

STRATEGIC FUNERALS FOR NGO PROGRAMMES

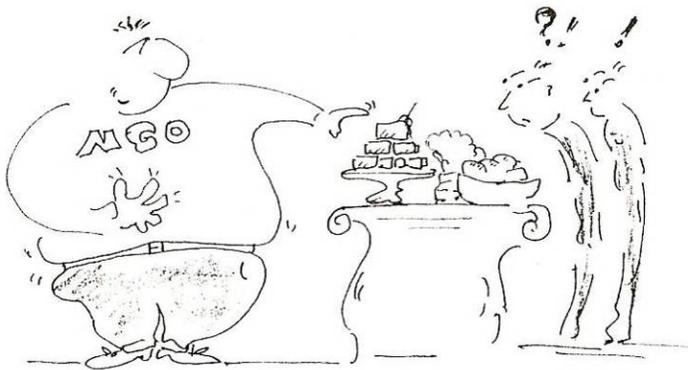
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*'There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven,
a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot'
Ecclesiastes 3 v 1-2*

The world in which NGOs live is becoming harsher. In many parts of the world poverty levels are increasing, long-term complex political emergencies abound. Health needs are increasing and life expectancy in many parts of Southern Africa has fallen to below 40 years due to pandemics like aids. Yet while the need for NGO work is increasing, the resources available for development work are declining. Real levels of aid are falling each year.

Many NGOs are flabby. Some seem more concerned with their own survival than the quality of their programmes and impact with their beneficiaries. The time of funding merely for being



organs of civil society is passing. NGO existence is no longer an end in itself (if it ever really was). Measurable results are what matter to donors. Many NGOs are not well suited to this harsher context.

To adapt to this new environment, NGOs have to change. Change requires letting go. As Bridges states, 'the failure to identify and be ready for endings and losses that change produces is the single largest problem that NGOs in transition encounter'.

Change will often require NGOs to make strategic choices about the future to concentrate increasingly limited resources where they can have most impact. Pruning is a natural part of fruit cultivation - to produce better yields you have to cut back at times. NGOs are very resistant to such changes. When NGOs do strategic planning they are often satisfied with increasing their programmes to adapt to the new challenges arising from their changing context. They are extremely reluctant and even get angry when discussions veer onto 'what

will you let go of in order to take that new programme on'.

Despite many NGO programmes clearly not performing and delivering the intended impact at beneficiary level, NGOs refuse to let them die. Many NGO programmes could be described as 'dead ducks' and yet NGOs insist on keeping them alive. NGO leaders spend much of their valuable and very limited time on nursing such programmes even though they are terminally sick. They invest heavily in life support machines to keep the programme alive at least in name and yet without any quality of life. The people in these programmes are usually unhappy, under-performing, and imprisoned.



Why do NGOs not let programmes die? NGOs fear being seen as failures which would undermine their reputation and 'fundability'; they are deeply concerned not to lose staff and they are also concerned not to 'abandon' the beneficiaries. Yet as the rot and gangrene set in the smell becomes too unpleasant and they are forced to concentrate on other areas. The death is not talked about publicly - it becomes a taboo subject. When they are forced to talk about it, NGOs rationalise it by saying that the programme did not die a natural death, but was 'murdered' by the fickleness of donor funding fashions.

But such radical times in which we live, require radical remedies. We cannot survive with our flabby NGO avoidance of tough decisions. The task is so pressing we cannot be content with mediocrity and 'good intentions'. We need to become more ruthless and performance oriented, for the good of our beneficiaries, those we ultimately exist to serve. We need to get into more strategic funerals.

The prevalence and cultural significance of funerals is one of the most striking features of Africa to a foreigner. Whereas in Britain we usually tend to try and pretend death does not exist (as it would challenge our sub-conscious belief in our myth of immortality) and funerals are very quiet, hidden affairs, in Africa they seem much more overt and public.

Funerals serve very important needs:

- to help people 'let go' through grieving and mourning. People need to let go of something before they move on and funerals are one step in this grieving process;
- to recognise and celebrate and give thanks for the life of the person and all they have done;
- to learn from the good things in peoples' lives which should serve as a model for others
- to learn from the mistakes people have made as a warning to others (for example there are calls for aids to be now mentioned at funerals where it is the cause of death)



In NGOs we should have more strategic funerals for programmes that should be allowed to die naturally. Every programme has a limited time-span. As the environment changes it may no longer become relevant, or as learning increases old approaches may be seen to be counter-productive. Rather than be frightened of such issues, we should recognise them and be prepared to make hard strategic choices and give the programmes (or even NGOs) which have to die, proper strategic funerals.

We need to do this in order to prevent scarce resources, both management time and financial resources, from going into unproductive programmes. We do this to help people let go and move on by marking the endings and celebrating the achievements of the programmes. We do this to free the captive staff into more productive and meaningful work where their energies can be recharged and their potentials released. We do this to systematically learn from the good things and bad things of the programme, rather than hiding the errors and achievements through embarrassment at the programme's death. This does not mean it is any less painful and uncomfortable, but it is a surgery we need to endure.

How might a strategic funeral look? Once the decision is taken by the NGO to drop a particular programme, the NGO should invest in a systematic process of learning from the life of the programme. This could be done through research and workshops ending up in some documented form. NGOs could then use any left-over funds (which often just get carried over year after year in the accounting books) to invest in a funeral with speeches, recognition of achievements, thanks, celebrations, warnings to heed and then some form of burial or cremation. Documents which are not longer of any conceivable use could be ceremonially burnt or buried as a symbol of the end.

NGOs do not have the luxury of remaining strategically flabby in a harsh operating

environment. If NGOs continue to avoid hard decisions and refuse to let programmes die, they will find the disease will spread and ultimately threaten the life of the NGO itself. NGO sustainability may require lean, 'mean' and effective NGOs which actually make a difference to their beneficiaries. Strategic funerals offer a culturally appropriate symbolic mechanism for dealing with vital change.