



Raising the Game: Engaging citizens and working with NGOs

Summary of the workshop delivered by thematic expert Emma Clarence, Idrija 22-23 October 2019

The constraints that local administrations face has led to a growing focus on the role of NGOs in initiating and implementing activities to address community needs. However, local administrations can be overly ambitious as to what NGOs can achieve given their capacity and resources. Local administrations need to understand that NGO activity is distinct from its own actions and that rather than seeking to direct, they must instead support the development of NGO capacity. In short, the focus needs to be on ensuring a positive eco-system for NGOs in order to strengthen and enhance the role they can play in their local communities.

Expectations and Reality

Local administrations can often be overly ambitious about what the NGO sector can achieve. As local administrations have confronted resource constraints and social, economic and demographic changes, there has increasingly been an expectation that NGOs can fill the gaps in addressing local needs. However, while NGOs have an important role to play within communities, it is important for local administrations to be:

- Realistic about what can be achieved given the people, time, resources and enthusiasms of the NGO sector in an area.
- Recognise that the NGO sector will not meet all needs and that some needs may not be adequately addressed.

Nor, it should be acknowledged, are all NGOs necessarily contributing to stronger, more inclusive, communities.

Creating a supportive eco-system for NGOs

NGOs need a supportive eco-system to flourish. Such an eco-system recognises the strengths and needs of the sector, and seeks to address barriers to its development. Although opportunities for financial support may be limited, there is much that can be done through in-kind support and with limited resources.

The provision of shared facilities for NGOs, such as through space within a public building, can be an important part of a supportive eco-system. Creating a visible 'centre' for NGOs, that NGOs can use and which can become a local 'hub' for NGOs and people to come together, can have a positive impact on raising the profile of NGO activities within an area. Shared space has the potential to facilitate greater collaboration between NGOs and can also promote and enable people to explore opportunities for volunteering – whether it be one off local activities to a more regular commitment.

Another element of a supportive eco-system for NGOs is the provision of training and support to strengthen and build NGO capacity. Voluntary organisations may lack the mix of skills needed to maximise their impact. From volunteer recruitment and coordination to website design and social media skills to project planning and implementation, the skills needed for a successful NGO are wide-ranging. Supporting NGOs to develop the skills they need can help them to be more effective in their local communities.

This short video on NGO House in Riga from Urbact's ACTIVE Network provides an interesting example of how NGOs can be supported: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r0rjOa4VGcg>

Local Administrations and NGOs

Developing an understanding of NGO activity within a local area is important. Local administrations should seek to know:

- Who the NGOs working in their area are – and what they are doing.
- Where needs are being met – and where they aren't.
- Who is volunteering – and who isn't.

Having this information can help local administrations to develop a clearer idea of the landscape of NGO activity – and where support might be effective in creating stronger NGOs and the potential for greater cross-NGO collaboration. There is also the potential for local administrations to leverage NGO knowledge of local needs. However, local administrations also need to recognise that such knowledge may be limited.

It is essential that local administrations understand that NGOs are not there to further their strategic objectives. NGOs might, as a by-product of their activities, contribute to meeting those objectives, but their actions cannot be directed. Local administrations need to recognise that attempts to direct NGO activity are likely only to contribute to distrust and a perception that local administrations want to exert top-down control on NGO activity. Both of which will have a negative impact on the willingness of people to volunteer and engage in community activity.

Volunteering

Recruiting volunteers and sustaining their engagement is a well-known challenge. Some groups, such as young people, can be difficult to reach. There are no easy solutions to recruiting volunteers. Rethinking what volunteering is and being creative about the opportunities available can help to broaden the appeal of volunteering. This is more than simply matching people and interests and skills to opportunities, but considering how different skills and opportunities can be utilised in new ways.

This means rethinking the how, where and what of volunteering and moving beyond traditional ideas of what it means to volunteer. It means rethinking the messages around volunteering. Demonstrating specific impact has been shown to have a positive role in recruitment, with people wanting to know that any time they spend volunteering is making a positive contribution. Short-term or ad hoc commitments can also be effective at drawing in people who may be reluctant to commit regularly.

Finally, the importance of saying ‘thank you’ to volunteers should not be overlooked – both by NGOs themselves and by local administrations to signal the value they give to NGO activities within their area.

A good NGO platform?

NGO platforms have a range of different roles, but the types of characteristics associated with successful ones include:

- Supporting the development of volunteering strategically in an area
 - by developing a culture of different types of volunteering activities within NGOs to meet different needs and expectations of volunteers, and,
 - through the quality and quantity of volunteering opportunities.
- Acting as a broker between organisations and people, and help people to find the right organisation to volunteer with.
- Promoting good practice within NGOs and improve the capacity and capability of NGOs in a wide-range of areas.
- Speaking on behalf of NGOs to create greater awareness and understanding of NGOs generally.

This idea of what a ‘good’ NGO platform can do is an ambitious one – nor is it one that emerges and develops quickly and without support. It takes time to build the relationships and trust required, as well as the skills, for such an NGO platform to take shape.

However, putting in place support can help NGO platforms to be effective at contributing to local communities through the identification of local needs and the coordination of local action, as well as acting as a conduit for communicating local needs. Nevertheless, local administrations cannot expect NGO platforms to be able to address local needs alone, nor overcome apathy and distrust.

Conclusion

NGOs have a critical role to play in local communities and an NGO platform can maximise the effectiveness of the contribution they make. However, despite the enthusiasm of many local

administrations for enhancing the role of NGOs, they need to be realistic as to what NGOs can achieve given their resource limitations. Putting in place support mechanisms that contribute to a positive eco-system which enable NGOs to flourish is central to strengthening the role they play in local communities.

Emma Clarence