



## Organizational development in Ethiopia: Factors affecting organizations' implementation of feedback

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### ABSTRACT

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) receiving organizational development assistance funded and facilitated by a third party frequently receive recommendations designed to improve their overall functioning. Research suggests that tailored in-person communication of recommendations results in increased implementation of recommendations. This study assessed whether the method and frequency of communication from an outside organization influenced Ethiopian NGOs' ability to implement organizational development recommendations. A secondary study goal was to identify additional factors that facilitated or inhibited implementation of recommendations.

Twenty two NGOs were surveyed about the amount, type, and timing of communication; their perception of the value of communication in implementing recommendations; barriers to implementation; and strategies used to overcome barriers to implementation. The frequency and level of personalization of communication was not consistently associated with organizational implementation of recommendations. Receiving communication was significantly associated with an organization's motivation (mean = 4.5 ± 0.6), understanding (mean = 4.2 ± 0.6), and ability (mean = 3.9 ± 0.6) to implement recommendations (p value = 0.02). Respondents reported that external factors, including funding; staff time, expertise, and training; information systems; leadership; and government regulations on nonprofit administrative spending, strongly influenced their ability to implement recommendations.

**Keywords:** organizational development, communication, feedback, capacity building, NGO, bilateral assistance

### INTRODUCTION

The Paris Declaration for Aid Effectiveness of 2005 brought about a significant change in the focus of bilateral foreign assistance. The Declaration's commitment to align foreign aid with local objectives and to use local systems to strengthen country ownership replaced long standing rhetoric with concrete actions. For example, the creation of the United States Global Health Initiative restructured US foreign assistance to support country ownership.<sup>1</sup> These commitments were reaffirmed in the Accra Agenda for Action in 2008 and during the Fourth

High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, South Korea in 2011.<sup>2,3</sup>

Donor agencies' focus on country ownership and capacity building has resulted in significant changes in funding priorities. Firstly, donors have invested increasingly large amounts of money in NGOs. Secondly, concerned with both stewardship of taxpayer funds and programmatic success, donors have invested heavily in capacity building and organizational development. This represents a departure from donors' historical preference of funding programmatic activities at the expense of



capacity building and general operating activities.<sup>4,5</sup> Donors previously assumed that investments in operational costs or capacity building reduced funding for programming, and their funding priorities did not reflect the connection between overall organizational health and an organization's ability to meet its mission through service provision.<sup>5,6</sup>

Donors' recent investment in capacity building and organizational development requires an understanding of the conceptual differences between the two processes. Organizational development and capacity building are terms that often overlap, yet remain distinct concepts. Organizational development is a system-wide process of planned change aimed at improving overall organizational effectiveness by enhanced congruence of such key organizational dimensions as the external environment, mission, strategy, leadership, culture, structure, information and reward systems, and work policies and procedures.<sup>7</sup> Capacity building includes a range of approaches, from a focus on discrete organizational activities to a system-wide approach that mirrors organizational development.

A 2011 study in India suggested that in at least three cases, capacity building which focused on discrete activities resulted in organizational systems that satisfied donor requirements for accountability, but which did not meet standards for overall organizational effectiveness.<sup>8</sup> In follow up to the India study, a research team from Boston University's Center for Global Health and Development initiated a longitudinal study to measure organizational development and effectiveness. The Boston University study involves three rounds of data collection in 2012, 2013, and 2014 from 44 NGOs in Ethiopia. The study instrument was developed for the local setting to measure organizational development across 11 domains, 43 sub-domains, and using 220 indicators.

Following every assessment round, the results were shared with each organization in a report that expressed the score for each domain using a series of graphics and text. Recommendations for improvement were also made, noting high and low priority domains on which the organization should

focus. No other interventions to improve organizational development or capacity were conducted as part of the study. However, the research team did contact organizations after the delivery of the report to offer interpretation and clarification of the reports.

This paper reports on a sub-study that assessed whether the method and frequency of communication from the research team influenced a NGO's ability to implement organizational development recommendations. A secondary goal of the study was to identify additional factors that facilitated or inhibited implementation of recommendations.

## BACKGROUND

We conducted a literature review to find peer-reviewed articles written after January 1, 1985 from the following databases: PsycINFO, ABI/INFORM Global, PubMed, and Academic OneFile. The search terms used in each database included the following terms: organizational behavior/organizational performance/organization, organizational change/organizational innovation, organizational development, behavior change/behavior, communication/information dissemination, feedback/feedback mechanism, response rates/response probability, and questionnaires/use of questionnaires. Synonymous search terms were used across databases based on the controlled vocabulary terms of each database. A total of 1,506 results were returned, and titles were reviewed for all search results. Abstract review was conducted for 70 articles with relevant titles, and of the 70 articles, fourteen were selected for full text review. Of those fourteen articles, two proved relevant to the study question.<sup>9,10</sup>

Tomlinson et al. demonstrated a significant increase in patient response to recommended action when patients were provided with additional information and a personalized reminder. Patients who received additional follow up were almost twice as likely to take recommended action than a control group who received only basic information (35% versus 18%).<sup>9</sup> Krieg et al. documented the positive effects of providing feedback and requesting follow up action in-person versus over the phone. Organizations who



received feedback and report results in-person were significantly more likely (65% versus 40%,  $df = 1$ ,  $P < .05$ ) to create and implement a requested action plan than those who received feedback over the phone and a report via mail. Additionally, organizations that received in-person feedback created action plans of better quality than organizations that received phone feedback, as demonstrated by their comparatively better length, breadth, and detail.<sup>10</sup> These articles suggest that tailored and personal communication about feedback increases the likelihood and quality of subsequent follow up actions from both individuals and organizations.

The current study was developed to expand the existing knowledge base about the relationship between follow up communication and resulting action at an organizational level. Consistent with the themes from Tomlinson et al. and Krieg et al., we hypothesized a positive correlation between the level of personalization and frequency of communication and the number of organizations that implemented recommendations.

## METHODS

A convenience sample of twenty-two organizations drawn from the parent organizational development study ( $n=44$ ) completed a self-directed survey. Survey respondents included executive directors, board members, and employees in mid-level leadership positions. Fourteen respondents completed the survey while attending a meeting in Addis Ababa; the remaining eight respondents

completed the survey at their workplace. Quantitative data was collected on the type and timing of communication (email, phone call, personal visit, or workshop), when implementation of high and low priority recommendations was started and completed, the impact of communication on the organizations' ability to overcome challenges to implementing recommendations, and the value of each type of communication. Qualitative data included descriptions of barriers to implementation, the effect of communication on overcoming barriers, strategies used to overcome barriers, and additional resources needed to address remaining barriers.

Data was entered into Epi Info 7 (CDC, Atlanta, GA, USA), and quantitative analysis was conducted in Excel and Epi Info 7. Missing and null data were removed from the quantitative analysis. Qualitative responses were reviewed twice to identify common themes, and responses were subsequently coded in Excel using the themes identified in the initial reviews.

## RESULTS

### *Sample characteristics*

The sample included organizations working with orphans and vulnerable children in the Addis Ababa, Amhara, Southern Nations, Nationalities, and People's Region (SNNPR), and Oromia regions of Ethiopia. Organizations differed by number of staff, budget size, and executive director tenure, as shown in **Table 1**.

**Table 1 Demographic characteristics of nongovernmental organizations**

Years in operation; <i>median, Q1, Q3</i> ( $n = 22$ )	14 (6.8, 19.8)
Executive Directors since NGO inception; <i>mean (sd)</i> ( $n = 22$ )	2.2 (1.4)
Current Executive Director tenure (years); <i>mean, (sd)</i> ( $n = 22$ )	7.6 (6.1)
Total staff; <i>median, Q1, Q3</i> ( $n = 22$ )	49 (32, 132)
Total volunteers; <i>median, Q1, Q3</i> ( $n = 20$ )	364 (182, 782)
Operating budget USD (FY 2012); <i>median, Q1, Q3</i> ( $n = 22$ )	\$562,508 (\$322,715, \$1,147,492)
Presence of discretionary funds; <i>percent</i> ( $n = 22$ )	36



### Quantitative results

**Table 2** describes the frequency of implementation of high and low priority recommendations. Linear regressions comparing frequency of communication and implementation of recommendations showed a significant correlation only between frequency of communication and implementation of low priority

recommendations ( $n = 22$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p = 0.05$ ). There was no correlation between the frequency of communication and implementation or completion of high priority recommendations, or between frequency of communication and completion of low priority recommendations.

**Table 2 Organizations' implementation of recommendations**

Organizations that both started and completed a high priority recommendation ( $n = 16$ )	31%
Organizations that both started and completed a low priority recommendation ( $n = 16$ )	38%
Organizations that started either a high or low priority recommendation ( $n = 22$ )	82%
Organizations that completed either a high or low priority recommendation ( $n = 21$ )	29%
Organizations that found recommendations easy to understand ( $n = 22$ )	91%
Organizations able to overcome challenges to implementing recommendations ( $n = 17$ )	35%

Respondents gave a consistently positive rating for all methods of communication from Boston University (**Table 3**). There was a significant between-group difference in the mean rating of

organizations' motivation, understanding, and ability to implement recommendations after receiving any type of communication from Boston University (**Table 3**).

**Table 3 Organizations' perceived value of communication from Boston University**

Value of communication method	Mean Score (Std. Dev.) (1 = unhelpful, 5 = very helpful)
Email ( $n = 18$ )	4.89 (0.32)
Phone Call ( $n = 13$ )	4.62 (0.51)
Personal Visit ( $n = 13$ )	4.92 (0.28)
Workshop ( $n = 15$ )	4.67 (1.05)
ANOVA result	( $df = 3$ , $p = 0.45$ )
Result of communication from Boston University ( $n = 22$ )	Mean Score (Std. Dev.) (1 = strongly decreased, 5 = strongly increased)
Motivation to implement recommendations	4.5 (0.35)
Understanding of recommendations	4.2 (0.37)
Ability to implement recommendations	3.9 (0.37)
ANOVA result	( $df = 2$ , $p$ value = 0.02)

Perceived helpfulness of communication from Boston University in overcoming obstacles to

implementation showed a slightly positive but non-significant effect on whether the organization started



implementing recommendations (Table 4). Sixteen organizations responded to questions about overcoming challenges to implementing recommendations. For these organizations, the perceived value of communication from Boston

University showed a positive but non-significant effect on whether organizations reported successfully overcoming challenges to implementing recommendations (Table 4).

**Table 4 Organizations' perception of communication from Boston University and ability to overcome challenges to implementing recommendations**

Organization's perception of communication from Boston University	Started recommendation	Risk Ratio (CI 95%)
Helpful for overcoming obstacles to implementing recommendations	19/22 (86%)	1.06 (0.80, 1.42)
Not helpful for overcoming obstacles to implementing recommendations	13/16 (81%)	ref.
Organization's perception of communication from Boston University	Overcame challenges to implementation	Risk Ratio (CI 95%)
Helpful for overcoming obstacles to implementing recommendations	5/9 (56%)	3.89 (0.58, 26.17)
Not helpful for overcoming obstacles to implementing recommendations	1/7 (14%)	ref.

Regardless of whether an organization perceived communication from Boston University as being helpful to overcoming obstacles, organizations'

ratings of individual types of communication remained high (Table 5).

**Table 5 Influence of results of communication on organizations' rating of communication value**

Value of individual type of communication	Boston University communication perceived as helpful for overcoming obstacles to implementing recommendations*	Boston University communication not perceived as helpful for overcoming obstacles to implementing recommendations*	p-value
Email (n = 16)	5.0 (0)	4.67 (0.52)	0.17
Phone Call (n = 12)	4.57 (0.43)	4.6 (0.45)	0.92
Personal Visit (n = 12)	5.0 (0)	4.8 (0.44)	0.37
Workshop (n = 13)	4.89 (0.33)	5.0 (0)	0.35

\*Mean and standard deviation

### Qualitative results

While the survey was designed for executive directors, other staff members from varying levels of the organization completed some surveys. This variation in survey respondents resulted in nuanced

qualitative data about communication between leadership and staff that may not have been otherwise reported. Qualitative themes included



funding; staff time, expertise, and training; information systems; leadership; and government regulations on nonprofit administrative spending. Responses were coded using these five themes, and

several subthemes emerged, including funder restrictions, staff turnover, use of volunteers, and collaboration with similar organizations.

**Table 6 Qualitative themes related to organizations' implementation challenges and suggested solutions**

Theme	Challenges To Implementation	Recommended Strategies To Overcome Obstacles
Funding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organizations do not have unrestricted funding for organizational development</li> <li>Organizations lack funds to hire additional staff to implement recommendations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Funders should consider making unrestricted grants to fund organizational development</li> <li>Organizations should consider how to incorporate organizational development goals into programmatic proposals</li> </ul>
Staff time, expertise, & training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff turnover is a challenge to implementing recommendations</li> <li>Staff lack the skills needed to implement recommendations</li> <li>Staff time is limited; volunteers are considered an untapped resource for increasing capacity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organizations would benefit from trainings and technical assistance from external consultants</li> <li>Organizations requested mentoring opportunities from organizations facing similar challenges</li> <li>Organizations could expand volunteer roles</li> </ul>
Information systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Organizations need databases and data collection tools to evaluate services and track progress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adaptable database templates and tools should be created for and adopted by organizations</li> </ul>
Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leadership from senior employees for implementing recommendations was inconsistent</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Communication practices between leadership and implementing employees should be strengthened</li> </ul>
Government regulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Governmental restrictions on administrative activities prevented organizations from implementing recommendations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Governmental agencies should consider how restrictions impact the strength and sustainability of the nonprofit sector</li> </ul>

### Funding

The majority of respondents referenced funding as both a barrier and a potential future opportunity. Barriers included insufficient funds, donor restrictions on using funds for non-programmatic activities, and a lack of funds to hire additional staff to implement recommendations. Organizations also reported applying for organizational development-related funding that would support them in implementing recommendations.

*"We are getting ear marked fund for implementing project specific tasks. We don't get funding for organizational development activities."*

- Respondent 1

*"Lack of finance and budget to address some of the components of the organizational development recommendations"*

- Respondent 9



*"All the capacity building interventions are donor (project) driven, not based on organizational gap."*  
- Respondent 13

### **Staff Time, Expertise, and Training**

Organizations reported that staff had limited time to implement recommendations in addition to their other responsibilities. Additionally, staff turnover was cited as a challenge. Organizations also reported that current staff did not have the expertise or skills to implement recommendations.

*"Human resource constraint: staff members of the organization became over busy on the implementation of the projects and hence face time shortage to work effectively to work on the recommendations timely."*  
- Respondent 20

*"Staff turnover at the head office level is also the other reason hampering implementation of the recommendation."*  
- Respondent 22

In terms of opportunities, respondents reported that volunteers could increase the time and capacity available for implementing recommendations. Respondents also reported that they had used skills gained in other projects to implement recommendations, and mentioned trainings, capacity building, and external consultants as valuable strategies for increasing staff capacity. Organizations also requested mentoring opportunities to learn from organizations in similar situations.

### **Information systems**

Organizations mentioned information gaps as a barrier to implementation and the need for data collection tools for evaluating services and database management.

*"Lack of information sharing structure (system)"*  
- Respondent 8

*"Shortage of technical staff in developing and managing database."*  
- Respondent 20

### **Leadership**

Several organizations reported that the leadership team was not committed to disseminating the report among staff and supporting the process of implementation.

*"Less commitment of higher level leaders in disseminating the report, Highly bureaucratic nature of the organization"*  
- Respondent 4

### **Government Regulations**

Nonprofits in Ethiopia are subject to a regulation passed in 2009 by the Ethiopian Charities and Societies Agency that limits nonprofits from spending more than thirty percent of their budget on administrative activities. The current interpretation of an administrative activity is controversial, with the government interpreting many programmatic and technical activities, including travel, monitoring and evaluation, and training, as administrative. Since organizational development activities are primarily considered administrative, NGOs felt this regulation prohibited them from using staff time to implement recommendations.

*"The legislation on charities and societies is threatening the organizational development assessment recommendations. Eg. Laws related to adoption of organizational policies, strategic plans, communication, development of database and procurement of tools and salaries are administrative costs which shouldn't exceed 30% of the total budget."*  
-Respondent 16

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Quantitative**

Our results did not support the hypothesis that frequency and level of personalization of communication are positively correlated with implementing recommendations. All types of communication (email, phone calls, personal visits, and workshops) from Boston University were equally valued by organizations. Organizations did not have a strong preference for highly personalized communication, and emails were equally as useful to organizations as personal visits. Additionally, the frequency of communication was not consistently



correlated with implementing recommendations. Organizations' ability to implement recommendations may be more deeply affected by structural factors identified in the qualitative data (lack of staff time and expertise) or environmental factors (government restrictions on administrative activities) than by communication.

The content of communication from the Boston University research team was restricted to clarification of recommendations and follow up. Communication between technical assistance providers and local partners related to developing skills, systems, or capacity may still be critical to successful implementation of recommendations.

Communication had a larger influence on organizations' motivation to implement recommendations as compared to their understanding of recommendations or ability to implement recommendation. This suggests that while personalized communication affects individual motivation to take action, it does not necessarily translate into organizational action.

Recommendations were rated "easy to understand" by the majority of organizations (91%), which suggests the recommendations required a minimal level of additional explanation. The recommendations were structured by organizational domain, tailored to the recipient organization, and designed to be specific, measurable, and action-oriented. Recipient organizations considered the recommendations easy to use, and other technical assistance providers and funders could structure recommendations in a similar format to increase clarity and reduce the amount of communication support needed by partner organizations.

### **Qualitative**

The qualitative results highlight a number of structural and environmental factors that influenced NGOs' ability to implement recommendations. Organizations identified challenges to implementation and potential solutions, and Table 6 contains recommendations based on these responses.

Organizations clearly identified the need for funding for organizational development in addition to project support. As funders place more attention and resources behind building capacity, it will be necessary to align funding priorities to support overall organizational development with unrestricted funding or blended funding for both capacity building and programmatic activities.

Leadership, staff time, and staff expertise emerged as critical components for successful organizational change. Organizations may need preliminary assistance strengthening capacity in these areas before addressing other organizational needs. Additionally, organizations reported a willingness to collaborate with similar institutions for problem-solving sessions and requested skill building opportunities from external consultants. Funders can further build local capacity by harnessing the collective knowledge of nonprofit communities, and by directing technical assistance resources to organizations' priority areas for growth.

Funders and technical assistance providers should consider the effects of government regulations and policy when beginning projects that rely upon the sustainability and autonomy of the nonprofit sector. As seen in this sample, government regulations can inadvertently restrict organizational development and sustainability.

### **LIMITATIONS**

This study has limitations that should be considered. First, there is evidence of recall bias, as some inconsistencies were found when responses were cross-referenced with results from the parent organizational development study. Additionally, the cross sectional design of the study and lack of control group limited researchers' ability to measure whether organizations would have started recommendations in the absence of any communication from Boston University. This bias leads us towards the null hypothesis, reducing the possibility of false positive results. The small sample size contributed to the lack of statistically significant quantitative results, but sample size did not negatively affect the qualitative data. These limitations suggest that the quantitative results should be interpreted cautiously; however the





qualitative findings show consistent trends in organizational responses.

### CONCLUSION

This report offers an initial investigation into the influence of communication on an organization's ability to implement organizational development recommendations. Although follow up communication is perceived as helpful, it does not negate structural and organizational level barriers to implementation. Funders, technical assistance providers, and government agencies can facilitate local capacity building by adopting funding priorities that acknowledge the importance of organizational development, providing skill-building sessions that leverage the shared knowledge of local nonprofits, and adopting regulations that reflect the need for organizations to invest in their systems, employees, and infrastructure.

As more attention and funding are focused on organizational development and capacity building, it is increasingly important to understand the barriers and opportunities that nonprofits face when trying to create sustainable, local change. Additional research on closing the gap between intention and action at the organizational level will be critical in creating effective, sustainable organizational development.

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