

Do you have a right to work in my country?

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Dear friends and colleagues, thank you for giving me the honour of being able to address you today. To be invited to present at this conference is a great privilege and I hope that I am able to say some words today that will provoke ideas and stimulate discussions.

In August 2005 there was a terrible hurricane that devastated the city of New Orleans in America. But how many governments and NGOs from other countries went marching in, uninvited, telling the local people how to rebuild their services? The American government would never have allowed people from outside America to take control of the reconstruction and planning service developments.

But when there is a hurricane in Bangladesh, a flood in India or a community ravaged by poverty in Africa, hundreds of NGOs and governments just march in, often uninvited, telling local people what they can and cannot do. "Let's build a blind school there", "Let's have a deafblind unit there", "Let's fund this programme for 25 years", "Let's organise training on our terms". This is very often the attitude of people from rich countries.

In this presentation I will ask what right anyone has to work in another country. What right do INGOs have to work in other countries? And what should their role be when they do that? I will look at the good and bad practice of international NGOs and argue that the consequences of bad practice can often have a devastating impact on long-term sustainable development.

I should make it clear that I work for an INGO and I have almost 20 years' experience of working internationally (and in other countries). I believe passionately that not only do we have a right to work in other countries, we have a responsibility to do so if we can

improve people's lives – but we have to do this in an appropriate way that empowers local people and leads to sustainable programmes.

I think it is impossible to consider the role of INGOs without reference to the wider context and the world in which we live.

We are living in an unfair and unjust world. As those of you from Asia know only too well, this is a world that can be cruel, in which basic rights are denied and basic needs are not met. Every single day more than 20,000 people die unnecessarily because of extreme poverty. Every three seconds a child dies in Africa; thousands die in Asia because they have no access to safe drinking water or simple medication; millions of children are denied the opportunity to go to school – often abused or forced into child labour.

This is appalling and we should all have something to say about this. Because we really can do something about it. In the last year enormous pressure has been brought to bear on the rich countries of the world and, as a result, there has been real progress in increasing aid, in looking at ways of reducing and eliminating debt and in ensuring a fairer playing field all round in world trade.

But we have a long, long way to go and far greater change is required - especially for disabled people.

Within the disability world it is essential that we understand this wider context. The link between disability and poverty is clear and is a long established fact. Poverty is the major cause of disability in poor countries – and disabled people are undoubtedly amongst the poorest. If rights are denied to a whole community, we all know that it will be disabled people within that community who face the most discrimination. And let's be absolutely clear about this – those who have multiple disabilities are even further down the list – they are at the bottom of the pile. There is no doubt that deafblind people in poor countries are amongst the most marginalised and oppressed of all people in the world.

If we are going to do something about this, I do not believe that we can just look at the micro level and say let's help that deafblind child there, let's develop a deafblind programme there. Of course we should provide services and of course someone needs to be focusing on that – but within our field overall we absolutely have to know about the global picture; we must be raising our voices at the highest level; we have to influence government policies and we have to advocate at the global level. If we do not do this, the needs and rights of deafblind people will forever be ignored.

The global frameworks do exist – we just have to ensure that our voices are heard. For example, in September 2000 more than 180 countries signed a commitment to achieve

8 Millennium Development Goals by 2015. One of these goals is about achieving universal primary education – appropriate primary education for all children.

At the moment fewer than 1% of deafblind children in the world are receiving appropriate education. But the MDGs cannot be achieved unless every child in the world is receiving appropriate primary education – and every child means every deafblind child as well. We should be shouting as loud as we can about this – at every opportunity – telling the world that it is failing. It is failing to make progress towards the targets it has set itself because it is forgetting about deafblind children.

Let me now look more closely at the role of international NGOs in this process.

The first question we should ask is “Should INGOs exist?”

In an ideal world I think the answer must be no. In an ideal world there would be no need for us to seek to bring about change. If every deafblind person in the world enjoyed their rights, there would be no need for Sense International to exist. But we exist because this is not an ideal world; deafblind people are denied their rights. And I believe that I have every right to try and bring about change to ensure that deafblind people are not marginalised and excluded.

So - “Should INGOs exist?” – unfortunately the answer is yes – but we should all be working towards a time when we do not need to exist. We should be trying to do ourselves out of business. The day when Sense International can cease to exist is the day we should be working towards – the day when our goals and vision will have been achieved.

If INGOs exist, on what basis should they operate?

It is with a great deal of regret that I have to say that there are many INGOs which cause far more damage than good.

There are too many people from my part of the world who think that international development is about helping poor people in poor countries, about telling you how to do things, about patronising you, about setting an agenda that you have to follow, about controlling the relationships. This is not development – it is a power-driven, controlling, patronising, charitable approach. Development is about empowerment, it is not about charity.

The bad practice of INGOs can have a long-lasting negative impact.

The people involved are often ignorant to this. They think they are doing good. They want to do good. But they are creating problems and causing damage that could take years to undo. All of us, INGOs and local NGOs alike, have a duty to each other to

stand up to this, expose bad practice and put an end to it. In developing countries it is often very difficult to stand up to an international organisation and tell us we are doing things badly, or wrongly, but you must do this. If you do not, you are letting yourselves down and the consequences could be disastrous.

I could talk for hours about good and bad practice, but for this presentation I will highlight some of the key areas.

Control

When an international NGO and a local NGO work together – who is in control? Who decides when training events should happen? Who decides what information should be exchanged? Who decides how money should be spent? Who decides when a partnership should finish?

There will always be a power imbalance when money is involved. But this does not mean that we cannot do everything possible to enable an equal partnership.

When Sense International started working in India, I give you my word that the only decision we made about India was not to make any decisions about India.

We established a structure that enabled Indian people to decide the way forward, Indian people to make decisions, Indian people to tell us what they wanted. This made sure that people in India had ownership of their programmes and could take responsibility for the way forward – and this is why in 8 years the number of deafblind programmes in India has increased from 1 to 33.

Local people

The subject of local people is another area in which INGOs make enormous mistakes. Far too many INGOs simply do not trust local people to have the responsibility to take things forward. There are too many INGOs working in Asia and Africa that use expatriate staff from Europe and America to do jobs that could, and should be done, by local people. And to make matters even worse they often pay those expatriate staff ridiculous, tax-free Western salaries.

How often do we see jobs advertised in the UK for an INGO Country Representative in countries such as Bangladesh on a salary of 32,000 pounds a year. The NGO are often “proud to have been working in Bangladesh for more than 30 years.” More than 30 years – and they have not been able to find someone in Bangladesh to be their Country Representative? And they are prepared to send someone out from the UK to earn a salary probably more than 30 times greater than the average Bangladeshi salary.

That is not development. That is pathetic.

Money

As I have mentioned, it is obvious that money has a huge influence in relationships and partnerships. Arguably, he who controls the money controls the relationship. So if local NGOs accept all of their money from international NGOs who will be in control?

Local NGOs and INGOs alike have to ensure that a culture of dependency can never develop. A local NGO should never become dependent on one INGO for its funding. Local NGOs should diversify their funding sources and ensure that they have a healthy mixture of funders, so if one goes it does not matter.

I also believe that all of us should be investing in local income generation. Whilst there is enormous poverty in Asia, there is also a great deal of money. Why should people in the UK fund deafblind programmes in India when there are 350 million middle class people in India and huge amounts of wealth in some of the richest companies in the world?

Of course, international NGOs should not be raising money for themselves in developing countries – but we really should be investing in strategies that enable our partners to raise money.

Within Sense International we have sometimes found it extremely difficult to invest in supporting local NGOs to attract local resources. It is certainly very challenging, when there are limited resources, to decide that we won't support those deafblind children in that deafblind programme because, instead, we are going to use those resources to support a long-term fundraising strategy. But these are the hard decisions that we all have to make – and today more than 25% of the total cost of our programme in India is now raised within India.

This means that Indian people are now paying for other Indian people to do something for Indian deafblind people. And this is exactly how it should be – as this is the only way to ensure long-term sustainability.

Exit strategies

I also believe passionately that INGOs must have strategies for leaving a country. I mentioned earlier that I believe our ultimate aim should be to reach a stage when we do not need to exist – and within that I think we have to have clear strategies for leaving the countries in which we work. I hear too many examples of NGOs being proud to have been working in a country for 90 years. But to me that indicates failure. If we are about real development and empowering local people to take control, I honestly cannot imagine that if we are good at what we do this should take 90 years.

Apart from anything else it lets people in those countries avoid their own responsibilities. If I said today that Sense International would fund every deafblind school in Malaysia for the next 90 years, would the government here ever need to do anything? Governments have an absolute duty to provide education for all children – and if INGOs do it for them then they do not have to accept their responsibilities.

INGOs should have clear strategies for withdrawing from countries. In an appropriate way of course, and in a timely fashion that does not result in programme collapse – but the aim should be to leave and allow local people to take responsibility and control of their own destinies.

With regards to the role of international NGOs I would therefore suggest that we need to really question our roles.

We should not just be about the transfer of resources from North to South or about the support of services to meet needs. We should be about rights-based development; we should be supporting our local partners to build their capacities; we should be advocating and campaigning for change; and we should be prepared to adapt and develop ourselves as the world around us changes.

Role and responsibility of local NGOs

I hope I have made it clear that I believe that there are roles and responsibilities for all of us in development. When things go wrong it is not only because INGOs get it wrong. Local NGOs have a responsibility to work in the right way as well. And let me emphasise that, from the INGO perspective, I want and expect local people to be telling me what they want.

You cannot just wait for INGOs to come along and solve all the problems. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King did not wait for the rich and powerful to come to the rescue. They asserted their call to justice and made their stand. The poor cannot wait for the rich to issue the call to justice; the poor world must unite and find its voice; local NGOs must be strong enough to accept their own responsibilities and develop their own strategy and agenda.

Partnerships

We hear a huge amount about partnerships and the basis on which they should exist and I do not intend to explore this in great detail here. It is a subject that we could discuss for the whole conference! But please allow me to emphasise two points:

There are huge challenges in the disability world, even more for those working in multiple disability. It is essential, therefore, that we work together and learn from each other. That

does not necessarily mean developing formal partnerships, but it does mean working together, sharing information, maximising the limited resources at our disposal and learning from each other as we move forward.

Let me also say that I do not believe we will ever change the world for every disabled person if we try to do it on our own. It is absolutely essential that we engage with as many other organisations and individuals as we can. This can be NGOs and governments alike, local, national and international. NGOs working with children should work with disabled children; NGOs working with old people should work with old disabled people – and all governments, who have responsibilities for all their citizens, should remember the needs of disabled people.

We have to work together and we have to urge others to take up our cause. Out of this will come many different kinds of relationships and partnerships, very often with organisations that are completely different to us. Sense International and the Government of India have enormously different visions and missions, but of course we can work together, even in a formal partnership, to make a difference for deafblind people in that country.

We must all be prepared to do this and to work with others, even if they are very different to us and have very different visions and missions, if we are really going to achieve our goals.

Wider context

At the start of this presentation I referred to the wider context and our need to be aware of the changing world within which we operate.

I would like to apply this thinking more directly to the way in which developments for disabled people should move forward.

Many years ago there would have been a focus on services. Those poor disabled people have needs and those needs can be met by providing services. In today's world this is no longer acceptable. Of course there is a need for services, but only within the wider context and bigger picture of the overall programme.

I want to refer to the UN Declaration of Human Rights and its statement that all people are born free and equal. But, I would argue, to provide a level playing field and ensure that some people can access their rights, specific actions may be required and that this is something that governments must do.

It is crucial that we apply this thinking within the disabled field. Disabled people have been born free and equal; they have the same rights as everyone else; but there are

specific actions that are required if they are to be able to enjoy those rights – and governments have a responsibility to ensure that those specific actions happen.

So services are required, but they are only a part of what is required. To ensure real, substantial and sustainable change we have to have strong advocacy programmes, we have to be lobbying governments, we have to be raising awareness and we have to be changing opinions and attitudes.

I hope that I have been able to give a small insight into some of the issues that I believe are important if we are to bring about the kinds of changes that are required.

The challenges are clearly enormous, but there are many reasons why we can feel optimistic and enthusiastic.

If we get our approaches right, our practice right and our attitudes right then we can all make a difference in other countries and we can give citizens throughout the world the chance to escape poverty.

Global decisions that result in agreements like the UN Declaration of Human Rights and the Millennium Development Goals, provide us with an international framework within which we can operate.

Above all, however, it comes back to us, as individuals. Individuals, working together, form and shape societies. Great forces for change are the accumulation of individual actions. The words of Bobby Kennedy are more powerful today than ever:

Let no-one be discouraged by the belief there is nothing one man or one woman can do against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence....Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events - and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation. Each time a man stands up for an ideal or strikes out against injustice, he sends a tiny ripple of hope - and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

I leave you with those words.

We have the frameworks, we have the examples of success, we have the desire and enthusiasm of so many people.

We really can change the world – every single one of us – individually and collectively - and make it a better place for all disabled people.