

Starting to Stay

Advice to New NGOs and the Donors who will Support Them How can we create a roadmap for NGOs to develop a sustainable financial model?

Supported by Stars Foundation and SAANED



Why is this article useful for NGOs?

We are a group of NGOs who hail from eight countries in the Middle East and who are among the winners of the Stars Foundation Impact Award for 2015. We came together in Amman, Jordan for a workshop supported by the Stars Foundation as part of our award package. By consolidating our experiences and expertise in social entrepreneurship and in the setting up of new NGOs, we hope to blaze a trail for those starting on their journey, helping them avoid common pitfalls and navigate new challenges.

We have put together a roadmap for NGOs, to help them develop a sustainable financial model along with solid suggestions for setting up a project that will last. Our advice, which stems from 100 years of collective experience, is aimed at helping donors and funders choose their recipients. In our workshop we discussed the repetitive nature of proposal writing and reporting, and how time could better be utilized on projects.

Our aim is to keep things simple and to illustrate our suggestions with real life examples. We want to showcase successful initiatives, highlight best practices and offer guidelines that are straightforward and effective. Let's call it an "NGO for Dummies"!

DOs	DON'Ts
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Be original• Do your research• Follow your passion• Learn from others• Build a team of experts to help you• Create partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Don't rush things• Don't give up your current job• Don't change your goals for others• Don't underestimate the potential of in-kind donations• Don't spread yourself thin• Don't put money first

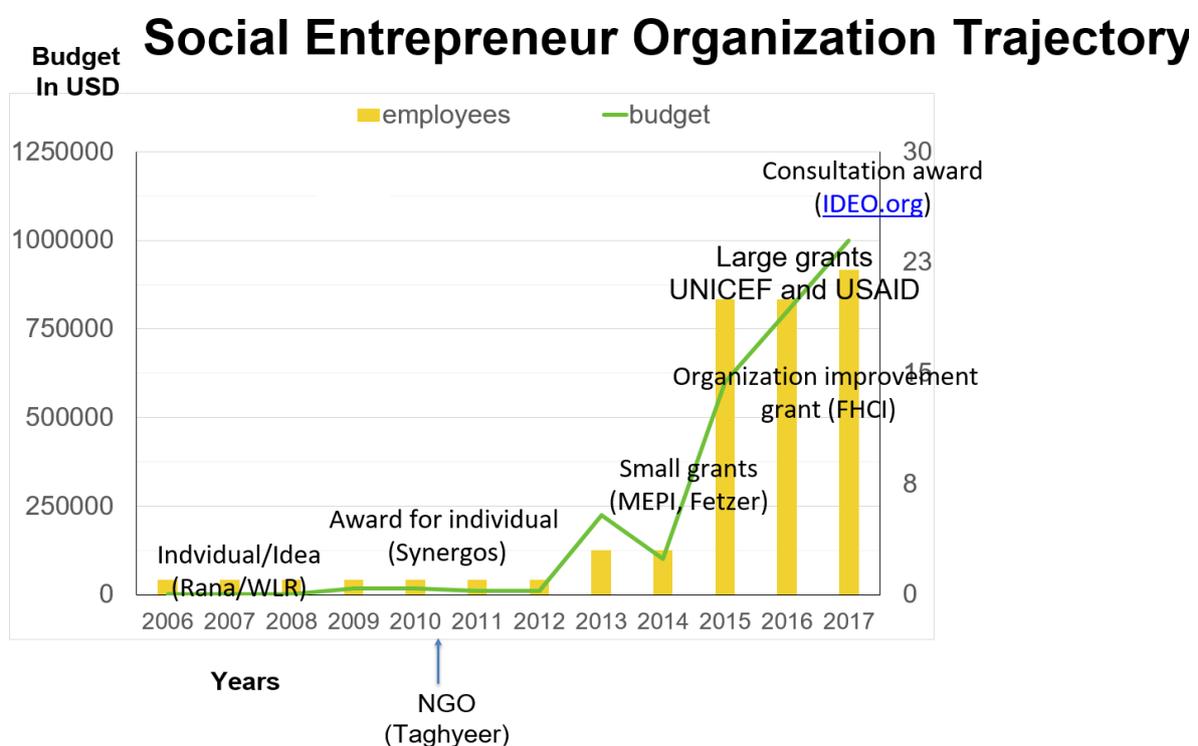
Human-Centred Design as a Method
www.designkit.org

In exploring the question of how to create a roadmap for NGOs to help them develop a sustainable financial model, we adopted a human-centred design method. Human-centred design is a creative approach to problem solving. It is a process that focuses on the people who are experiencing the problem, those who can guide the designers in creating a practical solution that is tailored to their needs.

Human-centred design consists of three phases:

1. The Inspiration Phase: where we learn directly from the people we are designing a program for. By immersing ourselves in the lives of these people, we come to deeply understand their needs.
2. The Ideation Phase: where we attempt to make sense of what has been learnt, identify opportunities for the design of possible ideas and prototype (test) possible solutions.
3. The Implementation Phase: where one brings these designs and solutions to life.

The workshop group took our joint knowledge and experience and put it into a roadmap that showcases the different stages of an NGO's journey towards financial sustainability.



NUCLEUS STAGE

“Do not belittle any small good deed” – Prophet Mohammad (pbuh)

Advice to NGO

Any successful NGO must start with an individual who has an idea born out of a need in the community. Sometimes it takes just two people to make change possible. In the early stages, they support and challenge each other. Sometimes one of them is the “motor” person, the one that pushes things forward. That’s a social entrepreneur in the making.

That person must research the idea thoroughly, learning everything available on the topic. He or she must believe in the idea wholeheartedly and should approach the idea with unwavering passion. In fact, this is true for all endeavours; one cannot be complacent about work. As such, the starting idea stands a good chance of getting off the ground and benefitting those for whom it was designed. This lead person(s) must put forward hypotheses and probabilities that will be tested as the design and decisions move forward.

The idea should be unique yet also fall into a clear sector. Create your own niche where you excel and become the only one with a solution. This uniqueness within a sector is what attracts donors /funders. Stay focused and do not spread yourself thin. This is tempting when you think you want to do everything especially in reaction to the donors/funders' demands, however, even a great idea can collapse if there are too many components. Variations to the main idea are more interesting.

Be patient. Don't hurry things. Ideas need to cook. They need to be tried and tested countless times until the right formula is achieved. This is the evolution of the idea. Let it happen.

Donors are always looking for innovative ideas and they encourage creativity and new ways of doing things. While they are eager to generate original ideas, they can become bored with the same old words. They want to see that you have clearly defined your goals and objectives, as well as the indicators of your impact. They will not approach you if you are unable to express your ideas clearly. State your own measures of growth and have a solid grasp of the bigger picture for your project. Develop your project slowly, organically. Do not improvise in front of the donors.

When you are ready to launch your project, don't give up your current job. Keep your job and don't quit until you are financially able to take this step.

People must want your idea. Of course it should be interesting and useful but the crucial component is that the idea must be born out of a need. You do not want to impose your own ideas on the community that you are trying to help. You do not want to be an oppressor making them do things they don't believe in themselves.

NGO advice to donor

We advise donors who want to support social entrepreneurs at this stage to focus on the idea being presented, its applications, its creative approach, and its long-term vision. Details can come later. We strongly advise any supporters and partners to fund the ideas with the organisations directly as they are the ones who best know the long-term vision.

Great ideas come from individuals identifying problems within their community and coming up with practical solutions that will be shaped and reshaped until they fit. However, many ideas are not given room to develop because funding often goes to organisations rather than individuals. Moving from being an individual with a good idea to an organisation with a good idea requires a whole set of different skills and enormous commitment. So in that space, between individual and organisation, ideas and solutions become lost. Therefore bodies that fund individuals become very important at this stage. Funding an individual will help that person develop their idea further and eventually set up an organisation to host this idea.

Most NGOs are not built around a concrete idea but around a vague intention of doing good and helping a community. Because of this, NGOs don't have a well-defined purpose or mission, making funding more difficult to obtain. Even when funding is obtained, there is no clear plan for promoting the idea or for its sustainability. It is therefore better to fund individuals with a clear idea, who eventually establish an organisation, because it is more sustainable and offers a real solution to real problems.

Real life examples:

"I lived on a small street with many displaced Palestinians. We spent the days together when the husbands were out and the kids were at school. After doing the housework, we would sit outside and talk, drink coffee, eat sweets, and teach each other about being wives and mothers. I began to photograph my neighbours and document their stories. These stories and "life lessons" eventually turned into a project to gather women's stories in Gaza. Our NGO was already up and running but the informal exchanges and the subjects that had been shared for years switched something on in my brain. Today, the Gaza Women's Story-Telling Project is part of our core program." Jackie Lubeck, Theatre Day Productions, Palestine

"During a training session with adult drama-teachers, some kids came to visit. I sat with them and asked: 'So, what is really making you crazy? What would you change tonight if you could?' I got answers from 12 kids detailing annoyances such as neighbours, parents, teachers, homework, a lost football, no money or class trips, etc. I mentally registered these stories and the next play was very much influenced by the worries of these kids and their creative solutions to my questions. Listening is more important than talking."
Jackie Lubeck, Theatre Day Productions, Palestine

DEVELOPMENT STAGE

'Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts'. Albert Einstein

Advice to NGO

An idea must have the potential to be applied in the real world. Foster relationships with partners, work on developing programs, network with key stakeholders and learn from other people's experiences and good practices to avoid falling into the same traps.

You must be able to define your idea in one page, one paragraph or even one line. Keep playing with words and language until you are able to express exactly what you want to say. The next step is to begin. Make a database of the potential donors and add yourself to their mailing lists. Stay updated with new grants on offer. There is plenty out there on the Internet but be aware that many offers are duplicates.

The NGO should be guided by the idea or program, not by the donor. Be flexible, see if your idea can fit with a potential partner but don't succumb to donor demands.

The NGO should have an action plan and should prioritise its core program. The NGO should always have a plan B that does not undo the original idea. If you have a good idea, you can always tweak it, but only change it if it becomes apparent that it will not work on a practical level.

NGO advice to donor

Not all impact can be measured quantitatively. Not everything that can be counted counts and vice versa. Give yourself time to measure impact and remember some impact is long-term. Fund and support the development of the program itself. Supporting projects is only helpful in the short-term. A good institution advocating for change in society is not made up on a project-by-project basis. Impact can be slow but the more solid the organisation, the more likely impact will be achieved. Donors should think creatively about new ways of measuring success, of changing the language and not measuring things solely based on numbers. For their part, NGOs can help donors create the language for measuring success.

Real life example

"Only after about 20 years—a whole generation—can NGOs really see results. It's after the children have grown up, the teachers have lived through various experiences, the schools have gotten used to the programs, the population has become accustomed to the project and everyone knows about it, that change becomes apparent. A prime example is Theatre Day Productions in the Gaza Strip. Annual indicators and evaluations have taken place, but to see real social change takes time." Jackie Lubeck, Theatre Day Productions, Palestine

"A development NGO works with thousands of children in the MENA Region. It has brought in a famous singer as its spokesperson and collects a lot of money. But in reality, it spends 3 days with the children, painting butterflies on their faces and giving out balloons. There is no real impact for these children. Rather they have turned them into small consumers who take what they can. This is not a good type of NGO to work with." Rana Dajani, Taghyeer, Jordan

Sometimes just one person can be very valuable, a person who shows loyalty, talent, commitment, and a willingness to learn. Beneficiaries should never be counted as "numbers" because "numbers" do not necessarily reflect quality. When working with indicators, one must distinguish between reporting numbers and discovering the next great person who might change the world.

LEGAL ENTITY STAGE

"It's not what you know it's who you know!" 2015 MENA Stars Impact Award winners.

Advice to NGO

Register your idea officially to preserve your intellectual property. Register as an organisation. As an NGO or a non-profit company working in the Middle East, registration is a complex process compared to Europe, where it takes a three-person board and a signature to complete the procedure.

Build partnerships and identify allies. Keep in touch with everyone who is relevant to your work.

Develop administrative policies for procedures and systems - also known as an Administrative Manual in which all your procedures are written down. Make sure your signatories are easily accessible.

Develop and define your programs. Keep reviewing them to get them as you want them.

Donors look for concise descriptions on how you are different from other programs, what niche you occupy and why they should fund you and not others in the same field.

NGO Advice to the Donor

Make things easy, support human capacity and do not work with an organisation you don't trust. Decrease the measurement of indicators and draft contracts for fixed amounts. The visibility of the donor is less important than impact. Do not ask organisations to place your logos everywhere. This makes it look like the NGO is owned by someone else. If you want to give, give for the sake of giving.

Real life example

Realistically speaking, if you know the right people, the decision makers, the power-players, you can get funding, registration, board members, contracts and other benefits. It is also about having the right board members or important community leaders/members. NGOs should be aware that they have to talk about their work to the world.

STRUCTURE AND PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

"When a butterfly flutters its wings in China there is a hurricane in the Atlantic"

The Chaos Theory

Advice to NGO

Plan and create job descriptions. Benefit from others' experience. Be balanced but also have a plan B, and a Plan C. Develop programs, refresh and renew your work; develop continuously but don't change your goals for others. Develop your goals and messages. Build the capacity of your people, evaluate and monitor your programs. Develop your systems and policies to go along with your programs. Stick to your values, plan for sustainability, and have a good management sense for risks (and also strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats – SWOT)

Donors want to reach a wide grassroots base. Donors want to see sensible, transparent designs and decisions. They focus on quality and measure impact. Donors pay the NGOs in increments. In some cases, donors want to see numbers at whatever the cost, which may not necessarily reflect real change. Donors want to know how you plan to maintain the sustainability of your program in the future. They call it the "phase out plan." Donors fund originality and sometimes fund fast, small programs within a week. They care about numbers; they want sustainability, visibility, and gratitude. Donors want to effect policies, they look for a good match to their goals and objectives. Donors look for well-known names in the organisation, seek recommendations and look at statistics.

And because this is what the donors want, it is important to strive to reach a stage where you are funded locally rather than by an international organisation. This is essential for building sustainability and ownership of the community. One must always be on the look out for a business model that is sustainable for the NGO.

NGO Advice to Donor

Fund the organisation directly, develop long-term partnerships, simplify financial procedures, don't request separate accounts. Draft a contract for no less than three years, fund organisations during times of crisis, and fund the development of entrepreneurial ideas. Visit the programs you support and meet the people you help. International donors keep changing their priorities. This creates havoc for those who depend on international funding. The eagerness to provide donors with the program they require also fosters unhealthy competition among organisations.

Real life example

“Ten years ago We Love Reading started in a small neighbourhood in Amman. Rana felt a sense of responsibility because she knew the solution to getting children to love reading was to read aloud to them. She began in her neighbourhood, reading aloud to the children and never thinking of anything more than doing her part within her small circle. Today We Love Reading is a social movement in 27 countries.” Rana Dajani, Taghyeer, Jordan

GENERAL ADVICE AND CONCLUSION

“I have not failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work.” - Thomas A. Edison

Advice to NGO

Deduce lessons and learn from your mistakes, consult experts, have the capacity to learn, and accept criticism. Keep developing; look for funding at each stage. Funds can sometimes be found in places you might never have considered. Learn from others but tailor your words to fit your idea. Lobby, develop partnerships, and make friends with anyone who will listen to your thoughts. Develop good public relations and communication including friendly phone skills, warm and original email writing, and good letter writing skills. Donors like to deal with a leader not a director; perception matters as well as innovation. Talk about your work. Be proud. You are the best ambassador for your work.

There is a real temptation to argue and fight with donors. Don’t do it. It never works. Discussion is good until it becomes clear that a positive result will not come about. It also feels good to tell a donor that you are no longer interested in pursuing the partnership.

NGO Advice to Donor

There must be mutual trust and respect. Follow along with the NGO and avoid streamlining. Keep in mind that you cannot expect the NGO to be 100 per cent sustainable. Visit the program and see the impact first hand. Get to know the entire program and the people working on it along with those benefitting. Don’t adopt a fashion/trend.

We hope our contribution will be of benefit to readers. We look forward to any feedback and comments. We also hope this will be the first of a series of articles sharing advice from the ground.

11 authors from six Stars Impact winning NGOs in Palestine, Jordan and Morocco:

Jordan:

We Love Reading Taghyeer: Rana Dajani, main author and co-authors

Morocco:

Association Bayti: Amina Malih and Yamna Taltit

Palestine:

Theatre Days Production: Jackie Lubeck and Anan Terhi.

Yafa Centre: Abdullah Kharoub, Fayez Arafat.

Burj Luq luq: Muntaser Edkaidek and Naser Gaith.

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