



10 Ways Not to Build a Global NGO

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Common Pitfalls in Building a Global Network

Over the last decade, many of the leading global non-government organisations have been seeking to broaden their legitimacy, influence, and income by developing strong national affiliates outside Europe and North America (especially in the emerging regional and global powers). Their aim is usually to build affiliates that are rooted in their own national society, and able to play an influential and respected role in relevant policy debates, both in their own country, and at regional and global levels

While a significant number of new affiliates have been brought in or established in key developing and transition countries, few are yet achieving their potential to influence national policies or take on leading roles in their federation. Although there have been some successes in individual countries, most leading federations are still learning what approach works best for them in different contexts.

This briefing seeks to draw together lessons from the experiences of a number of leading federations, drawing out ten of the most common pitfalls to avoid when seeking to develop or bring in a new affiliate in a developing or transition country.

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This briefing draws on interviews and assignments with leading global INGOs over the last two years.

Pitfall 1: Weak Vetting of Potential New Affiliates

When a federation decides to invite an existing national NGO to join the federation, there is a temptation to invite an existing national partner with whom the federation has worked on joint projects. This has the attraction of building on existing trust, and experience of working together.

However, in many cases, practically-oriented national partner NGOs brought into federations have been found to lack the skills and networks needed to influence relevant national policies, or are dependent on project funding from abroad. Their motivation to join the federation may be focused primarily on protecting or growing their income from other federation members. In these cases, they are unlikely to develop into strong autonomous affiliates in the foreseeable future.

An alternative pitfall is to seek out a high profile national NGO working in a related field and invite them to join the federation. They will often bring charismatic leadership and

national contacts. However, there have been many cases where these link-ups have not worked, due to substantive differences in mission, values, or ways of working, leading to tensions on joint projects, and a reluctance by other federation members to work through them in the country.

In some cases, the strong national profile arises from close links between the NGO's leaders and particular national political leaders, can make independent advocacy difficult, and leave the federation open to accusations of political bias. In others, the scale of the national partner's work may be so large that the link with the federation is a tactical rather than strategic issue for them – rarely a good basis for a successful partnership.

If considering bringing in a national NGO partner, the federation should take the time to carry out effective vetting. The box below suggests some key questions.

KEY QUESTIONS FOR ASSESSING POTENTIAL NATIONAL PARTNERS

- *Is there a good alignment of mission, values, and ways of working?*
- *Do they raise a significant proportion of their income from national sources?*
- *Are they effective in influencing relevant national policies and programmes of the government?*
- *Does the Board understand the importance of visible independence and set strong ethical standards?*
- *Do they have a strong strategic rationale for wanting to join the federation, and is this compatible with what the federation can offer?*

Pitfall 2: Focusing on the Technicalities of Registration

When a federation decides to establish a new national NGO (either from scratch, or by converting an existing national office), there is often a strong focus on the legal requirements of registration.

While this is important to get right, a focus on legal registration often obscures the more important issue of whether there is sufficient political space for the national NGO to operate without undue interference from the government.

As a result, an NGO may be formed with high expectations, but is either unable to influence relevant national government policies and programmes, or its

leaders are harassed by the authorities if they question the effectiveness of relevant government policies.

Before establishing a new national NGO in countries without a thriving independent national NGO sector, the federation should carefully assess political as well as legal constraints, to understand the limits to what can be done, and determine whether there is enough space to enable a national NGO affiliate to operate effectively. This may require different ways of influencing national policies from the approaches used in OECD countries.

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ESTABLISHING A CHINESE AFFILIATE

When the Chinese government established a new “Foundations Law” in 2006, several international NGOs moved to register Chinese affiliates under the new law. However, most found that in practice they were not able to establish their own supporter base in China or to carry out public advocacy. A more useful approach might focus on how the NGO could influence relevant Chinese government policies, and whether this could best be achieved as a Chinese foundation or as an international organisation with offices in China, or through national partners.

Pitfall 3: Failing to Identify a Viable Core Supporter Base

In developing countries, many of the leading national NGOs may have strong programme leadership, but are predominantly dependent on international funding (either project funding or partnership funding). Often, these are amongst the major national partners of an international federation, and may be seen as strong candidates for affiliation.

Alternatively, the federation (or a leading member) may convert an existing field office into a national NGO on the basis of its existing funding from federation partners.

While affiliates of this type can be effective in the short to medium term, they are rarely likely to become strong independent affiliates in the longer term.

A strong national NGO for the longer term usually needs to build a significant base of

supporters from within their own society, as members, regular donors, advocates or campaigners.

These can come from any part of society not controlled by government – eg individuals, communities, businesses, or professional associations – but they must feel a strong commitment to the NGO and its mission. Their support provides greater independence, through having flexible funding to develop and invest in their own programmes, and credibility with government as a legitimate voice.

The more successful long term affiliates usually arise either from bringing in an existing national NGO with a clear supporter base, or identifying a viable national supporter base for a new affiliate, and engaging with them from the outset. This may include creating a membership structure, and giving them a say in governance.

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Pitfall 4: Delegating Identification of Board Members

When establishing a new national NGO, or converting an existing country office, one of the key tasks is identifying suitable Board members.

This clearly requires careful judgment, to identify and attract people who not only bring relevant skills, experience, and contacts, but who also share the ambitions of the global movement, and understand the appropriate roles of non-executive directors, working within a global federation.

Too often, this task is delegated to senior programme staff working in the country or regional office (who will usually have limited experience of complex governance issues), to propose suitable people.

Many federations have ended up with either weak national Boards, or with Boards who take the

national affiliate along a path that diverges from the federation. Once this occurs, it can consume enormous amounts of the time of the senior leadership of the federation to resolve.

The more successful new national affiliates usually follow from the federation investing the time of one of their senior leaders with experience of global and national governance, spending time in the country to search out and vet a suitable candidate for Board Chair, and then working with them to identify other suitable potential Board members.

Risks can be further managed by establishing clear term limits for Board members, and by developing appropriate channels for ongoing federation involvement in review of existing Board members and selection of new ones.

“Once a weak or divergent national Board is running a national affiliate, it can consume enormous amounts of the time of the senior leadership of the federation to resolve”

Pitfall 5: Under-investing in Building Understanding and Trust

“The more successful transitions tend to include an intensive period of building understanding and trust at Board level”

Once a preferred national NGO partner has been identified and expressed a wish to affiliate, or Board members for a new national NGO have been found, a common pitfall is to move directly to complete the formalities of registration and affiliation, without investing time in building understanding and trust.

Without investing this time, there is a much higher risk of the affiliation relationship going sour within a few years, due to a mismatch of aspirations, expectations, or values.

The more successful transitions tend to include an

intensive period of building understanding and trust with the Chair and other Board members (and existing Executive Director where relevant), both prior to finalising the legal association, and in the months that follow.

A wide range of possible interventions can be used to help achieve this (see box below for some examples). In more successful examples, several of these have been used to complement each other. These enable both sides to assess whether the fit is a good one, and prepare the ground for a productive relationship.

POTENTIAL TRUST-BUILDING INTERVENTIONS

- *Visit by Federation Chair to meet Chair and Board of potential affiliate*
- *Visit by potential affiliate Chair to International Secretariat and to meet key international Board members*
- *Visit by potential Chair and/or Executive Director to an established affiliate in a similar national context*
- *Special Retreat for potential Board to explore what is involved in being a federation affiliate*
- *Special invitation to attend global federation meeting*

Pitfall 6: Lack of Clarity on Core Expectations

“The federation should be clear about its core expectations from the start, and introduce them early in discussions”

Whether an existing national NGO is being brought into the federation, or a new one being created, conversations between Board members and the representatives of the federation often focus on shared programme aspirations and the potential arising from working together, without the federation being clear on their practical expectations of the national affiliate as part of the federation.

These may then only come to light when the association agreement is being discussed, or worse, not made clear until after it has been signed. This can be a major blow to trust in the federation amongst the Board members, especially if it involves them in unexpected changes to how they work or

are governed.

In more successful examples, the federation is clear about its core expectations of the new affiliate before the discussions start, and introduces them early in the discussions, explaining their rationale clearly, to avoid nasty surprises, identify potential sticking points early, and provide time for negotiation if necessary. Some examples of key issues are listed in the box below.

Once agreed, some of these expectations may be appropriate to capture within the affiliation agreement, while others may be more appropriately captured in a more informal letter of understanding.

KEY ISSUES TO COVER IN EARLY DISCUSSIONS

- *Expectations on when the federation brand will be used (especially for existing national NGOs)*
- *Meeting good governance standards within the federation (which may involve changes to the constitution of an existing national NGO)*
- *Involvement in selecting a new Executive Director or Board members, when required*
- *A federation nominated person participating in national Board meetings (as a formal Board member or not)*
- *Expectations on participation in international work of the federation (externally and/or internally)*

Pitfall 7: Failing to Establish Clear Landmarks to Full Member Status

“Many of the leading federations have introduced a two or three stage affiliation process”

In some federations, joining the federation depends on an invitation and/or request to join, and an assessment against core criteria for federation affiliates.

These criteria serve an important purpose, but some issues that are key to success in the federation are difficult to define as objective criteria (eg fit with values), and some can only be assessed in the next few years following joining the federation (eg involvement in international issues). In cases where these do not work out, it can be very difficult for the federation to withdraw affiliation.

For this reason, many of the leading federations have introduced a two or three stage affiliation process to becoming a full member. This often starts with a period of association, then progresses to an interim affiliation status, before becoming a full member.

Clear criteria are needed for progression to each stage,

with a formal process of review, usually led by a federation accreditation committee reporting to the international Board of the federation.

Many also find it useful to establish clear expectations about how long a new affiliate can spend at each stage prior to full membership, to encourage progress, and to avoid struggling new affiliates getting stuck at an intermediate stage.

Well designed stages can help build mutual confidence and understanding, provide time to assess fit, and ensure that the national NGO is able to demonstrate good progress towards becoming a strong national affiliate (eg range of core programming capacities, funds raised from national sources, size of supporter base), before becoming a full member. They also provide a transparent exit route if the relationship with the new affiliate is not working out as intended.

Pitfall 8: Appointing an Executive Director without Broad Leadership Skills

The leadership skills of the Executive Director of a national NGO are normally critical to its success. Yet poor appointments to this role are one of the most common reasons for failure. The common pitfalls are listed in the box below.

The more successful appointments usually follow an open selection process, led by a Board-appointed selection panel (involving the national Board Chair, and an experienced leader from the federation), against a jointly developed person specification.

Networking inside and outside the sector (sometimes using a search consultant) is often key to attracting people with the right level and balance of leadership skills. In some cases it may also be necessary for the federation to mobilise supplementary funding for the first few years to enable a salary to be

offered that will attract leaders who can build the NGO to a national profile.

However, even in well managed recruitment processes, it is often hard to find a candidate with the full range of skills needed (especially in countries without an established NGO sector). The Board may need to consider one or two key appointments in the senior management team of the new affiliate who will bring complementary skills and experience. If the new Director is appointed from outside, this may include an experienced senior manager from elsewhere in the federation, on a 2-3 year secondment, and/or short secondments of the incoming Director to work alongside the Director of a more established affiliate.

COMMON PITFALLS OF EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR RECRUITMENT

- *Appointing an existing senior executive or country director to an Executive Director role where the breadth and expectations of the role have changed significantly, without assessing whether they have the skills needed to take on the new role*
- *Appointing an Executive Director with strong programme management skills, but without the necessary aptitude and skills to develop a national supporter base, raise significant funds from national sources, or develop external networks amongst leaders of key organisations at national level*
- *Appointing an Executive Director who has founded and developed their own successful national NGO, but who will come to resent the constraints of working within and representing a global federation, or has limited interest in engaging on international programme and policy work*
- *Leaving the selection to new Board members who have only recently joined, and may as yet have a limited ability to assess "fit" with the culture of the organisation, or no experience of recruiting national NGO leaders*

Pitfall 9: Under-investing in the Early Years

“It is often useful to agree a phased release of investment funds against specific benchmarks of progress”

Once the initial affiliation agreement has been signed, a common pitfall is for the federation to work with them on broadly the same basis as other affiliates, delegating support to a regional programme team or staff member, and encouraging them to participate in relevant international funding proposals and federation international meetings. This is rarely enough to enable the new affiliate to build the scale and breadth expected of a strong national NGO.

The more successful new affiliate development programmes usually involve a series of selected investments by the federation in building up the capacity of the new affiliate – for example to develop new national income sources, or to strengthen national policy and advocacy influence. This is

often best done through funding and/or providing secondees for key senior management appointments in the first few years.

It is often useful to agree a phased release of the investment funds against specific benchmarks of progress, with regular reviews of progress.

Federations may also appoint a Board level “mentor” from elsewhere in the federation, visiting 3-4 times a year in the early years to work alongside the Board and Executive Director, guiding them through their development programme and providing advice on how to make the most of the potential of being part of the federation. This person may also serve as a federation representative on the national Board.

CASE STUDY: SAVE THE CHILDREN IN INDIA

Following the establishment of Save the Children India as an independent affiliate, the International Save the Children Alliance agreed a phased programme of fundraising investments over five years to help build the capacity of the new national affiliate to develop an Indian supporter base. Funds were released against an agreed programme and specific milestones, subject to formal reviews every six months.

Pitfall 10: Failing to Create Opportunities for International Leadership

“Federations should invest in building the capacity of new affiliates in emerging powers to play leadership roles in regional and global policy debates”

To achieve the strategic benefits of the new affiliate, the federation will usually want to encourage it to engage internationally, participating in international policy, advocacy, or campaigning work, and contributing to internal policy discussions of the federation.

This often focuses on inviting the affiliate to contribute case studies, or to sit on global task forces, or to participate in international proposals to donors. While these all have valuable roles to play, they are usually confined to contributing ideas and experiences to initiatives or campaigns led by larger and more established Northern affiliates or by the federation international secretariat.

If the federation is serious about rebalancing its global network and giving a stronger voice to emerging regional and global powers, it will need to invest in building the capacity of new and emerging affiliates in these countries to play leadership roles in relevant regional and global policy debates, and to act as lead federation spokespeople in global forums and institutions on relevant issues.

This is likely to involve conscious choices to locate regional or global centres of expertise on specific policy issues in those affiliates, and for the more established affiliates to be willing to invest building their expertise and capacity in this issue, through funding and/or secondments.

Bringing it Together

Many of the steps recommended to avoid the pitfalls are followed by leading INGOs much of the time. However, there are many cases where omitting key steps have led to the creation of a weak affiliate or a difficult relationship, leading to frustration and disappointment at potential unrealised in the years that follow.

By learning from the experiences of others, federations can achieve much higher success rates in developing strong national affiliates in key countries of the developing world, enabling the federation to realise their aspiration to rebalance their global networks.

The table below provides a summary overview (references are to the Pitfalls in this article).

	BRINGING IN AN EXISTING NATIONAL NGO	DEVELOPING OWN NATIONAL NGO
PREPARATION PHASE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Careful assessment of motivation and fit of potential partners (1) ➤ Assess scale/quality of supporter base (3) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Assess political space for programme and policy work (2) ➤ Identify viable supporter base (3) ➤ Involve senior leader in Board selection (4)
INITIATION PHASE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Invest in building understanding and trust (5) ➤ Clarity of expectations from outset (6) ➤ Clear landmarks to full member status (7) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Invest in building understanding and trust (5) ➤ Clarity of expectations from outset (6) ➤ Clear landmarks to full member status (7) ➤ Funding and rigorous selection of Executive Director (8)
DEVELOPMENT PHASE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Phased programme of investment (9) ➤ Create opportunities for international leadership (10) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Phased programme of investment (9) ➤ Create opportunities for international leadership (10)

If you would like more information on the issues outlined in this briefing, please contact Caldwell Consulting on consult@caldwells.uk.net or +44 1737 843893.