

17 LESSONS

*for building and strengthening the
impact of NGDO platforms*

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Working for civil society organizations, we all experience bottlenecks in our processes and we all sometimes feel that the impact of our work doesn't match the effort we put in. Is it a matter of strategic planning? Is it the way we make decisions? Or is it the workflow we set up? Some of the problems we face are specific to our every organization and we can only address them if we identify the root causes.

However, there are common experiences and similar civic contexts for the NGDO platforms all over the world and this gives us a valuable opportunity to learn from each other. So here are the main 17 lessons from over a decade long activity of FOND - The Romanian NGDO Platform. It's about asking the right questions and improving continuously.

WHERE IS THIS COMING FROM?

In late 2018, FOND - The Romanian NGDO Platform commissioned an independent evaluation of its first 10 years of activity. The evaluation looked at FOND's external impact as well as the platform's organizational capacity and membership involvement. The suggestions above were put together by the evaluation team as good practice examples relevant to any NGDO platform. These suggestions are based on FOND's experience of platform building, members' engagement and building relationships with stakeholders to influence policy on international development cooperation.

**SELF-AWARENESS
AND POSITIONING
WITHIN THE SECTOR**

1.

Define your organization's position statement

What makes you different from other organizations that do similar work? Especially if you are a young organization, that's one conversation you need to have with all your members. The "unique selling proposition" is indeed a marketing tool, while you are a not-for-profit organization. It still applies, and it brings you three main benefits: it engages your membership, it makes your bid for funding stronger and it opens the path for relevant partnerships.

Your position statement is also the key factor that will help you build a strong brand to inspire confidence and respect to your members and stakeholders. Last but not least, go back and renegotiate your position statement together with your membership from time to time.

How?

- Have regular facilitated debates with your members.
- Write one line that shows your unique approach to each clear need of your beneficiaries.
- Make sure it's clear, short and true.
- Communicate it in everything you do.
- Use it in developing your brand.

2.

Know and show your values

Your organizational values should not be just some words on your website or in the statute, but relevant to the sector and the organization. Make them public, use them in communication, bring them up in members' discussions.

They should guide you in your activity and relationships with your stakeholders. They should also be the basis of your internal community-building activities.

3.

Be present and relevant in the political and social context

Being aware of and adapting to the given political, social and international context is essential to stay relevant to members and other stakeholders.

Important events, topics or trends affect the context in which organizations operate. They also generate broader conversations within society. Regionally or globally relevant topics - for instance closing civic space, populism, migration, climate activism, protest movements, racism and xenophobia, natural disasters, human rights crises, major policy moves such as the 2030 Agenda - they matter not just because they capture the public's attention but also because, in doing so, they open windows of opportunity for NGOs to influence public opinion by engaging with these topics in line with a certain set of values and missions.

How?

- Join the public conversation and use it to make statements about your work and your values.
- Support your members who are either affected by the events or who are leaders on prominent topics.
- Join or support movements, informal coalitions, discussion groups, etc. that work on important and urgent topics which are relevant to your mission and your members.
- Address the relevant topics in your events, projects and your interactions with policymakers.

CAPACITY BUILDING

4.

Apply good governance principles within the platform

Good governance doesn't just refer to the decision-making chain, as it is specified in your statute. It's a set of principles you can discuss with your members and implement on all layers of the platform: board, executive team, members' general assembly, etc. They can tackle transparency, accountability, risk management, monitoring and impact evaluation, financial management, needs assessment, etc. This will help you become more trustworthy for both members and stakeholders and will ensure you have smooth and efficient processes.

Norms and procedures are important for any federation, coalition, or organization. They will facilitate your decision-making process. However, bear in mind that you are more than a formalized process for organizations to cooperate, you are foremost a community. And that is one of your strengths.

Last, but not least, good governance is less likely in the absence of a performant financial and organizational management. The quality of all layers of management should be a continuous concern for all platforms.

5.

Support the platform's executive team (secretariat)

One of the most challenging tasks for the executive team of a platform is to keep a balance between, on the one hand, managing and growing the organization (attracting resources, implementing projects, events, advocacy activities, recruiting and managing staff, building partnership, etc.) and on the other hand maintaining a strong membership engagement.

At the same time, a stable and motivated executive team has proven essential to the success and sustainability of platforms. Member organizations and Board members who want to strengthen their national platforms should, therefore, aim not just to be themselves involved in platform activities, but also to actively support the executive teams.

How?

- Board members and experts from organizations are in a good position to ensure that newer members of the executive team benefit from mentorship and a climate of learning and support.
- By taking on responsibilities such as leading a working group or moderating a panel, you reduce the workload of the executive team while also providing visibility for your organization.
- Simply by participating and being responsive to the executive team's calls for engagement is a good way to show support and avoid demotivation.

6.

Engage your Board members more

It's always a good idea to go for the active board members. But ask yourself and your members exactly what 'active' means for your organization particularly, for instance:

- Taking on individual specific responsibilities and ensuring continuity from one board to the other
- Managing individual stakeholder relationships (together with the executive team)
- Individual specific reporting to the General Assembly.

Make sure you have set in your organization's strategy principles and procedures to ensure succession for the board members.

7.

Build your internal network of experts

Having a map of internal expertise (experts working in your member organizations) can prove useful in so many and diverse situations. It will not only serve as a resource in your policy agenda and advocacy efforts but will also build members' engagement and trust.

It's simple. You only have to know your members and their staff. Having a database with experts doesn't mean that you will bypass the representatives that the members have named for the platform. It only means that you will know what internal help you can get, what other potential speakers for the events you have, what other people you can get involved in your research or policy activities etc.

This is also a useful resource for the member organizations - in fact sharing knowledge and accessing a wider network of experts is often a strong motivation for NGOs who join platforms.

8.

Develop strong events that build credibility and visibility for your platform

It's true there are thousands of events all year long (in your country and all over the place). However, you can find your own niche and bring people together. You can become a binder for organizations and experts in your field of action and you can be an agenda-setter through these events.

When you organize events, keep in mind that all of your participants are communicators, they all reach a smaller or larger personal audience through their social media. So, pay attention to all of them and be transparent.

9.

Be smart about your financial sustainability

If A MAJORITY of your last year budget had one main funding source, it's time for you to make a change. Get your Board and executive team to work on a plan to:

- Become less and less dependent on one funder
- Identify grant-makers that can support different parts of your initiatives and map the complementarity between them
- Research non-restricted funding sources and explore the entire range of potential supporters: public, private companies, private grant-makers, individual donors, etc.
- Involve all your members in the long term financial planning exercise for the platform.

10.

Learn, innovate and use new technologies to your advantage

Keeping up with digital innovations requires a constant effort. But the good news about technological solutions becoming mainstream is that they are also more and more user-friendly and they can easily be used to enhance your communication and collaboration. A good-looking website and posting on social media is no longer enough, at a time when people consume and produce information in different ways. Think about how you

communicate visually but also using audio and video tools, consider using online tools or mobile apps to crowdsource information and to request feedback from your members and participants. Be aware of new communication channels and consider their curators (bloggers, vloggers, photographers, etc.) as new stakeholders. You can also use apps and online tools to help you monitor and evaluate your work in real-time.

You are not the only one needing to learn and adapt to digital innovations, most NGOs are in this position, so think about shared learning and bringing opportunities to your members and participants by, for instance, inviting experts in your projects and events. As always, the surest way to make sure your next projects will include innovative tools and expertise is to budget for them.

How?

- Members' needs and priorities are bound to change, and with these motivations for involvement also change, so it's important for the platform's leadership to conduct periodic needs assessments and plan on how to meet the current priorities.
- When attracting new members, target organizations that bring specific expertise or capacities to the federation (identify what you need in order to grow stronger).

**BUILDING AND
MAINTAINING A
STRONG MEMBERSHIP**

11.

When building membership, focus on motivation rather than large numbers

A lean membership (fewer but more motivated and efficient) can work better than a bulky structure in which many members are only loosely connected to the platform. When the platform has a large number of members who don't participate, this places a non-efficient burden on the secretariat while demotivating the rest of the members. In some cases, too many inactive members can also make decision making within the platform difficult.

A larger membership base may also be functional if most of the members are active or at least responsive, but it requires efficient decision-making structures/processes and internal communication strategies.

12.

Make members' engagement flexible, meaningful and enjoyable

Engage members in flexible structures based on interest and concrete goals. People work better together when they have a common, well-defined objective - such as an advocacy campaign, a report or an event - rather than just being grouped in working groups on thematic interests.

Transparency builds trust. Communicate regularly about opportunities for engagement and when necessary, about selection criteria.

Acknowledge and celebrate success with members. This can include informal gatherings and even celebrations, not just formal occasions such as General Assemblies. The platform's successes are achievements of the members as well, and they should be made to feel that way.

How?

- Make informal structures (such as working groups, hubs, committees) practical and flexible. If a group is no longer motivated and functional, it may not be useful at the moment. Closing old groups/committees and setting up new ones is not a failure but a recalibration.
- Set up impromptu structures that work on a given task.

13.

Provide members with opportunities to take on less formal leadership roles

Encourage members to assume leadership roles, not just formal ones (in Boards or Committees) but also informal ones based on their interests and expertise. Ask experts from member organizations to lead working groups, moderate panels in your events, represent the platform in international events or lead reports and advocacy initiatives. This sort of leadership creates motivation and engagement, and it can also serve to bring more people from that particular member's organization closer to the platform.

Making all of the above possible is no easy task if the expertise gap between your members is getting larger. You can prevent that from happening by simply using multiple tools (preferably interactive one) for disseminating the know-how towards all members on a regular basis. Think about concepts, ideas, skills that could be improved for some of your members and help them grow, it's the best investment you could make.

ADVOCACY AND STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

14.

Set a clear and smart advocacy agenda

Go beyond including general advocacy goals in your strategy and set clear advocacy agendas with objectives, mandates, and timeframes. This will ensure the platform's executive team, Board and members all know what they are working towards. Setting advocacy objectives should be done in a participatory process that includes members. As stakeholders and political contexts change, revisit your advocacy agenda when necessary.

In advocacy, keep in mind the long term, your mission, and accountability to members. Advocacy work may sometimes require quick decisions that don't allow for consistent consultations with the members. This includes the times when you need to do something (make a public statement, sign a letter, participate in a consultation), but you should be aware that non-decisions or deciding to not do anything are also actions that define your position. When difficult or less straightforward advocacy decisions need to be made, the best course of action is to:

- Be transparent in communicating to your members what action or non-action you did take, why you decided that way and, depending on their answer, decide together on what to do next time a similar decision comes along.
- Consider your mission and values, as they are your standards of accountability to the member organizations. Decisions that are difficult because of their immediate impact may strengthen your platform in the long run if they are well aligned with the mission and long-term goals.

15.

Differentiate between the technical and the political stakeholders

Ideally, when attempting to influence policies for the long term, you should build relationships both with political decision-makers and with the more technical staff who work in ministries or agencies and who draft policy documents. Naturally, since most politicians depend on their public reputation, in such relationships how and what you communicate publicly, as well as your own reputation, weigh more heavily. Technical staff, on the other hand, tend to be more invested in the contents and quality of policy documents and keen to see their work products adopted. In fact, professionals within the government can themselves feel frustrated at times with the political agenda and could use an external ally in the civil society (i.e. feeling that

development cooperation is not high on the agenda) or with the political process (i.e. when proposals they feel positive about get postponed or thwarted for political reasons).

It is important to consider who you are building relationships with, what are their different stakes, benefits, and risks in relation to you, and how your positions impact them differently. This means that, for instance, you can be critical with politicians and policies without necessarily damaging your relationships with technical staff.

16.

Engage with multiple stakeholders

Whatever your advocacy agenda, it is important to keep in mind not just the main targets (the policy-makers who actually have the power to make the decisions you want) but also the other people who have a role in the process such as institutions with a consulting or implementation role, or people who can influence decisions - politicians, Members of Parliament, ministries other than the primary target, councilors etc.

Having strong relationships with multiple stakeholders, knowing your supporters and investing in these relationships can be very rewarding in the long run and helps you reinforce your advocacy agenda. In many cases, your primary target can actually feel more motivated and supported in knowing that you can influence other stakeholders.

A strong international presence (connections with international organizations, even affiliation with international platforms) also brings credibility and negotiating power.

CONNECTING

17.

Practice what you preach in terms of network engagement

Be as engaged in international networks as you want the members to be engaged in your national platform. In both cases, with greater effort come bigger rewards. An active role in international platforms will sooner or later bring many benefits closer to home, such as:

- A stronger reputation before national stakeholders you are trying to influence
- An important added value for platform members who feel that their voice is represented at international level and that they also have individual opportunities to participate in international events that expand their knowledge and network
- Relevant partnerships for international projects.

How?

- Participate in network events (and offer to host some)
- Assume active/leadership positions
- Be responsive to requests for contributions or feedback
- Be proactive in communicating with other members