

Summary of external input in support of NGO X¹ strategy development

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¹ The report has been anonymised - we haven't included names of interviewees or the organisation itself

● Context

This paper is an anonymised version of internal research done for environmental NGO X, looking to centre marginalised people in its new campaigning and community strategy. We sought to learn from the experience of others in large organisations engaging marginalised groups, and from such groups themselves with experience of working with larger organisations, to make recommendations about what works in such partnerships, and the common mistakes NGO X should seek to avoid.

● Summary findings

Interviewees highlighted the following main considerations for NGO X in implementing its strategic intent:

In engaging with new audiences, NGO X will need to clearly articulate what it stands for: its vision and reasons for wanting to engage; to be clear about the analysis it is bringing, and the extent to which that is rooted in an intersectional understanding (meaning that the root cause of, and the solutions to, climate change are inextricable from struggles around colonialism, class, race, gender etc).

NGO X will need to do some deep internal reflection before seeking to engage new audiences, to tackle how structural bias shows up in the organisation. This includes work on accountability and governance, surfacing and addressing questions around power dynamics, and giving continuing and meaningful consideration to issues of representation and diversity. All this will represent a significant culture shift.

There is low trust in the NGO sector generally. NGO X specifically is likely to come to new relationships with some advantages and disadvantages. Much will depend on how outreach and engagement is undertaken. NGO X will need to expect, and be open to, some criticism.

Relationships and partnerships should lie at the heart of the new strategy. These will foundationally rely on establishing mutual trust, and gaining trust is a long-term proposition that can't be hurried. NGO X will need to be clear who internally holds these relationships and on what basis, ensuring staff at all levels of seniority across the organisation/ in every team are involved. Part of building a relationship-focused strategy entails ensuring as far as possible that individual staff are able to hold particular relationships over the longer-term.

NGO X should begin by developing partnerships with groups/Intermediaries already taking an organising approach and embedded in their communities, and particularly where it has existing relationships, and to go where the struggles are.

There were some mixed views about the best role of local activists as part of the strategy of community engagement. Some examples point to the possibilities but there are risks and sensitivities too.

Climate and nature issues will not be at the forefront of people's concerns. NGO X will need to be sensitive in finding the space for collective action, based on listening and meaningful co-design. It will mean being willing to compromise where there is disagreement.

NGO X should not think of itself as turning up to 'build others' power'. It will be about listening to what people want and need and then considering what NGO X can contribute. There are assets that NGO X has and can bring that could be useful to others, but this can best be determined on a case by case basis. Communities also have much to teach NGO X and would be best engaged fully

acknowledging the desire for a reciprocal relationship.

In considering messaging, there will need to be clarity around:

- the extent to which NGO X brings a justice framing across its communications,
- how best to foreground others, in ways that go far beyond telling people's 'personal stories',
- being ready for backlash.

Maintaining relationships with decision makers whilst also seeking to be community-facing will in some cases prove difficult.

NGO X will need to develop planning, monitoring and evaluation systems and approaches that support /are sensitive to this approach, given that:

- it will be based on testing and iterating, and require operating with agility and opportunism,
- it introduces new accountability relationships and new joint decision making approaches,
- 'results' are more likely to be intangible, uncertain and longer-term.

Many interviewees welcomed NGO X's interventions, in building deep partnerships to centre communities, so long as this work is done well. It requires you to enter into it in the right spirit, listening, being humble, being flexible, allocating the significant resource necessary, committing for the long term, learning and adapting as you go.

● Methodology

Findings presented in this paper are based on 21 interviews and inputs. Interviewees included

- (a) people working in community-facing groups and organisations
- (b) people working for organisations that engage with and support community groups and organisations
- (c) NGO X's international partners and
- (d) NGO X's staff with relevant experience.

Interviewees contributed on a non-attributable basis. Based on interview transcripts, we coded and analysed themes emerging and present these below.

1 Getting the building blocks in place

1.1 Developing a clear proposition

Several interviewees stressed that in engaging with new audiences, NGO X will need to clearly articulate what it stands for. As one explained it: *"NGO X will need to set out a vision ... and ... the principles behind the shift. What is driving this? How radical and transformative are they hoping to be? They should be able to say, 'This is what we mean. We are talking about x, y, z'".* Or put more simply, *"You need a reason to be there"*.

According to interviewees, clarity on this will be a way of:

- establishing a point of contact
- lessening reluctance to engage - *"People can be suspicious, they won't understand you, if you're not clear about your thing"* - as well as
- helping to head off future misunderstandings.

Several of those we spoke to specifically mentioned that NGO X should expect to be challenged on, and will need a clarity around, the analysis it is bringing, and the extent to which that is rooted in an intersectional understanding. One interviewee set out that the struggles around climate are *“inextricable from the struggle against patriarchy, racism, colonialism and requires ... building people’s power ... [from a] class, feminist, anti-racist, anti-colonialist and international perspective”*.

Some feedback also points to the desirability of setting out the strategic logic more clearly. The aspiration to engage the most marginalised communities was widely interpreted as something that could only credibly be operationalised through deep organising. As we explore below, there may be other routes NGO X can follow; but the point here is that shared language at the start that describes the work would help. Terms like ‘organising’ and ‘movement building’ tend to be widely understood (if sometimes somewhat loosely applied) but NGO X’s strategic approach doesn’t neatly fit into these understandings and is not currently easily described.

1.2 Addressing internal structural and cultural issues

Several interviewees explicitly stressed that there is a need for NGO X to do ‘the groundwork’ before going out (and this was also implied in others’ contributions): *“there is a huge arc of work that needs to happen before we even get to the ‘doing”*.

The most-referenced aspect of this related to questions around accountability and governance. The key point here being that upward accountability requirements can be, and typically are, in conflict with imperatives around joint decision making with, and mutual accountability to, partners: *“Structures reinforce power dynamics ... [NGO X will] need to spend time questioning what the accountability and governance arrangements look like”*.

Linked to this are questions of power, and the need to understand and reflect on how it plays out. SMK’s report² notes that, *“Change requires a reimagining of relationships and processes within and between organisations and communities, and a reckoning of the deep social inequalities that run through the very sector that exists to address them ... Make hidden and invisible power visible”*.

Some explicitly referenced the (prior and then ongoing) need to consider representation and diversity: *“Representation is not all, but there will be questions about what senior leadership looks like. Who is going out to engage? Will it include members of the board? Who is representing and fronting the organisation?”* A couple of interviewees mentioned the importance of not relapsing to performative foregrounding of members of staff of colour, for example.

Several interviewees highlighted that these changes would represent and require a significant culture shift. Again, this is picked up in SMK’s report, which notes that, *“Shifting this culture requires diligent effort to make it visible, to challenge exclusionary cultural practices and create a new, inclusive, story”*. The move towards *“radical trust in communities”* - and all that entails - involves a cultural shift as much as a structural one. *“To get there, you may find you are up against your own ... collective thinking”*.

Some pointed to the importance of having and cultivating internal champions who have space to undertake this work, but also that infrastructural support to these champions will be needed. To quote SMK’s report, *“Too often, individual staff are tasked with creating strategies for engagement and participation without the wider support, understanding or resources required for meaningful change”*. Getting widespread internal buy-in can be hard.

² ‘It’s All About Power’ by the Sheila McKechnie Foundation
https://smk.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/SMK_ItsAllAboutPower_Digital.pdf

Some interviewees suggested NGO X should consider seeding a separate structure to undertake some of this work, as a preferable alternative to doing everything through the existing organisation. Reasons for this included that it could be a good way to navigate branding and reputational aspects, that it would help overcome potential partners' scepticism and reluctance to engage, and that it makes sense to demarcate elements of an overall strategy to different organisations, rather than one organisation trying to do it all. It would also allow more autonomy for NGO X staff who are more connected to frontline communities to work in more relationship-centred ways.

Of the externals we spoke to, some knew NGO X well, some a little, and some only from distance. From the former came a warning that *"NGO X will likely be engaging where there is an existing culture of mistrust, because of past experiences ... There are ripples from [previous incident] ... that alienated people"*. But there was also more positive feedback, that NGO X has demonstrated an ability to be collaborative in ways that some other NGOs haven't (and aren't), and the work on [Y] was typically cited positively. SMK's report highlights the importance of NGOs stepping up to *"contribute to a culture of cooperation across civil society"* and to *"protect civic space"*. In relation to both of these, NGO X's work on the [Z] Bill, for example, stands in its favour.

Views on NGO X will also be influenced by negative views of the wider sector – both the environmental sector – *"NGOs are very white middle class ... there is a whole piece of work to do about what that connection [to wider communities] is"* – and because of low trust in the NGO sector generally. Notwithstanding this, some felt positively about the prospects. As one put it, *"Your efforts will be welcome if they are done right"*.

But either way, a couple of interviewees noted that NGO X will need to expect, and be open to, criticism: *"you will expose yourself to a number of criticisms and critiques. And you need to be ready to hear them. There is widespread feeling about NGOs being extractive, not understanding race and colonialism. If NGO X are trying to switch and broaden, and wanting to engage, then these things will come out"*.

2 Network and campaigning implications

2.1 Relational approach

There was a clear consensus that:

- (a) relationships should lie at the heart of the new strategy, and that
- (b) these will foundationally rely on establishing mutual trust, and that
- (c) gaining trust is a long-term proposition that can't be hurried: *"organise at the speed of trust"*.

For many interviewees this means being present, listening, and being open to others' agendas (as explored further below). In turn, that means coming in a spirit of solidarity and respect, and embracing two-way flows of communications and influence. *"Both parties have something to learn... we're talking about work done in a community for years, histories, networks of trust - [NGO X staff should] share the same thing from NGO X about its history... it's like going on a date! Getting to know each other."*

Some stressed, and perhaps others felt it went without saying, that relationships can be messy, at all levels, including bilateral and inter- and intra-community relationships. And there can be challenges around both maintaining relationships and *"having the wisdom to know when to extricate yourself"*. A

couple of contributors highlighted the need to think (from the start) about the pathways for continued engagement.

A couple of interviewees pointed to the need to be clear about who internally holds the relationships and on what basis - this should be across the organisation at all levels of seniority, not gate kept by senior managers or farmed out to more junior staff. One made the further point that creating the conditions where longer term relationships are possible requires wider thinking about how staff can feel ownership over their work (because of being trusted, supported, feeling they have the space to grow in the role, etc).

2.2 Which communities?

One clear strand of advice cited by many was that NGO X should best think about engaging with organised groups/Intermediaries, and particularly where it has existing relations, as in the suggestions to *“Start where there is energy - everywhere [we have] worked we have been invited”* and that *“One approach would be to pick some groups, find maybe a dozen partner organisations, and make an offer to build a meaningful relationship, then see where it goes. Do it by doing”*.

Complementary to this, some advised NGO X to go where the struggles are. As one interviewee put it, *“if you want to do something in a community, if it’s really needed, it’s probably already happening. Find out how you can contribute”*.

Being one step away from the community can, however, present its own challenges, according to one contributor: *“What we ... tend to find is self-appointed leaders ... you could accidentally align yourself with certain politics or sides within the community without realising and this could be problematic ... It’s easy to forget that most people in the community don’t have anything to do with the gatekeepers and the community spokespeople”*.

There were also some relevant reflections from NGO X office in another country on the need to distinguish between *“convergence of struggles”* (which they do not support) and *“alliance building”* which allows (tactical) support for the specific demands of different movements.

There were some mixed views about the best role of local activists as part of the strategy of community engagement. Contact with [W] in Leicester came through NGO X activists for example. And NGO X [in two other countries] has built campaigns around asking/ encouraging/ supporting their local groups to engage with working class neighbourhoods. But some pointed to the risks and sensitivities, around the potential for *“clash of understandings”* for example, and the need to avoid possible ‘paternalistic’ tendencies.

2.3 Whose agendas?

Some highlighted that NGO X will need to be aware that climate and nature issues will not be at the forefront of people’s concerns. However, several interviewees did note that NGO X’s international perspective – and the ability to link internationally and locally – could be an important asset.

For some (perhaps coming from an organising perspective), NGO X’s role should be to facilitate and support others’ agendas. But many framed it slightly differently, as being about finding the space for collective action, based on listening and meaningful co-design.

This isn’t straightforward of course, not least because ‘communities’ won’t have a homogeneous view, and in some cases – particularly perhaps around transition, where in the experience of one

interviewee they may “*fundamentally disagree with a lot of what we say ... We have our own theory of change and values and goals, but we also have to go where they need us and that’s not always where we think we’ll go which can be tricky ... Being willing to compromise on what you want to achieve when it clashes with what your communities want to achieve*”.

2.4 What is the support offer?

Again, there was a stress on listening: “*What are people calling you to do? You can’t know that in your office. You have to ask. Sometimes people call you to do stuff that you might not feel is the most important ... If you turn up, you have to listen*”.

According to some people’s experiences, communities may typically have a sense of powerlessness and little hope of achieving change. And a couple of interviews stressed that an organisation like NGO X comes with the (at least potential) advantage of bringing a different vantage point and expertise.

However, a much more prominent strand of opinion was along the lines that NGO X should not think of itself as turning up to ‘build others’ power’. Partly this about not making assumptions and partly it’s about a mindset of “*everybody ... bringing something ... we have to acknowledge the power that we have ... Communities have other forms of power ... local people also have expertise and resources and an ability to scale ... [we need to] move away from the idea that expertise exists within us*”.

In relation to specific contributions and offers that NGO X might make, several felt that NGO X’s levels of **political access** represented a potentially valuable asset to others - especially if shared with communities “*people [value] ... meeting people with positional power or those they respect... if there are five seats, there should be more space for groups they are working with ... they should feel they’re meant to be there more than anybody else*.”

But others noted that this comes with some sensitivities around the power dynamics involved that would need careful navigation, in terms of how policy positions are determined for example “*[This strategy] requires a high level of commitment to experiment and see where things go - you’re starting at the opposite end of the advocacy spectrum. It requires you to change the mindset to ‘we don’t know what the problem is - let’s go find out’*.”

Notably, the potential to link local issues and scale them to national levels was said by a couple of interviewees to carry with it power that needs to be handled very carefully.

NGO X has been considering the potential to offer **small grants** and again several interviewees welcomed this, but a similar number pointed to the potential complexities involved, for example that, “*deciding who gets the grant creates an ownership problem, and issues around access to resources. If communities have their own resources, they’re properly in charge [which isn’t the case with] someone [external] giving them a grant*”.

Some welcomed the proposed offer of **capacity building and training**. But there were again some caveats, with suggestions that training that is specific and targeted (and explicitly requested) more likely to be useful than more generalised offers of off-the-shelf support.

NGO X’s potential **convening** role was given a more positive reception, as being valuable when requested.

There was some consideration about what practical support and **access to practical assets** NGO X would be able to offer. Meeting space for example was cited as highly valued by several interviewees,

and one person mentioned also a basic introduction to online campaigning tools “*which websites they can have that won’t cost anything.*”

One person mentioned NGO X’s ability to mobilise its **supporter base**: “*the heft of their membership is attractive, the ability to get 50k to sign a petition*”.

Some stressed the importance of **paying people for their time**.

3 Wider organisational implications

3.1 Identifying and addressing trade offs

Some interviewees flagged the question of whether a justice framing will permeate all communications: “*This work can be undermined if the social media narrative of the organisation is not consistent, or if the organisation doesn’t give visible solidarity at key moments*”. And some pointed to more general sensitivities around branding and promotion, and the need, for example, “*to balance ‘giving visible support’ with ‘not claiming the movement’ - knowing when to step back to allow others to be visible*”.

Several stressed the need to get right how best to foreground others, in ways that go far beyond telling people’s ‘personal stories’ – given the potential for such approaches to be tokenistic, extractive and commodified.

A couple of people pointed to the need to be ready for backlash. As one put it, “*if they make public moves in this direction, they will get [negative] media and political attention. Media teams need to be ready for that*”. And some stressed that NGO X must be prepared to lose some supporters over messaging and positioning: “*they will need to try and bring people with them but have to reconcile to losing some people along the way*”.

In terms of existing relationships, some highlighted that attempting to maintain relationships with decision makers whilst also seeking to be community-facing can prove difficult.

3.2 Tracking and assessing progress

A couple of comments related to the perceived need for NGO X more clearly to disentangle and demarcate its goals. This was along the lines that “*there is potential conflict in strategy between building NGO X & building communities’ capacity*” and also that “*it’s important to be diverse, but to be representative of groups who are most affected is a different thing – they are connected but not the same thing*”.

Some interviewees pointed to the need for an approach based on testing and iterating, and linked to this a couple of interviewees highlighted the importance of agility and opportunism. This obviously has implications for where and how, and how quickly, planning and decision making takes place within the organisation, and how learning is captured (and by whom) and how it is shared.

Some stressed too the need to think about results differently, given they are more likely to be intangible, uncertain and longer-term.

4 Carpe diem

“If they are not prepared to take risks now, then when? It’s clear what needs to be done, there’s no excuse not to push in that direction.”

Many interviewees stressed that, although there are many things to consider, the potential benefits of deep partnership work and centring communities are huge - in terms of achieving the power shifts needed to tackle the climate crisis through a green transition. Choosing not to follow through with this approach itself has grave risks - it is what is needed. Interviewees had challenges, but many were clear NGO X would be welcome as long as the work is done well.

“The knowledge and understanding from this kind of organising and stepping outside of the usual environmental circles is really powerful.”

Many community organisations have had bad experiences with NGOs that have attempted to engage them in a fixed, extractive way without entering into genuine partnership. We heard that there is no one right way to build deep partnerships, but it requires you enter into it in the right spirit, listening, being humble, being flexible, allocating the significant resource necessary, committing for the long term, learning and adapting as you go.