



Non-government aid – comparing effectiveness

By John Eysers
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How can private citizens who want to contribute to international humanitarian or development efforts obtain a guide to which international non-government organisations (INGOs) are most effective in what they do?

There is a wide range of activities which INGOs undertake as contributions to humanitarian relief and development – to give a few examples, distributing relief supplies after natural disasters, providing medical services to victims of armed conflict, encouraging community participation in governance and infrastructure, promoting rural livelihoods, lobbying governments, or trying to change attitudes on gender. This variety makes it difficult to form a meaningful system for measuring INGOs' effectiveness for the purpose of comparison.

Measurements and comparisons make sense only when applied to the effectiveness of limited subsets of INGOs which have common objectives and timeframes for showing results, or else to organisational characteristics which are at one remove from activities and results. This choice is reflected in the sources I've found which offer information about INGOs to prospective donors.

From Australian sources, there is limited information about INGOs in comparative terms. The system of accreditation of NGOs by the [Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade](#) provides publicly a three-level categorisation of INGOs, in terms of attributes which indicate some likelihood of effectiveness. There is one Australian-based website, [Effective Altruism Australia](#), which offers and explains a list of several recommended INGOs; these recommendations are sourced from United States (US) organisations mentioned below. There are two other Australian-based websites – the [Australian Charities and Non-profits Commission](#) and [ChangePath](#) – providing information about large arrays of INGOs operating in Australia, but this information has limited relevance to their effectiveness.

When I reconnoitred United Kingdom (UK) sources, two features stood out. There is a publicly visible, collaborative effort by development NGOs, through the networks [BOND](#) and

[NIDOS](#), to keep improving the evaluation of their activities. Several of the big INGOs based in the UK (or straddling the UK and the US) publish “accountability reports” which are detailed, informative accounts of how they assess their own effectiveness and keep trying to improve it. Examples include [Oxfam](#) and [World Vision](#).

In the US, several organisations have for some decades offered donors their ratings of a wide range of INGOs, backed by varying amounts of information, without charge or for small subscriptions. These organisations are [Charity Navigator](#), [Charity Watch](#), [BBB Wise Giving Alliance](#) and [Guide Star](#). They do not assess how far INGOs’ activities are worthwhile. And in terms of approaches to ratings, they compete – one focuses on what proportions of public contributions INGOs use for fundraising and administration expenses, while others have argued publicly that this focus is mistaken.

A group of linked US organisations, more recently established, do assess and compare INGOs in terms of their impacts, but their reports – accessible without charge – refer to only a few recommended INGOs. They are [Effective Altruism](#), [GiveWell](#), [Impact Matters](#) and [The Life You Can Save](#). The reports by Impact Matters which I’ve seen contain impressive analyses which relate impacts per beneficiary to costs.

The conclusions I’ve drawn from surveying these sources are as follows. The organisations which select a few INGOs to recommend show a transparency and rigour which are strongly appealing. However, the rigour with which they seek evidence of effectiveness in saving or improving lives disposes them to select INGOs which make health or livelihood interventions, on a limited scale.

Inevitably it’s harder to assess the effectiveness of INGOs which operate in many places and various modes, such as – to name only two – the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières. Similarly, it’s harder to assess the effectiveness of INGOs which devote substantial resources to addressing societal or political obstacles to development, such as CARE and Oxfam, or those which, for example in the water and sanitation sector, must work through influencing public utilities and private companies. I hope that private donors contribute to such INGOs despite the absence or limitation of ready-made external assessments of their effectiveness.

The survey summarised in this blog can be found at greater length in an [accompanying paper](#). I emphasise that my observations are incomplete and my conclusions tentative: there is more to be done in forming a reliable general account. So I would welcome comments on this post.

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