

Making Aid Agencies Work

Never afraid to ask the difficult questions and to come up with challenging answers, Gibson digs under the surface of recent problems in the aid industry and provides disruptive and innovative solutions. You may not agree with everything he says, but taking the journey with him will definitely lead you somewhere new in your thinking, whether you're part of the industry yourself or just an interested observer.

— Dr Simon Batchelor, Development Entrepreneur and Innovator, DFID recognised champion of mobile payments, MPESA and Solar Electric cooking

Making Aid Agencies Work brilliantly captures the tensions INGOs face in trying to meet the increasing demands for results, accountability, transparency and efficiency from their masters in development agencies in the north while still meeting the needs of the people they seek to serve.

— Dr Ian Smith, Former Executive Director of the Office of the Director-General of the World Health Organization

Gibson is uniquely positioned to ask important and novel questions of the INGO community – and of those who partner, support and fund INGOs. His analysis provides guidance on contemporary challenges in a rapidly changing and increasingly politicised world.

— Professor Mark Pelling, King's College London

Making Aid Agencies Work: Reconnecting INGOs with the People They Serve

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Inventing Futures, UK



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	ix
<i>List of Boxes</i>	xi
<i>About the Author</i>	xiii
<i>Preface and Acknowledgements</i>	xv
Introduction	1
1. Evolution of the Industry: History of INGOs	9
2. The Whole World Has Changed	21
3. <i>'When There's a Crash, Blame the Pilot': Local Failings or Broader Problem?</i>	33
4. The Architecture of the Industry: <i>'Show Me the Money'</i>	47
5. <i>Before You Can Agree a Goal, You Have to Decide Who Should Agree a Goal</i>	61
6. Learning from the Local	77
7. Which End of the Telescope?	93
8. Turning INGOs Upside Down	117
Conclusion: Rebuilding	133

Notes	137
Bibliography	177
Other Publications	191
<i>Index</i>	193

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.	INGO Functions	15
Figure 2.	Three INGO Functions Reshaped Through Donor Pressures.	58
Figure 3.	Service Delivery INGO Structure.	59
Figure 4.	Situated Learning: Action, Reflection and Knowledge. . .	70
Figure 5.	Knowledge and Power Matrix.	74
Figure 6.	Institutional Donors and INGOs in the Knowledge and Power Matrix.	75
Figure 7.	INGO Roles Converging.	96
Figure 8.	Knowledge and Power in an INGO Rooted in Situated Learning.	108
Figure 9.	Change Agency INGO Structure.	109
Figure 10.	Contrasting Service Delivery and Change Agency INGO Structures.	120
Figure 11.	Functions in a Change Agency INGO.	123

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LIST OF TABLES

Table 1.	Contrasting Urban and Rural Experience of Threats and Consequences, From GNDR <i>Frontline</i> Data ($N = 6,173$). Source: From Gibson and Wisner (2016).	26
Table 2.	Threats and Consequences Reported by Richest and Poorest Respondents, From GNDR <i>Frontline</i> Data. Source: From Gibson and Wisner (2016).	28

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LIST OF BOXES

Box 1.	What Happened in Haiti?	3
Box 2.	Kathmandu Workshop Themes	85

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Terry Gibson is a researcher and activist in international development. After a career in filmmaking focused on the Global South, he combined doctoral research at Manchester University with a full-time role as Operations Director of the Global Network of Civil Society Organizations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR). Here he developed and led the major research programme 'Frontline', collecting community perceptions of disasters and risk. His current research focuses on local learning and action, the lived experience of everyday disasters and the role of NGOs. His website is available at inventing-futures.org.

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Some have asked me, when I told them about this book, why another is needed about problems faced by international NGOs and the entire aid industry. This usually leads on to a discussion on those problems, but they are not, at the deepest level, what the book is about. Its real focus is learning. My career, spanning communications, international development, research and practice, has been driven by a fascination with learning, and I realised quite early that what interested me wasn't book learning by individuals but the kind that goes on socially, in groups and organisations.

When I sat in an African village talking to Cathalene, who you'll meet in these pages, I saw that she brought tremendous energy and determination, day after day, to bringing up her family. What I also saw was that she and her fellow villagers understood clearly how things could be different and how decisions made further away affected their daily lives. As I carried on travelling, working and studying, I discovered it made sense to listen to these voices and the knowledge they created, but few were.

We live in a technocratic world, the province of experts. What people learn in their ordinary lives is undervalued. Their reality doesn't count. The aid industry does the maths on people's lives and acts for them, not with them. Travelling to cities, towns and villages in many countries I became more and more convinced that their voices, ideas, experience should be heard. Not just politely before carrying on, but as an important basis for action.

Having stood uncomfortably for some years now straddling the gaping crevice between practice and study, I wish this gap would close. Academics have much to offer when they think questioningly and imaginatively and show others how to do that. I particularly like the way they can look in on the day-to-day from outside and see things often unnoticed. This is critical thinking. What's not so great are the career and financial pressures which

turn academia into an inward-looking industry, writing stuff that's more and more obtuse just to impress or even outcompete colleagues.

Practitioners I've worked with in the aid industry are almost invariably passionate about their work, concerned to make a difference, energetic activists, determined change agents. The trouble with the treadmill many of them are on is it gives no time or permission to stop, think and ask whether this is the best way things can be. Activists find it very hard to learn and have little patience with thinkers, researchers and academics.

You can see why if the two could bash their heads together creating a blend of the best of both we might learn better. Donald Schon called this combination 'reflective practitioners', a term I like, though I wish it somehow implied groups, discussion, collaboration rather than someone sitting, solo, at a desk.¹ Learning from action is a group process. It's learning that results in further, better, action and it doesn't need education and training. I guess what it does need, and what is often drummed out of us in various ways, is self-belief. People, particularly in poverty, become passive and resigned when they decide not only that there are no options but that no one values their thoughts about how things could be different.

Turning back to the industry which is the focus of this book, I think the missing piece is learning. It's gradually become clear to me that vital knowledge is created everywhere people live, work and struggle, but is unheard. If INGOs could shift their focus away from the treadmills they are on to listen, learn, become change agencies, things might be very different.

The first four chapters of this book investigate how this industry has developed, what drives it and what challenges it faces. They suggest that INGOs' historical development has created constraints to their pursuit of their missions, that their staff in turn are constrained in their actions, experiencing dislocation and disconnection whether in the field or in head offices. Financial drivers tend to focus INGOs on the priorities of funders and these in turn focus their goals towards institutional priorities rather than local concerns.

The following chapters explore insights that can be gained from local experience and knowledge, how these might lead to a radical restructuring of INGO operations, what this implies for the structure of the organisations themselves and what can be learnt from organisations which, from

¹ Schon, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

inception or through restructuring, have adopted different forms of organisation focusing more strongly on learning and action.

I believe strongly in learning from action and also in the power of stories, so I've made use of many of my encounters spanning a quarter century, some very recent and some from further back. I've used them because even if they're less recent, the issues they raise are still relevant, and the research wrapped around them draws on current sources.

If I've learnt anything myself over the years, it's been with and from the valued colleagues around me. I'm grateful to UK INGO Tearfund who sent me all over the world filming, introducing me to many people and places, shaping my thinking. I learned a huge amount from working with hundreds of members of the Global Network for Disaster Reduction and particularly, over the last two years, with Festus Tongwa Aka, Ruiti Aretaake, Sarwar Bari, Guillaume Chantry, Manu Gupta, Grace Molina, John Norton, Hepi Rahmawati, Nisha Shresha and Ben Wisner.

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As well as patiently tolerating my long absences at the desk and my moods, my wife Olwen brainstormed the structure and arguments with me for which, along with everything else, I'm eternally grateful.

Though I champion social learning, this was a solo enterprise, so any errors or shortcomings you find here are solely my responsibility. Beyond these pages I hope some discussion and even learning may grow. Join the conversation at <http://inventing-futures.org/making-aid-agencies-work/>. See you there.