
DIMENSIONS OF NGO SUSTAINABILITY

Seven different dimensions of the NGO sector are analyzed in the 2003 NGO Sustainability Index: legal environment, organizational capacity, financial viability, advocacy, service provision, NGO infrastructure and public image. In the Index, each of these dimensions is examined with a focus on the following questions:

1. What has been accomplished?
2. What remains a problem?
3. Do local actors recognize the nature of outstanding challenges?
4. Do the local actors have a strategy and the capacity to address these challenges?

A brief explanation of the criteria used to evaluate each dimension of sustainability follows:

Legal Environment

For an NGO sector to be sustainable, the legal and regulatory environment should support the needs of NGOs. It should facilitate new entrants, help prevent governmental interference, and give NGOs the necessary legal basis to engage in appropriate fund-raising activities and legitimate income-producing ventures. The legal environment dimension of the Index analyzes the legal status of non-governmental organizations. Factors shaping the legal environment include the ease of registration; legal rights and conditions regulating NGOs; and the degree to which laws and regulations regarding taxation, procurement, access to information and other issues benefit or deter NGOs' effectiveness and viability. The extent to which government officials, NGO representatives, and private lawyers have the legal knowledge and experience to work within and improve the legal and regulatory environment for NGOs is also examined.

Questions asked include: Is there a favorable law on NGO registration? Is the internal management, scope of permissible activities, financial reporting, and/or dissolution of NGOs well detailed in current legislation? Does clear legal terminology preclude unwanted State control over NGOs? Are NGOs and their representatives allowed to operate freely within the law? Are they free from harassment by the central government, local governments, and tax police? Can they freely address matters of public debate and express criticism? Are there local lawyers who are trained in and familiar with NGO law? Is legal advice available to NGOs in the capital city and secondary cities? Do NGOs receive any sort of tax exemption? Do individual or corporate donors receive tax deductions? Do NGOs have to pay taxes on grants? Are NGOs allowed legally to compete for government contracts/procurements at the local and central levels?

Organizational Capacity

A sustainable NGO sector will contain a critical mass of NGOs that are transparently governed and publicly accountable, capably managed, and that exhibit essential organizational skills. The organizational capacity dimension of the Index addresses the operation of NGOs.

Questions evaluated include: Do NGOs actively seek to build constituencies for their initiatives? Do most NGOs have a clearly defined mission to which they adhere? Do most NGOs incorporate strategic planning techniques in their decision making process? Is there a clearly defined management structure within NGOs, including a recognized division of responsibilities between the Board of Directors and staff members? Is there a permanent, paid staff in leading NGOs? Are potential volunteers sufficiently recruited and engaged? Do NGOs' resources generally allow for modernized basic office equipment?

Financial Viability

A critical mass of NGOs must be financially viable, and the economy must be robust enough to support NGO self-financing efforts and generate philanthropic donations from local sources. For many NGOs, financial viability may be equally dependent upon the availability of and their ability to compete for international donor support funds.

Factors influencing the financial viability of NGOs include the state of the economy, the extent to which philanthropy and volunteerism are being nurtured in the local culture, as well as the extent to which government procurement and commercial revenue raising opportunities are being developed. The sophistication and prevalence of fundraising and strong financial management skills are also considered.

Questions asked under this dimension include: Do NGOs raise a significant percentage of their funding from local sources? Are NGOs able to draw upon a core of volunteer and non-monetary support from their communities? Do NGOs typically have multiple/diverse sources of funding? Are there sound financial management systems in place? Have NGOs cultivated a loyal core of financial supporters? Do revenues from services, products, or rent from assets supplement the income of NGOs? Do government and/or local business contract with NGOs for services?

Advocacy

The political and advocacy environment must support the formation of coalitions and networks, and offer NGOs the means to communicate their message through the media to the broader public, articulate their demands to government officials, and monitor government actions to ensure accountability. The advocacy dimension looks at NGOs' record in influencing public policy. The prevalence of advocacy in different sectors, at different levels of government, as well as with the private sector is analyzed. The extent to which coalitions of NGOs have been formed around issues is considered, as well as whether NGOs monitor party platforms and government performance. This dimension does not measure the level of NGOs' engagement with political parties.

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Questions include: Are there direct lines of communication between NGOs and policy makers? Have NGOs formed issue-based coalitions and conducted broad-based advocacy campaigns? Have these campaigns been effective at the local and/or national level at effecting policy change? Are there mechanisms and relationships for NGOs to participate in the political process? Have NGOs led efforts to raise awareness of problems or increase support for a particular position? Is there awareness in the wider NGO community on how a favorable legal and regulatory framework can enhance NGO effectiveness and sustainability? Is there a local NGO advocacy effort to promote legal reforms that will benefit NGOs, local philanthropy, etc.?

Service Provision

Sectoral sustainability will require a critical mass of NGOs that can efficiently provide services that consistently meet the needs, priorities and expectations of their constituents.

The index reviews questions such as: Do NGOs provide services in a variety of fields? Do the goods and services that NGOs produce reflect the needs and priorities of their constituents and communities? Are there goods and services that go beyond basic social needs provided to a constituency broader than NGOs' own memberships? When NGOs provide goods and services, do they recover any of their costs by charging fees? Do NGOs have knowledge of the market demand – and the ability of distinct constituencies to pay – for those products? Does the government, at the national and/or local level, recognize the value that NGOs can add in the provision of basic social services? Do they provide grants or contracts to NGOs to enable them to provide such services?

Infrastructure

A strong sectoral infrastructure is necessary that can provide NGOs with broad access to local NGO support services. Intermediary Support Organizations (ISOs) providing these services must be able to inform, train, and advise other NGOs; and provide access to NGO networks and coalitions that share information and pursue issues of common interest.

Questions include: Are there ISOs, NGO Resource Centers, or other means for NGOs to access information, technology, training and technical assistance throughout the country? Do ISOs and Resource Centers earn some of their operating revenue from earned income and other locally generated sources? Do local community foundations and/or ISOs provide grants from either locally raised funds or by re-granting international donor funds? Do NGOs share information with each other? Is there a network in place that facilitates such information sharing? Is there an organization or committee through which the sector promotes its interests? Are there capable local NGO management trainers? Is basic NGO management training available in the capital city and in secondary cities? Are training materials available in local languages? Are there examples of NGOs working in partnership, either formally or informally, with local business, government, and the media to achieve common objectives?

Public Image

For the sector to be sustainable, government, the business sector, and communities should have a positive public image of NGOs, including a broad understanding and appreciation of the role that NGOs play in society. Public awareness and credibility directly affect NGOs' ability to recruit members and volunteers, and encourage indigenous donors. The Index looks at the extent and nature of the media's coverage of NGOs, the awareness and willingness of government officials to engage NGOs, as well as the general public's knowledge and perception of the sector as a whole.

Typical questions in this section include: Do NGOs enjoy positive media coverage at the local and national level? Does the media provide positive analysis of the role that NGOs play in civil society? Does the general public have a positive perception of NGOs? Do the business sector and local and central government officials have a positive perception of NGOs? Do NGOs publicize their activities or promote their public image? Have NGOs adopted a code of ethics or tried to demonstrate transparency in their operations? Do leading NGOs publish annual reports?