GPSA Brown Bag Lunch Series
Learning from Results: Adapting Social Accountability projects to Contexts and Multiple Strategies

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GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

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Presenters: Bill Walker, Senior Research & Evaluation Adviser, World Vision Australia, Joseph Wales, Research Officer, Overseas Development Institute (ODI) & Gaia Gozzo Head of Governance, CARE International UK
Discussant: John Gaventa, Director of Research, Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex

Moderator: Roby Senderowitsch, Program Manager, Global Partnership for Social Accountability

John Garrison, Senior Civil Society Specialist from the World Bank chaired the event and emphasized that civil society organization (including nonprofit organizations or non-governmental organizations) are an important actor of the development process. The GreatNonprofits provides a platform for beneficiaries and donors to review the performance of the nonprofit organizations they have had an experience with. It does not only help improve the accountability of nonprofit organizations but also provides a channel for citizens' voice to be heard and acted upon. Perla Ni, CEO and Founder of GreatNonprofits then presented the work of this initiative, shared lessons learned and provided her insights on how this initiative can be translated to developing countries. Anabel Cruz, Founder and Director of Communication and Development Institute, provided her comments on the presentation from Latin American perspective. The comments were followed by a lively discussion.

TAKE-AWAY MESSAGES

- Translating the approach of GreatNonprofits for collecting beneficiary feedback to developing countries is challenging. Not only is there no database of nonprofits in the developing country, communication with the beneficiaries in developing countries is usually complicated. There is poor network coverage, illiteracy is prevalent, there are multiple dialects within the same country, and most importantly local culture may disincentivize citizens to voice their opinions. Moreover, power dynamics among various stakeholders including donors, nonprofit organizations and government are different in developing countries than in the United States and may require a different approach.

The GPSA Brown Bag Lunch (BBL) series is a program of lunch-time events aimed at sharing the experiences, knowledge and learning of GPSA Grantees, Partners and World Bank Initiatives. All BBLs are held at World Bank offices, live streamed and documented.

- Beneficiary feedback through an approach like GreatNonprofits is only one component of a complex and multi-faceted feedback system. Also, there needs to be multiple channels of citizen participation in development programs including participation in design of the programs, in addition to soliciting feedback once the project is implemented.

I. ORGANIZATION: OBJECTIVE AND ANALYTICAL UNDERPINNINGS

"I think it [evaluation of nonprofits and CSOs] is a really really important topic for development and for the future of openness and transparency" (Perla Ni)

Greatnonprofits.org is a set-up comparable to Yelp and is the largest content collector and aggregator of beneficiary reviews about social programs implemented by NGOs primarily in the United States.

This initiative came about in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina when the founder and CEO of the organization, then publisher of Stanford Social Innovation Review, realized that there was no information available that could be used to assess the performance of nonprofit organizations. The belief that the knowledge about which nonprofit is working is in the communities where these nonprofits work spurred the creation of Greatnonprofits.org.

The website acts as a platform where all stakeholders of a nonprofit organization, including volunteers, donors and beneficiaries can submit a review of their experience with the nonprofit organization. All nonprofits that are listed in IRS database in the United States are part of the platform. The information generated through the reviews is then shared and syndicated to various partners, such as GuideStar, Truist, Justgive, to an audience of about 10 million. Reviews are completely original and are not even edited for grammatical and spelling mistake. No reviews are taken down. However, nonprofits have an opportunity to respond to a negative review. Since its founding in 2007, Greatnonprofits has quickly grown and currently represents the largest database of first-person stories about nonprofit organizations ever assembled. Currently it has over 190,000 reviews for about 19000 nonprofit organizations.

The mission of GreatNonprofits is multifold. One of the main objectives of this initiative is to provide reliable information to donors and volunteers to help them find trustworthy nonprofit organizations. Currently donors contribute to the nonprofits primarily based on personal contacts. The nonprofit then provides services to the beneficiaries. GreatNonprofit aspires to move away from this linear model to a more interactive model where donors provide funds to the nonprofits based on beneficiary's feedback and satisfaction. In this model beneficiaries are not only passive recipients of services but have a voice in deciding which nonprofits are funded. Second, GreatNonprofit also provides a platform to nonprofits where they can market their work to donors, volunteers and other stakeholders, and demonstrate their community support and significance of their work. In addition, the information generated at GreatNonprofits can also be used to help nonprofits improve their performance and accountability to their clients. In short, GreatNonprofits can play a very important role in improving accountability of nonprofit organizations, NGOs and civil society that are important partner in development work.

GreatNonprofit model is based on two assumptions. First, quality of services can reliably be measured from the perspective of the users. The second assumption is that feedback from the user can provide insight into how to improve programs. This model also mirrors similar models that have successfully been used in the for-profit market. In addition to a number of websites including Yelp and Tripadvisor, metrics such as Net Promoter Scores (NPS) constructed from citizen feedback are used widely as measures of success of for-profit organizations. The rationale for using stakeholder feedback and satisfaction in nonprofit sector is similar to using customer feedback in for-profit sector.

II. CHALLENGES OF GREATNONPROFITS.ORG'S APPROACH

Despite the great promises, this approach does present some challenges. First is the issue of bias. Most of the reviews on GreatNonprofit are positive. Similar positivity bias exists on Yelp and other market-based organizations. However, an analysis of reviews on GreatNonprofit shows that donors show a greater positivity bias while clients (beneficiaries) are much more critical of nonprofits and candid in their reviews. They also provide specific information about the program making it more valid.

Second, feedback is always subjective. However, aggregation of information can mitigate the subjectivity bias. Third, there is also an issue of anonymity and malicious reviews. The challenge is to keep the identity of the reviewers safe but at the same time preventing malicious reviews, for example, by competitors or unhappy former employees of the organization. This issue becomes crucial in the light of recent court orders that made Yelp release the identity of their reviewers when an organization alleged that negative reviews on the website were being posted by the competitors. While in the nonprofit sector, the probability of malicious reviews is much lower than in the for-profit sector, the tradeoff must be kept in mind.

The other challenge concerns the use of GreatNonprofits for advocacy organizations. Advocacy nonprofit organizations have a much longer time horizon and they do not have direct beneficiaries. Their impact is also more intangible compared to a service delivery nonprofit, for example, that works in providing education. While GreatNonprofits is not the best platform for these organizations, they continue to use it to analyze satisfaction of various stakeholders with different aspects of their work.

One thing that must be kept in mind is that information generated through initiatives like GreatNonprofit is only one valuable component of a complex system of evaluating nonprofits, NGOs and CSOs. More information, in addition to what is collected by GreatNonprofits, should be considered when evaluating nonprofits and assessing their performance.

III. IMPACT OF GREATNONPROFITS.ORG'S APPROACH

It is very difficult to assess how the information generated on the website has had an impact – whether on how the donors decide to provide funds to various organizations, as well as on the behavior of the nonprofits in responding to the feedback. There is, however, some anecdotal data that shows that feedback generated on GreatNonprofits has been useful. First, there are testimonials by donors such as the Gates Foundation documenting how the reviews on GreatNonprofits have helped them make decisions on which nonprofits to fund. Second, there is some evidence that nonprofits have made changes to their programs in response to the feedback received. For example, Communities in Schools in Pittsburgh, PA that services at-risk youth added a lounge area

in their building to create a safe, accessible place for students in response to suggestions by the students in their reviews.

IV. LESSONS LEARNED

"Feedback needs to be easy, fast and inexpensive to collect" (Perla Ni)

GreatNonprofits shared the lessons learned during the course of its work. First, the process of providing feedback needs to be easy, fast, inexpensive a so that everyone is able to provide feedback. Second, in the same vein, the process of collecting feedback should be easy and inexpensive. Third, feedback should be easy to understand for various audiences so that it can be used and acted upon. Fourth, feedback should be part of continuous management improvement system. Fifth, no reviews should be removed, however negative. Additionally, the information should be provided publicly. The last two lessons if not kept in mind will negatively affect the trust of the potential reviewers and reduce their incentive to share their views.

V. TRANSLATING THE IDEA TO DEVELOPING WORLD – CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

"We have to acknowledge that beneficiaries have the right to receive information, to participate and engage and not only send feedback when the program has been designed and implemented" (Anabel Cruz).

GreatNonprofit started its work in the United States. Although, it now has nonprofits that work in developing countries (Asia, Africa and Latin America) in its platform, its work remains largely US based. There are many challenges to translating this model to developing countries.

First, there is a challenge of creating a database of nonprofits in developing countries. Currently, nonprofits, NGOs, or CSOs opt in to be included in the platform of GreatNonprofits. This creates a clear volunteer bias. The nonprofits that are performing well will be most probable to make themselves open to reviews. In the developing countries, identifying non-performing CSOs is a greater challenge; information about these organizations is more useful to the development practitioners. Therefore, either citizens should be able to create a profile of a nonprofit or an NGO, or an effort needs to be made to create a database of nonprofits worldwide. Another organization is currently in the process of creating such data base.

The second significant challenge is communication. Many beneficiaries of these organizations do not have access to the Internet and have poor network coverage. There are frequent power shortages that make this issue even more acute. In many countries, beneficiaries also tend to be illiterate. These beneficiaries are most vulnerable but are not able to directly communicate and review their experience with the nonprofits. Wide diversity of dialects across one country can cause even more communication difficulties. Therefore, it could be suggested that the approach used by GreatNonprofits is no match for soliciting feedback of beneficiaries through facilitators who go in each community and directly talk to the people.

While this remains a challenge, experience of Danish Refugee Council (DRC) in Somalia also presents some hope. DRC instituted a system of SMS feedback about a year and a half ago. The response rate was nearly 10%, which is exceptionally high for an internet or telephone based communication in any context. They achieved this by making the system flexible, easy and fast, and by ensuring the communities that their feedback would be anonymous. Most importantly they emphasized the importance of their feedback in the process of making a difference. The message was phrased as a call to action. Moreover, they introduced the program to the communities through community facilitators before operationalizing it.

There is also an issue of cultural aspect; some cultures inhibit raising one's voice and providing candid feedback, especially when feedback is negative.

Another challenge concerns the power dynamics in developing countries. There are multiple stakeholders that the nonprofits and NGOs are accountable to in addition to their beneficiaries e.g. donors and governments. Donors are crucial for the survivability of these nonprofits. As a result, nonprofits and NGOs tend to respond to donors' demand much more strongly than in the US, thereby pushing citizen feedback to a corner.

Lastly, there is a difference in perspective; in development programs citizen feedback after the implementation of a program is only one way of engaging beneficiaries and citizens in the development process. Citizens need to be engaged in prioritizing their needs, as well as in the design of the program.

VI. MOVING FORWARD

Moving forward, a lot more work needs to be done in translating this work to developing countries. We also need to learn to use the information generated through beneficiary feedback in multiple ways. We need to understand how this information changes the behavior of donors when they decide to fund various nonprofits, as well as of non-profits themselves when they decide or not to respond to the feedback. We need to make these connections stronger so that this data helps people make better choices.

One way of doing this is to create metrics built around structure of organizations etc. that would provide concrete pieces of information about a nonprofit organization. GreatNonprofit is currently in the process of creating these metrics for different types of nonprofits (e.g. nonprofits that work on environment or education)