The Changing Face of Non-traditional NGO Governance: The Case of the Chinmaya Rural Primary Health Care and Training Centre (CRPHC&TC), India

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Traditionally, NGO governance structures are reinforced by trustees or board of directors (Smillie & Hailey, 2001). In the case of an organisation that has made deliberate efforts to avoid hierarchy and implement a participatory and decentralized collectivist structure, the question of the traditional governance role of trustees is challenged. This paper explores the non-traditional governance mechanisms of an intentional collectivist NGO, ‘The Chinmaya Rural Primary Health Care and Training Centre’ (CRTC), in India, and it uses lessons learned from CRTC to propose a non-traditional governance model.

The literature suggests that NGOs, even those that intentionally want to maintain a collectivist structure, when subject to growth and accountability from funders, turn to adopt bureaucratic governance features (Kassam, Handy & Ranade, 2000). However, CRTC is an exception. It is a rapidly growing rural development NGO whose core philosophy is rural constituents reclaiming development using community skills and resources. CRTC functions as a facilitator of development by helping its constituents access resources and networks needed to achieve their goals. It receives most of its funding from international development organizations, which subject it to stringent accountability standards. Every staff member and constituent has a sense of the whole organization. Furthermore, the governance process within each of the NGOs programs is a reflection of the governance process guiding the NGO.

Staff and constituents at the NGO share ownership of the governance process as they collaborate on the designing of evaluation, accountability, strategic planning and policy framing processes. The CRTC field workers are trained to be flexible, reactive and adaptive to the environments of their constituents. Evaluation and accountability standards frequently prescribe objectives and goals in advance (Edwards & Hulme, 1996), but at CRTC these standards are maintained within an open-system approach, i.e. meeting needs and ends as they evolve and expand (Korten, 1980).

By critically examining governance at CRTC for generalizations that can apply to other rural development NGOs, the paper argues that it is possible for rural based NGOs to develop non-traditional forms of governance by deliberately maintaining a collectivist structure. This widens the governance equation to include staff and constituents, and it changes the traditional role of board members. The paper concludes with the ‘Dynamic Holographic Collectivist Governance Model.’ The model borrows from Morgan’s (1986) Principles of Holographic design for organization form to help rural development NGOs design a conceptual governance framework. The model is neither comprehensive nor inflexible and is designed for generic adaptability by practitioners to suit their environmental needs.

The methodology is a qualitative analysis of the governance process using ethnography research consisting of open-ended questionnaires and focus groups. Other research methods include field observation to study evaluation, accountability and decision-making processes, and an archival analysis of the organization’s records.
References:


