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Partnerships between International Non-Governmental Organizations and Grassroots Organizations for Program Success in Developing Communities

Christine Ow



Abstract: International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) all over the world who seek to improve the lives of many through their various aid and development projects are all similarly interested in ensuring project longevity and sustainability. There has been rich literature on the obstacles to success and the potential remedies to them. This essay is inspired by the success of a Los Angeles-based nonprofit, The Samburu Project, whose model of partnerships with local grassroots organizations (GROs) has allowed the organization's projects to enjoy great success. Drawing upon the experiences of The Samburu Project as well as existing literature, this essay argues that INGOs and GROs possess unique complementary characteristics that make them critical partners for project success. These characteristics include the GROs' closeness to a given community, whose local legitimacy is a means for INGOs to bypass weak and corrupt state institutions. On the other hand, INGOs possess the necessary resources, knowledge, and global legitimacy to empower GROs and can harness the power of the international community for altruism and political pressure. Finally, the essay acknowledges the important role of the state that can either impede or facilitate an INGO-GRO partnership for program success.

Keywords: development, grassroots organizations, international nonprofits, legitimacy, local empowerment

1. Introduction

This project was inspired by an interview I conducted with the Executive Director of The Samburu Project (TSP), a development-oriented, non-governmental organization based in Los Angeles, whose mission is to bring clean water to Samburu County, Kenya. Unlike many nonprofits in the same field, the Director boasted about the longevity of the organization's wells, which she credited to TSP's unique approach, working closely with local grassroots organizations to implement their programs and maintain them into the future.

Has TSP unlocked one of the secrets to the successful implementation of development-oriented programs? That is the question this project seeks to answer. For the well-intentioned international non-governmental organizations (INGOs, to be defined in the following section), success can be measured in longevity and sustainability. However, that milestone has traditionally been difficult to achieve, especially when the organization takes an interventionist approach through which INGOs implement programs without prior consultation or collaboration with local communities. Such initiatives have been criticized for being prescriptive while failing to resolve systemic problems that their target communities face. As such, there is a growing body of literature in the development sector discussing the potential behind leveraging partnerships with grassroots organizations (GROs, to be defined in following section) for the implementation of programs designed by INGOs (Carr 2008; Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2007; Uphoff 1993). This paper dives into the current literature and various case studies to explore the characteristics of GROs and INGOs that create a critical relationship to ensure the success of development programs. At the same time, it also expounds on obstacles posed by governments to the said relationship.

This project argues that working with GROs is key not only to successful implementation of INGO programs, but also to long-term improvement of the target community's circumstances.

2. Definitions

The following section elaborates upon the key terms that will be used throughout this paper.

INGOs are defined as NGOs headquartered in a country outside of their work site. An INGO will typically have local contacts and partners, and some (like TSP) might also have local offices to facilitate the implementation of their programs. However, an INGO is distinct from a regular NGO in that the key decision-making power of the organization lies in an office outside of the work site.

The definition of “GROs” is adapted from Uphoff (1993): “Grassroots organizations are any and all organizations at the group, community or locality level” (609). Adding onto Uphoff’s definition, this paper further defines GROs to be strictly comprised of local community members.

Project success and “success” in general are defined in this paper as INGO projects which are implemented in a manner that is relevant to the problems faced by the community, as identified by locals, and designed to suit the local context. This is considered successful because it smoothly integrates resolving the needs of the people in a pertinent manner that sets it up for longevity. These terms will be used throughout the paper to explore the critical relationship between INGOs and GROs for project success.

3. GROs as Critical Partners for Success

The following section will discuss why GRO partnerships are critical for the success of INGO programs. GROs have a unique closeness to the target community of INGOs that allows for a greater understanding of the problems faced by community members. Furthermore, collaborations with GROs will also grant INGOs more legitimacy during the implementation phase. Direct partnerships with GROs are a way to bypass weak state institutions and are also a means of empowering local

communities to build bottom-up pressure for long-term sustainable development, which are in line with the goals of the INGO.

3.1 Closeness to the target community

GROs have a unique closeness to the target communities INGOs seek to impact that makes them ideal partners for project success. This closeness comes naturally since GROs are made up of community members that have an inherent understanding of local conditions and problems due to their personal experiences with them. This knowledge is critical and beneficial for INGOs as they will be able to create projects and initiatives that directly meet and respond to local needs, which is something many traditional aid interventions fail to do. A common criticism of interventions in the past is their tendency to be prescriptive and based on uninformed perceptions and biases. Working directly with GROs is a proactive way to avoid that common pitfall (Easterly 2006; Hancock 1989).

A notable case of how the traditional aid implementation strategy can accidentally neglect unique local conditions was the Millennium Villages Project, a developmental experiment spearheaded by American economist Jeffrey Sachs.¹ The project identified several villages which they termed “millenium villages” in various less developed African countries; explicit goals and timelines were established along with provisions of extensive amounts of resources, such as building materials, high yield seeds, and education resources, in hopes of helping these communities achieve sustainable development (Sanchez et al. 2007). Geographer and anthropologist Edward R. Carr is among the several academics who have given pointed criticism for the United Nations-backed initiative. Carr (2008) notes that the innovators behind the initiative were working off preconceived notions of what would help the local communities and designed initiatives to target problems, which are intersectional in nature, in an isolated manner. He, along with several academics, have pointed to the problematic nature of an approach rooted in assumptions rather than

reality. While Sachs and the team have tried to design the project based on purported “truths” and tested ways to induce development, these efforts were still not accurate reflections of the complex history and sociology of rural villages in Africa (Carr 2008; Wilson 2015). As such, while the Millennium Village Project eventually did achieve some of its goals, it was an essentially inconclusive experiment that failed to demystify the enigma that is aid and development any more than it had been before the project began (Sachs 2018; Barnett et al. 2018).

Carr’s proposed solution to this problem is to consult and work with the local communities that make up the millennium villages. He argued that “village-led identification of problems and their solutions [are] central to the success of the development project” (339) because locals have a personal understanding of the complex issues faced by the village communities. Therefore, they can make recommendations on solutions that are targeted and relevant to the local context. Active consultation with GROs will also allow INGOs to understand local capacity and limits which informs the program design to be better overall (Carr 2008, 339-342).

Carr’s recommendations highlight that partnerships with GROs are critical for success due to their closeness to target communities. Their intimate understanding of local problems and best solutions allow for INGO programs to be framed and designed in a manner that is sensitive and targeted to local conditions to ensure a long-lasting solution. In that same vein, TSP has been able to enjoy longevity and sustainability in their projects, as every step of their well drilling process is driven by the needs and demands of the Samburu people. The organization responds to community applications for well drills and works with local leaders to establish local management for maintenance; this ensures that the well is taken care of even when TSP staff members turn over ownership to the local community.² At the same time, community members can request TSP to provide educational workshops such as menstrual hygiene or women’s empowerment workshops to meet local needs. These characteristics of the organization are in line with the literature about how GROs closeness to communities allows them to inform INGO programs to be

appropriate for the community, thus leading to project success.

3.2 Local legitimacy

Additionally, the embeddedness of GROs in target communities means they enjoy greater local legitimacy than INGOs. This is a direct result of GROs having been built and sustained through community trust and kinship, which has contributed to their continued existence and local authority in recognition of their contributions to the community (Romano 2019; Ostrom 1990). A notable example of this is the water management groups in rural Nicaragua known as the Potable Water and Sanitation Committee (CAPS), who have managed water services in their communities since the 1970s. As a result of their consistent work, members of these groups are recognized in the communities as leaders, so much so that they are often trusted over government officials, especially when it comes to water management (Romano 2019). This legitimacy is critical as it means that GROs have the ability to influence the behaviors of the local community in ways INGOs are not able to (Viteri and Chavez 2007). This is noted in Uphoff's study of rural development opportunities for GROs and NGOs alike. Uphoff posits that legitimacy is critical for development as it grants an organization more access to resources and respect, which in turn increases the level of compliance to a program or collective action initiative. Uphoff notes that GROs enjoy more local legitimacy and this explains why local organizations are usually more successful in collective action than their nationwide counterparts (Uphoff 1993, 616). In contrast, due to the distant nature of INGOs and the history of aid projects failing to be sensitive to local needs, rural communities and citizens of developing countries at large are often suspicious of external aid efforts (Kimanthi and Hebinck 2018; Cikuru and Mertens 2021).

The recognized legitimacy of GROs is an avenue for INGOs to overcome local skepticism and successfully connect with communities that will benefit from the programs. By borrowing the legitimacy of GROs, INGOs programs can be viewed by local community members

as having more credibility, circumventing any hesitation associated with foreign intervention. At the same time, through GROs supporting INGO programs, INGOs can rally community participation and cooperation which will benefit the long-term goals of the programs.

3.3 Circumventing weak and corrupt local institutions

Another way GRO and INGO partnerships facilitate success is by bypassing weak and often corrupt state institutions to directly impact the lives of target communities. The United Nations reports in 2018 that corruption is estimated to cost the world economy a total of US \$2.6 trillion and those impacted the most are the poor (United Nations 2018). By taking money away from beneficial public programs such as welfare, education, and healthcare (United Nations 2018), it is not uncommon that aid from INGOs never reaches their target communities. This is a concern shared by many academics who argue that despite global efforts to relieve poverty through donations and funding, there are currently no foolproof means to ensure that these funds are benefiting the people who need it most as corruption is seemingly unavoidable (Mishra 2006; Bardhan 1997). As such, many have begun exploring the possibility of funding local communities directly, which has seen some successes.

A notable example is a joint initiative called the International Urban Poor Fund (IUPF) between the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) and Shack/Slum Dwellers International (SDI). The IUPF provides small grants to local communities and GROs to help slum dwellers secure land tenures or make other long-term living arrangements. Within six years of its founding in 2001, the Fund had given around US \$ 4.6 million to over 40 GROs in 17 countries and secured land tenure for an astounding number of over 170,000 families internationally by 2007. The Fund has also initiated local savings groups to pool community resources to act as a social safety net for impoverished families. Empowered GROs have also become partners with local officials to influence policies and create more conducive relationships between

en slum dwellers and government officials. Together, communities have built thousands of homes for themselves and are even actively involved in an international network of slum dwellers to share learning points and experiences with one another (Mitlin and Swatterthwaite 2007).

There are several other examples of projects that have experienced great success by working directly with local communities. For example, 1) a rural self-help program granted over a million people in Malawi clean water, 2) the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh has worked successfully with local small saver-borrower groups to provide loans to over 1.2 million people among the rural poor (Uphoff 1993, 617), and 3) the 109 wells TSP drilled have come to benefit over 100,000 people, supported schools, hospitals, and women's empowerment programs in Samburu County, Kenya (The Samburu Project 2019, 25).

The rapid and sustained success of the IUPF as well as other cases of successful direct help programs is evidence that to combat the uncertainty tied to state partnerships, INGOs should work with GROs in their target communities. By circumventing state mechanisms, INGOs are able to reduce the risk of corruption siphoning funds away or political impasses inhibiting the implementation of their programs. Rather, partnerships with GROs ensure that there is transparency and increased control for both the INGO and GRO to determine where funds are allocated and programs are implemented. This sets up the necessary conditions and accountability for program success in target communities.

3.4 Political empowerment for long-term change

That being said, avoiding local corruption is not a long-term solution. For sustained development, the involvement of the state is critical for target communities. One of the biggest risks of foreign aid intervention is dependency (Brautigam and Knack 2004). The fear is that successful INGO programs will create a reliance on the resources and initiatives provided by the INGO, without the state building a community's local capacity or addressing systemic issues that underlie many local problems.

Therefore, an added benefit of partnerships between INGOs and GROs is the empowerment of GROs to become organizations capable of exerting bottom-up pressure on state and local governments to affect policy change.

By working together with GROs, INGOs provide grassroots leaders with the resources and knowledge that will allow locals to personally contribute to improvements within their communities. Also known as asset-based community development (ABCD), ABCD is a strategy of community empowerment where external organizations focus on empowering locals by leveraging “local residents’ insights, skills, and resources, thereby increasing the effectiveness of outside support” (Lee 2018, 7). A successful case study of ABCD is Nyasare Water and Sanitation Company. Initially founded by a local church, it relied extensively on domestic and international partners to “provide technical and administrative assistance” (Lee 2018, 10). However, in the last decade, the management of this Company has been officially turned over to the community who has been able to sustainably manage the project while “achieving financial stability and greater community participation” (Lee 2018, 10).

However, the impacts of ABCD are not limited to the passing over of project management responsibilities. ABCD has a broader impact on the psychology of beneficiaries that empowers them to take on a more proactive role in local development – including political reform. Hanna Nel (2017) finds that in communities that have been empowered through ABCD, residents often gain “confidence in the usage of these assets” and these “interventions [created] citizens with a strong sense of ownership, self-reliance..., with sound trusting relationships and connectedness” (42, 46). An ABCD-type intervention approach from INGOs hence builds upon current local capacities, empowering them with technical skills for development, and enhances their sense of self-confidence to be advocates for their interests to people in power.

At the same time, by organizing these development programs, GROs are effectively “proving their worth” to local officials, opening up the prospects of collaboration offers from local authorities. Such was the case experienced with the IUPF in many local communities. Once em-

powered with the funds from the IUPE, some GROs have been able to negotiate shelter initiatives with local governments. Local authorities have also reached out to GROs in India to collaborate on resolving the housing struggles faced by slum dwellers. South African groups were even able to secure a US \$20 million subsidy allocation from the Minister of Housing to continue their work in their communities (Mitlin and Swatterthwaite 2007, 494-495).

INGO-GRO partnerships enable GROs to become political players that can lobby their local governments to recognize their problems and institute policies to resolve them. These partnerships increase the visibility of GROs and communities to the point where they no longer can be ignored by local governments. At that point, states have no choice but to acknowledge and work to resolve their problems. Ideally, the solution will be a policy change that will have a more long-lasting impact on the community's current problems which will allow them to no longer be dependent on assistance from INGOs.

4. INGOs as Supporters to Enable Success

After investigating and establishing the potentials and roles of GROs for project success, it is now time to consider the role of the INGO in this critical relationship. Since INGOs are based outside of their target communities, they often have access to an array of technological and knowledge resources which when transferred to the target community, will benefit program implementation. Finally, INGOs enjoy international legitimacy and influence which can drive global altruism, as well as international pressure to support GROs' bottom-up advocacy efforts.

4.1 Provision of resources

In their partnership with GROs, INGOs play the key role of providing resources for their programs. Unlike GROs who are limited by local circumstances and resources, INGOs typically have access to a wider

range of resources and capital. By nature of it being an international organization, an INGO usually has significant financial support which allows it to maintain operations in two or more localities in different countries. INGOs are also frequently staffed by well-educated employees, especially in their headquarters outside of the target community. This highlights a critical difference between INGOs and GROs. While GROs enjoy local closeness, legitimacy, and understanding of problems, they lack the resources or knowledge to effect change. On the flip side, INGOs have access to the resources but lack the local connection to be effective in the change they aim to make (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Therefore, INGOs have the ability to plug the resource and knowledge gap to impart the knowledge and the means for GROs to solve local issues and promote development (Romano 2019). With enough funding, INGOs are even able to bring in new technologies to target communities to facilitate programs and create a technological transfer that can also benefit the development of impoverished communities.

Evidence of resource, knowledge, and technological transfers empowering GROs and driving program success can be seen in the IUPF. The IUPF is a pipeline for funds and technologies to support local communities, which as previously established, has enabled community organizations to alleviate poverty and resolve the slum housing crises all over the world. The other function of the IUPF is to act as a knowledge sharing platform, both between INGOs and GROs, and between GROs in different countries. GROs are able to seek advice to inform their approach towards local problems. The benefits of this are two-fold: for one, the GROs are able to supplement their existing knowledge to design sharper programs to benefit their local communities with their partnered INGO. At the same time, the accumulation of knowledge and experience will allow them to make independent decisions for change in the future. Mitlin and Swatterthwaite make a strong argument for INGOs to take a backseat in program implementation to prevent dependency from GROs on INGOs in the long run. Rather, they support the nurturing of local movements to empower GROs to be long-term agents for change and development (Mitlin and Swatterthwaite 2007).

The technology and resources INGOs bring to a target community are critical to kickstart a successful program by providing the initial push. However, the knowledge INGOs bring and transfer allow GROs to be more independent and informed for future initiatives, creating long-term sustainable change. Therefore, it can be seen that INGOs act almost as mentors and investors of resources when implementing their programs in conjunction with GROs.

4.2 International legitimacy and a boomerang effect

As mentioned before, INGOs do not always enjoy legitimacy within their target communities. Rather, INGOs are often more recognized in higher levels of government, such as the United Nations stating they have the enhanced “ability to affect policy procurements and resource allocations over and... to exercise power and influence” (Uphoff 1993, 616). This means that while INGOs do not enjoy local legitimacy, they have significantly more credibility (in comparison to GROs) in international organizations and the global community.

INGOs have a global influence that is very beneficial to the INGO-GRO relationship in two main ways. Firstly, the global presence of INGOs allows them to tap into a wide variety of philanthropic and altruistic communities. INGOs can take advantage of this fact by fostering connections with such communities to solicit donations and financial support for their programs. This money in turn goes on to support GROs during program implementation, supporting the program’s eventual success. At the same time, these connections also help with awareness building for the INGO, which ideally creates a domino effect of increased support (both financially and by other means, such as advocacy) for the INGO with communities beyond their immediate reach. This allows INGOs to expand their operations and influence, eventually evolving to become civil societies that also have the power to exert pressure. As illustrated in Figure 1, the ability for INGOs to exert pressure allows them to lobby local governments and international institutions to simultaneously

put pressure on the state institutions of their target communities through a boomerang effect (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Kiel 2011). This, in conjunction with the pressure exerted by empowered GROs, creates four sources of pressure that will ideally increase the likelihood of state action for long-term change and development.

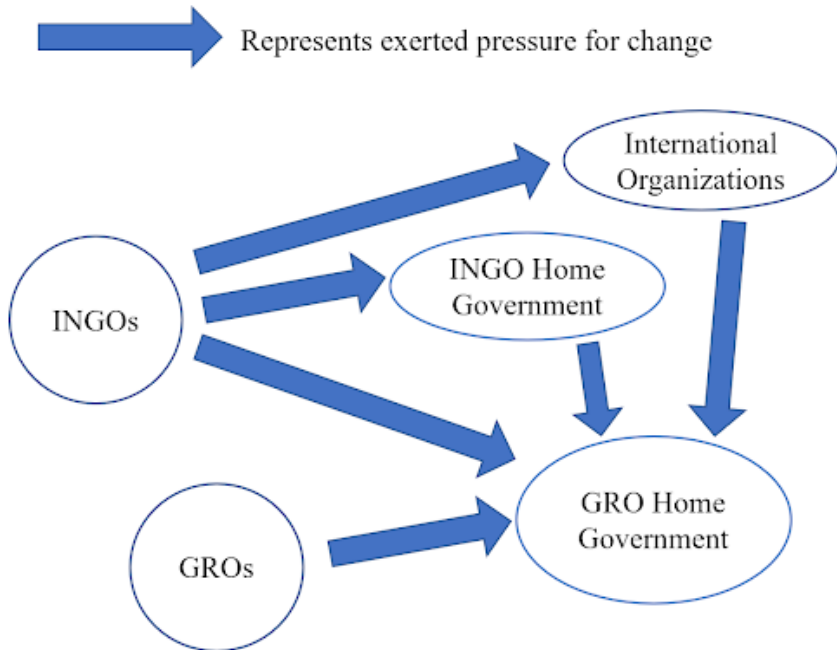


Figure 1: Conceptualized map of exerted pressure

Hence, similar to how GROs are able to influence community behavior due to their embeddedness in the target community, INGOs can leverage their international legitimacy to drive global altruism. Additionally, they act as a form of civil society to advocate for change in the home countries of their target communities. This supports the program's INGOs design with GROs, while also creating the conditions for state reform and long-term change and success.

5. The State as a Potential Threat to the INGO-GRO Relationship

The details discussed above explore the ideal relationship between INGOs and GROs when implementing INGO programs for success. However, as with every theorized ideal, there are obstacles that will limit potentials for success. The effectiveness and viability of the INGO-GRO relationship are heavily reliant on the state institutions and laws, which can act to facilitate or prohibit this critical relationship. Additionally, the persistent risk of fostering dependency from the state is not conducive for project success nor long-term change.

One major obstacle that the state can pose to the INGO-GRO relationship is the policy landscape it creates when it comes to regulations for nonprofits. For example, changes to the tax code could force INGOs to incur more administrative costs while also dissuading donors from making donations to the organizations. To small INGOs, these changes could be devastating to their operations and could force them to shut down. Additionally, governments could increase the cost of registration for INGOs in a foreign country to the point where it becomes unviable for INGOs to operate in a target community. Administrative processes to formalize an INGO-GRO relationship could be prohibitively long, making it impractical for INGOs to pursue partnerships. The possible outcomes to different policy changes are impossibly long and it would be impractical to list everything in this paper. However, the impact of policies on the nonprofit sector is undeniable, which can either facilitate or sabotage organizations. A positive instance of policy impact on nonprofits was in South Korea, in the early 2000s, when the sector saw a dramatic rise after the passing of the Nonprofits Assistance Act in 1999 that provided “financial support for nonprofits, and tax credits, and reductions” (Choi and Yang 2011, 60). However, in the same way that a policy can help the industry, it has the potential of hurting it. Yet, there is conceivably nothing INGOs and GROs can do since they exist within this political ecosystem and they need to play by the rules.

Additionally, the efforts of INGOs and GROs could be undermined by a passive state. One of the most important benefits of a robust IN-

GO-GRO relationship, as established previously, is its ability to empower GROs and INGOs to become active civil societies to pressure local governments for change. In an ideal world, this pressure will lead to political reform which will help foster long-term development for a community or region. This might not always be the case, however, as the success of INGO-GRO partnerships, which creates successful programs, might in fact reduce pressure for state institutions to enact reforms for the country. A significant literature about aid has investigated how aid undermines institutional development and reform in the countries it is implemented in. For one, high levels of aid reduce levels of tax mobilization and revenue collection as governments begin to rely on aid money to run government services. Aid has also shown to reduce government accountability as the INGO programs plug the gap of government services, turning scrutiny away from the government's inability to provide adequate services in the first place (Moss et al. 2006; Brautigam and Knack 2004; Wright and Winters 2010).

Therefore, the success of the INGO-GRO relationship and project success may be temporarily good for the target community they impact, but could also result in continued political impasse from an already ineffective state. This is harmful in the long-term as the impact of INGO programs will not be sustainable nor have longevity. For progress and development, institutional changes are critical; however, as elaborated on above, a strong INGO-GRO relationship has the potential to reduce incentives for high-level reform. In light of this, it might be wise for INGOs and GROs to simultaneously identify partners in the state that will serve as political supporters for their projects. Finding allies within the government helps prevent the potential antagonization of those in power. It is also a direct means for INGOs and GROs to obtain clear communication of the overall evolving policy landscape. At the same time, INGOs and GROs can use these partnerships to pursue their specific goals and influence politicians to take on a more proactive role in development rather than becoming overly reliant on these temporary solutions. While this paper is focused on the critical relationship between the INGO and GROs, it is important not to alienate the state as they are a key player in

the future development of any locality. A full exposition on how these stakeholders can work in tandem to pursue the best results is beyond the scope of this paper, however INGO-GRO partnerships should involve supportive state actors whenever appropriate and possible.

6. Concluding Thoughts

Overall, development remains an enigma for academics and policymakers alike. It is a complex and multifaceted problem that requires high levels of cooperation and coordination among multiple stakeholders: the INGOs, GROs, state, and international institutions. Contributing to the ongoing debate, this paper analyzed the existing literature on development strategies to support the overall push for INGOs to forge deeper relationships with GROs during project implementation.

As seen in the explanations provided above, it is evident that INGOs and GROs have several complementary qualities which are conducive for program success and long-term development. Namely, GROs are highly embedded in their communities, hence they enjoy local legitimacy which is a reliable way for INGOs to bypass weak or corrupt state institutions to directly impact the community. These partnerships are also a way to politically empower GROs to become political agents who self-advocate to officials for institutional reform, which is a more enduring change for long-term development. INGOs, on the other hand, have access to more resources and are embedded in the global community, thus making their contributions more effective when they play a supportive role to GROs through their work. Knowledge and technology transfers provide locals with the necessary political tools for advocacy and action, while the international legitimacy of INGOs can trigger high levels of altruism and a boomerang effect to exert direct and indirect pressure on local governments for political reform.

In light of these insights, this paper argues that for INGOs to improve the success rates of their projects and for aid to have a lasting impact, partnership between external organizations and GROs is a cri-

tical first step. However, it also recognizes the limitations presented by less-than-ideal political circumstances which might impede the success of INGO-GRO relationships. As such, this project does not provide a perfect solution to optimize aid implementation, but rather to reinforce a growing literature on local collaborations to support aid projects for long-term success.

Endnotes

¹ The Millennium Villages Project was a large scale aid experiment that was conducted by academics from the Earth Institute at Columbia University, led by Jeffrey Sachs, with support from the United Nations. During this project, ten villages in rural Africa were identified as “millennium villages” and a large amount of aid money was invested into developing different critical sectors, such as water and sanitation, agriculture, disease, and education, to meet the Millennium Development Goals.

² TSP’s well drills are an annual event that starts with applications from locals in the beginning of the year. During that time, TSP’s Kenyan staff members go out into community hubs and advertise the opportunity for a well drill which registered community groups, such as women’s groups, can then apply for. Once the applications are filed, TSP consults a hydrogeologist to understand the feasibility of a well drill and shortlists ten wells to be drilled that year. In preparation for the drill, the Kenyan team gathers a group of volunteers who will make up the Well Committee that is trained on doing minor repairs and is a point of contact for TSP should more major repairs needs to be arranged. Once the well is drilled, management of it is handed over to the community and TSP conducts annual surveys to check on its condition, as well as offers workshops at the communities’ request.

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