations and activists in many countries are experiencing repression from government authorities (CIVICUS 2013; RoA 2014). In many developed countries, organisations are facing two concurrent challenges: cuts in public and private funding, and pressure to demonstrate tangible results.

Within this changing global aid and development dynamic, the International NGO Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) began to observe that many international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) were ending projects, programmes and partnerships in some countries. While INGOs are constantly restructuring and adapting, shifting in response to development needs, strategic priorities, and funding opportunities, there appeared to be a marked increase in exit processes. INGOs are actively seeking examples of good practice and knowledge on how to plan their exit, including such issues as: how to prepare partners and staff; principles to apply; ensuring sustainability of partners, interventions and activi-

ties; knowing when is the right time to withdraw support; monitoring exit processes; and building capacity prior to exit. INGOs are keen to discuss and share knowledge on this topic in safe spaces. Nevertheless, few are analysing or documenting experiences of exit internally, and fewer still are sharing those experiences externally by publishing or disseminating findings openly, so that lessons can be learned. Moreover, INGOs rarely seem to be aware of existing research or publicly available materials on aid exit.

Reflections on the future of aid and international development at the global level, as well as empirical studies on specific INGOs, recognise how INGOs are caught up in changes to development policy and financing. However, there is a lack of studies analysing aid withdrawal in relation to INGOs. This article starts addressing this gap. It draws on data gathered since 2012 through observational and participatory research with INGOs, including data on exit patterns and processes from 17 European INGOs. It firstly explores where the INGOs are withdrawing from and why, then interrogates the processes of exit used by INGOs and the challenges they face, including the sharing of knowledge and experience within the sector. The paucity of research on this topic between macro-level debates and individual studies represents a significant gap in our understanding of how NGOs are adapting to global shifts.

2. Background, methodology and findings

2.1 Aid withdrawal, NGOs and exit strategies in the international development context

International aid has been going through considerable changes in the last decade, in line with shifts in the global political economy (Severino/Ray 2009, 2010; Kanbur/Sumner 2012; Kharas/Rogerson 2012; Thomas 2013; RoA 2014; Alonso et al. 2014). Overall amounts of development financing have increased; however, the actors, channels, forms, functions and recipients have undergone major transformations. Notable trends of relevance to this piece are debates around aid to middle income countries (Kanbur/Sumner 2012; Thomas 2013; Herbert 2013), debates around support for poor countries or poor people (Wood/Tiwari 2012; Sumner 2013), and fragmentation of aid, with many new actors playing a greater

role in development activities. Civil society actors and organisations, including INGOs, have been caught up in these changes. INGOs are important conduits of both public and private aid, and although accurate statistics are not available, both the total number of NGOs worldwide and the volume of finance they channel are considered to be rising (Sianes 2013; OECD 2013a; Tomlinson 2014).

However, the greater involvement of a wider pool of actors in international development, including private foundations, the private sector, and NGOs based in the global south, has created competition for INGOs. Many that receive a considerable proportion of their funding from traditional donor agencies have been affected by cuts to public aid funds, decisions by aid agencies to widen the actors they engage with, and reductions in aid to emerging economies. In addition to funding, INGOs have faced challenges over accountability, effectiveness and legitimacy (Pratt 2009; Dubochet 2012; Popplewell 2013; Sianes 2013; RoA 2014; Elbers/Schulpen 2015).

Several studies have explored how particular INGOs are adapting to the changing context, analysing the processes that INGOs go through in order to adjust to meet new demands from donors, publics and partners (see Dubochet 2012; Elbers 2012; Elbers/Schulpen 2015). These studies bring depth to the global debates on the future of aid, highlighting the lived realities of organisations facing major change. In this environment, INGOs have to make decisions about where they are working and how. To get from where they are now to where they either want to be or need to be requires them to halt some activities and relationships.

Although there is a substantial body of literature on the purpose and impacts (positive and negative) of aid delivered by global institutions, the governments of developed countries, and international NGOs, much of this does not engage with the issue of exit strategies or withdrawal processes in practice. Authors that do discuss aid exit explicitly (see Easterly 2006; Moyo 2009; Fee 2012) rarely engage with the practical side of withdrawal, but tend to focus on arguments for an end to aid because of its distortive or dependency-inducing effects. They do not discuss *how* aid should be withdrawn, the intertwined systems that need to be dismantled, the impact of that process on the people and organisations involved, and the consequences that withdrawal might have for the sustainability of development activities in the short to medium-term.

A second strand of literature contributes useful insights into processes of aid exit with reference to specific countries, donors and cases. Research includes reflections on the politics of withdrawal (Davis/Sankar 2006; Slob/Jerve 2008), as well as practical guidance for donors and NGOs (Levinger/McLeod 2002; Roger/Macias 2004a, 2004b; Gardner et al. 2005; Kvinna till Kvinna 2011). This literature provides valuable insights into the reasons for aid withdrawal in specific cases as well as approaches to developing exit strategies. However, there are few recent studies in this pool, and none that engage with broader patterns of withdrawal.

Finally, literature on partnership and relationships between northern and southern-based NGOs often touches on aid withdrawal (James 1994; Fowler 2000a, 2000b; Brehm 2001; Eriksson Baaz 2005; Keystone Accountability 2011; Elbers 2012). Issues examined include capacity building of local organisations as a prerequisite for partners to become self-sufficient, and interrogations of the power dynamics behind the idea of partnership when relationships rest upon funding. This literature also explores relationships beyond aid and provides important guidance on dilemmas facing INGOs. This article builds particularly on the latter two bodies of work and in doing so seeks to address the gap in the more macro-level political economy analyses.

2.2 Study methodology and findings

In 2009, researchers at INTRAC began writing about the impact of shifts in the global environment on civil society dynamics, observing how these were affecting countries reaching middle income or lower middle income status (Pratt 2009, 2010). This was further debated at a conference in December 2011 attended by nearly 100 representatives of civil society organisations, international NGOs, donor agencies, and civil society support organisations. Here, NGOs raised the challenge of the process of exit from partnerships in the emerging context (INTRAC 2011). Since then, aid withdrawal and how it relates to broader developments in the global political economy have become increasingly salient amongst NGOs. Ever more NGOs and private foundations are contacting INTRAC to discuss approaches to exit and how to ensure sustainability of local partners and development interventions.

In 2012, the INTRAC research team, funded by several INGOs,¹ was tasked with providing further reflection on several key lines of enquiry: to review existing work on exit strategies; explore aid withdrawal challenges facing northern NGOs as budgets and portfolios change; understand the perspective from southern partners; and examine creative ways of redefining partnerships. During initial discussions, the INGOs involved recognised that this was not a new topic, but they were concerned about an apparent wave of withdrawals, insufficient understanding of this phenomenon, and a paucity of tools to deal with this. The data presented here focus on what is happening amongst northern-based INGOs.

In an initial survey in 2012, eight European-based INGOs listed 21 countries which they had already withdrawn from in the years between 2007 and 2012, or were planning to withdraw from imminently. These were: Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, Cameroon, Cambodia, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), East Timor, Ecuador, Eritrea, Honduras, India, Kenya, Laos, Nepal, Peru, Philippines, Rwanda, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, and Uganda. Of these, the following countries were experiencing withdrawal from more than one INGO: Angola, Bangladesh, Brazil, Cambodia, India, Honduras, Laos, Nepal, Philippines, and South Africa (INTRAC 2012a).

Further exploration was carried out at a workshop in November 2012 attended by representatives of 22 different European INGOs, NGO networks and associations, amongst which were seven of the original eight. These were mainly medium-sized or large INGOs, providing multiple programmes across development and humanitarian sectors, but the list also included more issues-based, smaller INGOs and networks. Participating INGOs were asked about the countries from which they were withdrawing. 16 provided this information: they described 62 cases of programme, project or partnerships closure covering 49 countries and regions (INTRAC 2012b). Additional data were subsequently provided by several of these INGOs, and by May 2013 we had a dataset covering 86 cases of withdrawal by 17 INGOs from 49 countries and regions.² Within this dataset, five organisations were exiting from India, five from the Philippines, and four from Cambodia. Amongst the 17 INGOs were several that were withdrawing from more than five countries, with one agency withdrawing from 14 in total.

The INGOs that provided these data were self-selecting, and there are many limitations in the research. We were unable to probe deeply into the responses but only asked simple questions around where INGOs were exiting from, why and how. We did not interrogate sufficiently *what* INGOs were withdrawing from, i.e. what types of programmes or projects, whether they were short-term or long-term interventions with rolling funding or short-term contracts, and with what forms of local presence or partnerships.

However, the initial mapping exercise highlights some important issues. While we had expected emerging economies to be prime candidates for withdrawal (e.g. India, the Philippines, South Africa, Brazil, Mexico and Angola), the list included many examples of withdrawal from low-income countries or lower-middle income countries with ongoing high development challenges, such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Laos and Nepal. Moreover, there are countries which constitute difficult political environments for NGOs to work in, but which are amongst the poorest in the world, such as DRC and Rwanda. The list also included several post-communist countries which saw a large inflow of NGOs in the mid-1990s, but have experienced gradual pull-back since the mid-2000s (Buxton 2011). We had anticipated more concentration of countries and were surprised by the range of countries.

At the November 2012 workshop further questions were posed around reasons for withdrawal, the process of exit and subsequent relationships. The reasons can be grouped into six categories; most respondents gave at least two reasons for their decision to withdraw:

- Funding: in 28 cases (out of the 62 cases offered at the workshop) withdrawal was due to cuts in the overall budget of the INGO or cuts in specific programme budgets.
- Strategic: 32 cases were described as being in response to changes in strategic direction at an organisational level, de-prioritisation of countries or the closure of isolated projects.
- Country progress: in 14 cases, exit was based on an analysis of the rate of economic growth or poverty reduction in the country, and an assessment of whether continued support was required.
- Political: this category included withdrawal because of corruption, forced exit and shrinking political space for civil society to operate in,

thereby affecting the ability of the INGO to function. This was given as the reason for withdrawal in two cases.

- Added value: in three cases, the work of the organisation was assessed as no longer having clear added value, or other organisations were doing similar work to greater effect in the same location.
- Cost effectiveness: in four cases, high operating costs (e.g. Angola and DRC), poor value for money, poor efficiency, lack of progress and poor results underpinned the withdrawal.

Strategic and funding reasons provided the main explanations. These were interlinked in the INGO narratives. Funding squeezes have been profound for some NGOs, but funding was rarely given as the only explanation. The financial climate was considered by many participants to have been a catalyst for reviewing priorities, activities and relationships in order to lead to better programmes, more targeted activities, more strategic partnerships, and better results.

As regards processes of exit, most organisations phased their exit over a period of 18 months to three years. This was often coupled with capacity building (specified for 14 cases), and in five cases fundraising support was mentioned. In four cases, the INGO reached out to others within their own networks, such as the Act Alliance or Caritas, to take over support for particular partners.

In 31 cases the relationship after withdrawal was described as ‘ended’. However, a few have or intended to retain relationships with former partners. One organisation had maintained a small funding window so that it could continue to provide ad-hoc support to some strategic partners in countries from which it had exited. Others had shifted to an advocacy-based relationship, or maintained a formal connection, such as through the INGO remaining on a partner’s advisory board. For many, a more informal relationship remained, primarily through INGO networks and alliances.

3. Discussion: interrogating the ‘why’ and the ‘how’

The study started from the perception that economic crises in several European countries were leading to withdrawal from primarily middle-income countries. What emerged was a more complex picture that

reflects many of the broader trends in aid debates, and the study thus only scratched the surface. Concentrating on withdrawal from *countries* often masked nuances within country programmes where it was only particular partnerships that were ending, but where INGOs were in fact strengthening collaboration with other partners in the same country. Some of the INGOs in our pool of participants were starting up work in new countries. Furthermore, there are distinct differences between INGOs that are closing a local office, those that are ending projects and programmes that may have been finite, and those that are ending financial support to a long-term local partner.

3.1 Why

Three trends provide explanations for the findings and patterns: aid shifts; different needs in emerging economies; and aid effectiveness. Firstly, economic downturn in OECD countries is often the key explanation for large-scale aid programme reductions by governments, e.g. Ireland, Italy, Spain, Greece and Portugal. However, other countries less affected by financial difficulties have also made considerable cuts to international development budgets, e.g. Belgium and the Netherlands (OECD 2012, 2013b). Political change has led to a restructuring of development assistance, for example with the merging of foreign ministries and development cooperation portfolios in countries such as Canada and Australia, and to an enhanced connection between aid, security and trade, as has happened in the Netherlands. This reflects the re-emergence of more strategic aid, away from the rights-based, poverty-focused approach that dominated the 1990s and 2000s (RoA 2012). In several countries, moreover, government policies with regard to civil society are changing. In the Netherlands, for example, INGOs have long relied for a very high proportion of their income on public resources, and will face major cuts in the coming years (private communications; RoA 2012: 236). The European Commission, as well as Denmark and Norway, have developed new civil society policies and strategies which have placed the funding arrangements of INGOs into the spotlight, and which demonstrate how donors are considering alternative ways of funding civil society in developing countries (Norad 2008; Fällman 2012; Giffen 2013). These shifts have considerable knock-on effects for INGOs which receive a high proportion of their funding from govern-

ments, leading to tough choices being made about programme sizes and staffing. Economic crisis also affects private donations. In Ireland, reductions in donations from the public, as well as the government, to international development have been considerable (Popplewell 2013).

Secondly, economic growth in middle and lower middle income countries is providing a catalyst for the reduction in programme and project aid to these countries, or to a move to more technical assistance and soft loans (DFID 2012; OECD 2013b; Thomas 2013; Herbert 2013; Tomlinson 2014). This is sparking considerable debate about where aid should be concentrated, including amongst larger INGOs, many of which are reviewing whether or not they should be working in middle income countries and, if so, with what types of support and in what types of relationships (Kanbur/Sumner 2012; Thomas 2013).

Finally, there is pressure in many OECD countries for demonstrable evidence of the impact of aid. Among the reasons for withdrawal listed by our sample were organisations' inability to articulate the added value of their support and its cost effectiveness. Since the early 2000s there has been much debate in the development sector around the effectiveness and efficiency of development interventions and aid (Hayman 2012), which has led to growing pressure on INGOs to demonstrate results from their work (Du Toit 2012; Sianes 2013). The effectiveness agenda has stimulated reflection on numbers of projects and partners, arguably leading to a more rational distribution of resources. Our sample included examples where the INGO provided isolated support to one partner in an entire country based on long-term historical ties, but with an unclear rationale in relation to the wider goals of the INGO. Of greater concern is where pressure to be efficient and cost-effective leads INGOs to withdraw from fragile contexts which are expensive to work in, where insecurity is high, and where impact may be harder to demonstrate because of the environment, for example DRC and Eritrea.

3.2 How

Interrogating the process by which programmes are closed and partnerships ended reveals a pattern of weak knowledge sharing and organisational angst, set against a backdrop of a growing awareness that the global aid system is changing and the role of INGOs is in flux. Most of the organ-

isations in our sample had a phased process of exit which involved support for partners to find alternative funders or to build capacity for sustainability. However, most also emphasised admitted weaknesses in their planning and internal principles and strategies for exit.

In theory, good practice would dictate that when establishing projects or working relationships, INGOs and their southern partners should build an exit strategy into the design, incorporating the capacity building of partners. There should be a clear rationale for beginning a funding-based partnership and a clear path towards the end of the relationship, enabling transparency and avoiding dependency (Levinger/McLeod 2002; Roger/Macias 2004a, 2004b; Gardner et al. 2005). However, this is hard to achieve in reality, as the needs of projects evolve over time and as mitigating circumstances upset linear trajectories towards specified objectives. Development seldom follows the plan. In practice, the process is rarely simple, and numerous partnerships and projects have no exit strategy in place; even if they did, the strategy would often be irrelevant at the time the decisions on final exit were made because of modifications in activities over time (Brehm 2001).

The INGOs in our study were all building exit strategies as they were faced with withdrawal, but many lacked clear internal guidelines. The reason for aid withdrawal tended to strongly affect the process. Withdrawal on account of economic constraints can quickly undermine the ideal exit process. Within our sample was an example of a planned three-year phased process, which was progressively cut back because the financial situation became more constricted. Although the final closure was positively portrayed in public, internally the process was more contentious. A structured review process, with strong partner engagement in the decisions and designs for withdrawal, was more likely to be a positive experience. However, many of the participants explained that, although partners would ideally be consulted, and certainly informed about exit processes, very often the design was a top-down imperative from headquarters or country offices. Furthermore, a long-term partnership or programme of work with exit built in can be easily upset by deeper strategic decisions about the structure and objectives of an INGO. Amongst our participants were INGOs which were going through major re-organisations that were resulting in exit processes, for example Everychild, and country chapters of Save the Children and Oxfam.

While often there is a desire to evaluate the impact of exit at a subsequent date, very few INGOs manage to do this; fewer still publicly share the results of such exercises. An exception is the Swedish INGO Kvinna till Kvinna (2011), which withdrew from Croatia in 2006 after 13 years. Withdrawal was based on an assessment of the success of the programme, and therefore a reduction in need. The women's groups supported were considered strong enough to stand alone. Kvinna till Kvinna reviewed their withdrawal after two years. Partners struggled in the first year, partly because they had not sufficiently grasped what withdrawal would mean. This indicated a weakness in discussion and communication on both sides. There were debates about whether the withdrawing partner should take responsibility for finding new donors for partners, or whether the responsibility was rather to ensure that partners had the competencies to access new resources. Kvinna till Kvinna came to accept that not all former partners would continue to exist. Organisations that knew what they wanted and had the strongest capacity were the most sustainable. The downsides of withdrawal were that regional networks weakened, as it was hard to fund cross-national interaction; activities became more localised and inward looking. Women's groups also became quieter in their watchdog role, as they were more dependent on national funds (Kvinna till Kvinna 2011; INTRAC 2012b). Similar dynamics are evident in other cases.

4. Conclusion

Debates about when to plan for exit and how to do it continually arise in international development. Likewise, re-strategising, realignment and reorientation are part of a regular cycle for INGOs. However, there has been a growing interest among European-based INGOs in aid withdrawal and exit issues since about 2011, which is reflective of an increase in official development aid being withdrawn from a number of countries as part of changes in the financing of development. Our research started from a simplistic hypothesis about economic decline in some parts of the world and growth in others leading to aid exit by NGOs, and a questioning of the absence of data about these patterns. The data gathered reflect wider trends in international development: uncertainties about the future of INGOs,

the future of their activities in countries they have long supported through partnerships, networks and local offices, and the wider sustainability of civil society. As several civil society analysts have been warning INGOs for some time (see Fowler/Malunga 2010; Tandon/Brown 2013), the changes in the international development environment will have significant consequences for the sector both in the north and the south.

Aid exit creates existential dilemmas within INGOs about the rhetoric and reality of their partnerships, their added value into the future, and practical challenges around where to work, how and why. Even where phase-out, hand-over or exit is built in from the outset, the process will never be straightforward or non-contentious as there are myriad interests at stake, including those of local staff. All too often, exit is not inherently built into the programme, project or partnership, or at least not in a way that is relevant when exit becomes an imminent reality; numerous practical issues need to be addressed, which can be difficult and often demoralising. INGOs want to be responsible partners, to ensure sustainability of their partners or work, but struggle to know how to do this; and many would like to know about the impact of withdrawal but rarely manage to evaluate the process.

While some literature exists to support INGOs, many organisations are either unaware of or are not working with this. The individuals or teams within INGOs who are grappling with aid withdrawal processes feel that they are scrabbling around in the dark. It begs the question of why there is limited sharing of knowledge to date on the experiences of aid exit, and why INGOs do not appear aware of existing knowledge. Despite a desire to share and learn, very few INGOs have put their data into the public domain or documented exit processes. This compounds the weak evidence base about the scale and impact of exit, and the fuller picture of how global aid dynamics are affecting INGOs and the local organisations they work with.

Our research to date has focused on withdrawal by the giver. There remain substantial gaps in publicly available empirical evidence on the experience of withdrawal from the recipient perspective. A greater commitment amongst INGOs to document and publicly share their experiences would go some way to creating a knowledge base from which evidence can be derived, and which would enable INGOs to build more account-

able and coherent exit strategies into their ethos and practice. This is vital if INGOs are to play a strong role in the complex future of development financing, if they are going to change how they engage with partners, how they deliver aid interventions, and how they provide support in order to strengthen local civil society, ensure sustainability, reduce dependence, and allow for painless and smooth exit processes when the time is right.

- 1 The initial research was funded by INTRAC's NGO Research Programme, with support from Broederlijk Delen, Concern Worldwide, Cordaid, DanChurch Aid, ICCO, Norwegian Church Aid, and Save the Children Denmark.
- 2 Participating INGOs had headquarters in a number of European countries, including the UK, Ireland, the Netherlands, Belgium, Denmark, Norway and Austria.

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Abstracts

Within the changing global economic and political environment for civil society and international development, a growing number of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) appear to be withdrawing from projects, programmes, and partners in developing countries.

However, there is little publicly available evidence about this phenomenon and its impact on both INGOs and their civil society partners. Drawing on data gathered through participatory research and exchange with INGOs based in several European countries, this article highlights the range of countries and regions affected by aid exit, some reasons behind withdrawal, approaches taken, and various challenges and dilemmas that INGOs face. It questions the contradiction between a desire amongst INGOs to learn from others about exit strategies, and the lack of accessible documentation and data made available by INGOs about their own experiences for others to use.

Angesichts des sich wandelnden politischen und ökonomischen Umfelds von Zivilgesellschaft und internationaler Entwicklung scheint sich eine wachsende Zahl internationaler Nichtregierungsorganisationen (INROs) aus Projekten, Programmen und Partnerschaften in Entwicklungsländern zurückzuziehen. Es gibt jedoch wenig öffentlich zugängliche Informationen, wie sich dieses Phänomen sowohl auf die INROs als auch auf deren zivilgesellschaftliche Partnerorganisationen auswirkt. Dieser Artikel präsentiert Erkenntnisse, die durch teilhabende Forschung mit und die Untersuchung von INROs in mehreren Ländern Europas gewonnen wurden. Er zeigt regionale Schwerpunkte, Gründe sowie unterschiedliche Ansätze des Ausstiegs aus der Entwicklungszusammenarbeit auf und verweist auf Herausforderungen und Dilemmata, mit denen INROs konfrontiert sind. Er thematisiert auch den Widerspruch, dass INROs zwar daran interessiert sind, von den Ausstiegsstrategien anderer Organisationen zu lernen, dass sie aber zugleich ihre eigenen Erfahrungen nicht dokumentieren und anderen nicht zur Verfügung stellen.

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