



DevelopmentAid Dialogues

Season 3. Episode 12: Why Big Donors Can't Deliver Without NGOs: A Dialogue With UNICEF's Dara Johnston

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Hisham Allam: Hello everyone. Welcome to DevelopmentAid Dialogues. I'm your host, Hisham Allam. At the end of February, the world marks International NGO Day to underscore the importance of nonprofit grassroots organizations that help the most vulnerable communities across the globe. During this month's episodes of DevelopmentAid Dialogues, we will examine the real work NGOs do on the ground. How they complement large institutions, respond in crisis, and bring community voices into global agendas.

Today our focus will be on the critical access to water, sanitation, and hygiene, and I'm very happy to welcome back to the podcast Dara Johnston joining us for the second time.

Dara is a senior water and WASH expert with more than 35 years of experience across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. He currently serves as the chief of water sanitation and hygiene for UNICEF in Palestine, and has previously led climate resilient wash programs in South Sudan, Bangladesh, Somalia, and Myanmar.

Dara, it's a pleasure to have you back on DevelopmentAid Dialogues, and thank you for joining me to reflect on International NGO Day.

Dara Johnston: Thank you, Hisham. It's a pleasure to be talking to you once again.

Hisham Allam: To start off with the big picture. Dara, in your experience, what makes NGOs such vital players in humanitarian and development work, especially compared to large organizations or governments?

Dara Johnston: Let me start by saying that UNICEF does not implement its programs in silos. NGOs are a critical part of our programming in humanitarian response and in development work. We know that we're part of a larger mechanism which is critical for success and long-term sustainability. So, while UNICEF and other UN partners can provide the resources and have the overall mandate to implement humanitarian development programs on behalf of, or together with host governments, NGOs have the proximity, the speed, and the operational capacity to implement effectively on the ground.

For example, in any given country, there will only be one UNICEF office. However, there may be several NGOs implementing water and sanitation programs. They might have different specialties, countries of origin, or geographic reach. But they allow for an extensive reach, which enables a broad coverage.



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And the individual NGO might have other capacities such as microcredit, agriculture vocational skills development. And these are areas in which UNICEF does not have a mandate. So, this gives the NGO partner a perspective to reach deeper into the community and thereby strengthening the overall impact of any program.

Hisham Allam: Dara, can you share some examples of successful collaborations between UNICEF and local NGOs, in the WASH sector or other areas where you have seen a real impact on the ground?

Dara Johnston: In any country I've worked with UNICEF, I can think of many successful partnerships with NGOs.

A good example is the partnerships we've had with NGOs in Bangladesh to implement both sanitation and water quality programs. One of the main NGO partners was interested in addressing the challenges with sanitation in the most remote parts of the country. And we were looking to assist the government to address this, but we also wanted to address the water quality issues in the area.

However, the NGO we were collaborating with did not have the water quality expertise, so they joined together with another smaller NGO. Who had the knowledge and expertise in water quality, which was in this case, specifically arsenic contamination. So, the program at the end was very successful in reaching its aims, as the two partners were very competent in their respective fields and they collaborated very effectively.

Hisham Allam: That is great.

Dara Johnston: Another example is humanitarian response. In the countries where we have responded to emergencies, either manmade or natural disasters. Collaboration with NGO Partners is really critical. UNICEF does not have the manpower or the reach to provide assistance to many thousands of people who are often left in critical need of support when disasters occur.

So, NGOs really play a vital role in these operations. Having their close contact on the ground with the families in need and being able to assist them very effectively and rapidly.

Hisham Allam: You are reflecting on your work previously with India or Indonesia?

Dara Johnston: In any of the places where we address humanitarian response, we don't do it ourselves alone. We work together with the NGO partners on the ground, either international NGOs or sometimes even more effectively with national NGOs because they have a much deeper reach into the community.



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Hisham Allam: Dara, every partnership also faces challenges. What are some of the biggest NGOs encounter in their day-to-day work, and how does UNICEF help address or reduce these challenges.

Dara Johnston: I think sometimes the NGOs face challenges with the collaboration with local governments or for example, with import of large quantities of humanitarian aid. So, UNICEF has a mandate to work with government to either in humanitarian response or development work.

And we can be a sort of a bridge between the NGO partner and the government in the sense that we have an agreed partnership with the government. And when the NGO works together with us, they can become part of that partnership. So, it gives them an umbrella to work under so that we can collaborate successfully with the NGO, but while at the same time, supporting the government to actually achieve their objectives. UNICEF has the capacity to bring in very large quantities of humanitarian aid when we need to. And this is an area where the NGO partners may not have the strength, but on the ground, they have the strength to assist us to distribute these needed supplies to the right people in a very effective manner.

So, it resolves a challenge they have, but it also solves problems for us as well.

Hisham Allam: You have worked in some very complex contexts. From that experience, are there any powerful stories or situations you can share where NGO involvement truly made a difference for humanities?

Dara Johnston: Everywhere we work, the dedication of the local NGOs is often one of the main reasons humanitarian development programs succeed, especially in the most difficult circumstances.

I can think in one particular instance was the dedication and response by the NGOs to the humanitarian crisis of the influx of Rohingya refugees into Bangladesh in 2017. Most of the NGOs in the water and sanitation sector had not implemented humanitarian programs for many years in Bangladesh.

Disaster response had become the responsibility of local government, and this was after years of successful support by the UN and NGOs. The government had made it part and parcel of their operations, so the NGOs were focused much more on development work, but the refugee crisis was different. It was not local community it was not local government that was responding, and you had almost 1 million people displaced in a very small area of land.

So most of the water and sanitation NGOs were development partners of UNICEF in our mainstream programming and they had, as I mentioned not implemented humanitarian response for some time, but they very quickly turned their attention to the crisis and overall it was very successful intervention which undoubtedly saved many lives by providing safe water and improved sanitation in the most difficult conditions. Some of the NGOs, didn't really have a mandate for humanitarian response, but in light of what they were seeing unfold, they actually changed their approach for a short period of time.

But it was enough to make that impressive difference to the response.



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Hisham Allam: This is really hard work. Let's talk about areas and innovation. How do NGOs bring fresh thinking or community perspectives into UNICEF's programs? Do you have an example where NGO driven innovation really changed an approach or outcome?

Dara Johnston: One of my favorite examples was in Myanmar, where a community had taken responsibility for its water supply system. And this was after UNICEF and a local NGO had installed the system in collaboration with local government. The system consisted of a borehole into the aquifer, a solar-powered pump, and a ground tank.

From the ground tank, the household members had to collect their water. So, they would go by foot, put it in the container, and carry it back to their house. And the funds for this particular project were limited, so an elevated tank was not possible. The local community and the local NGO, knowing that the solar powered pump could pump water higher than the ground tank.

So, they came together and raised funds to build an elevated tank, and then they ran a pipeline from the elevated tank to each home in the village. They then installed water meters and collected a fee for the water usage, and this limited wastage and made sure that the system was maintained because there was an income.

So, this was something that we found when we came back to visit the community after a number of years. And because it was all locally brought together, it was a really impressive outcome. And we then worked with this NGO partner and scaled up this example to cover many more communities in the area which originally had the ground tank solution and almost all of the communities welcomed the idea and the beauty of it was that the resources to, take this to the next level were all coming from the community. So, there was community ownership and sustainability was also insured. I think this is one of my favorite examples of innovation in a very remote sense.

Hisham Allam: That is really inspiring. The first thing that came to my mind was the movie of The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind. Looking ahead to the future of collaboration, what would you most like to see improve or even evolve in how UNICEF and NGO work together? Or in other words, are there untapped opportunities for deeper or smarter collaboration?

Dara Johnston: I think the collaboration with NGOs is always evolving. We learn from each other, and I have observed that more and more we recognize each other's relative strengths and where we can compliment one another. So, I think that this dialogue should always continue and they will always be a need to evolve and improve capacities all the time.

So, I think if we continue the dialogue, I think we will grow stronger together.



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Hisham Allam: There are many of our listeners maybe working in smaller organizations. What practical advice would you give to small or new NGOs that help to partner with larger agencies like the UNICEF or any other international bodies and to maximize their impact?

Dara Johnston: So, in the water and sanitation programs I would always seek to work with an NGO partner, which is similar objectives to UNICEF. I'm not one that is simply portraying the capacity and values we have just to avail of our funding. If there is compatibility, we should work together.

If the synergies don't exist, then they can't be created. If both UNICEF and the NGO partner have similar objectives, then I think we can really have a good partnership. But if those similarities are not there. I don't think that they should be created.

Hisham Allam: Yes. But do you think that the international aid cut that took place in the last couple of years is affecting this kind of having mutual goals for both the small and the big organizations?

Dara Johnston: It's definitely having a major impact on the organizations, but I don't think it's changing the goals. In fact, probably means that it's more important that we are there and we are there to support people because a lot of resources have been curtailed and we need to find ways to work more effectively and have even greater impact because with reduction in resources, then you're going to find even more people in need.

Hisham Allam: Reflecting on your long career. Other key lessons from past UNICEF - NGO operations, good or bad, that you think NGO leaders and practitioners should keep in mind today?

Dara Johnston: I think one, in particular, it's all to do with communication. When any sort of problem occurs and there'll always be problems along the way, we have to be practical.

Nothing will run smoothly, nothing will be perfect, but we always expect our NGO partner to inform us immediately. And sometimes this is not always what happens. If they're able to be upfront and tell us when some issue is occurring, this builds trust. And this is a critical part for any collaboration.

If we know from the beginning of any issue, we can help to solve the issue or perhaps not, but at least being aware of it puts us in a much greater position of trust, I think. Sometimes the problem can be solved quickly and then maybe in hindsight they might think, oh, maybe we shouldn't have bothered to inform.

But often the problem gets larger and inevitably we get to know. And the worst case is when we learn of an issue through a third party. And this can lead to a real breakdown in trust. So, I think the communication, as a program is being implemented not just the achievements and the good parts of the story, but the challenges that they're facing. These need to be related as quickly as possible and we can work together to solve these.



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Hisham Allam: Building on that, there is also a critical debate about competition versus collaboration. Some critics argue that NGOs sometimes compete for visibility or funding instead of working together. How can organizations move beyond turf wars and refocus on the people who need help most?

Dara Johnston: Yeah, I think it's an important point because you can see it happening more and more, but each partner, I think has its own strength and capacity, and this is what we should build on rather than competing, the bottom line is that we should be working towards actually not being needed. Development workers should put themselves out of a job really, that is the long-term objective, strangely enough. So, we should implement sustainable programs, and in the case of humanitarian responses, we have to have an exit strategy, which leaves the community stronger than before and not dependent on our assistance.

So, I think the focus should not be on competing, but rather on looking at each partner's relative strength and building on that.

Hisham Allam: At the same time the global context is changing fast, as development priorities shift, whether due to climate conflict or funding pressures as we have just discussed. What is one major rescue are most worried about for NGOs and how should they prepare for it?

Dara Johnston: I see more and more a push towards NGOs becoming more like private enterprises, private contractors many donors are preferring this modality and they are missing out on the key strength of an NGO, which is not the for-profits activities, but more their ability to work very closely on the ground and be very much in touch with the local community.

The way of doing it as a contractor has its advantages, but one of the key elements of NGO is that they are not for profit. Naturally, they have to cover their costs and not run out of funds. But when it becomes a profit-making enterprise, we're definitely talking about a private company. And in that case, a private company does not necessarily think about sustainability.

Or the community having dependence on the assistance that's been given. So, they don't really think about the long-term sustainability of the community. So I think that's a big risk that, especially in these times where, funds are becoming scarce and where donors are really looking to maximize on the numbers, but we have to help the donors realize that it's not just the numbers, it's the quality of what we do, the sustainability and creating a capacity within the community to take care of themselves. And that's really not something that private enterprises can always do. That would be one of the changes that I see happening that I, that is a bit of a worry.

Hisham Allam: So, what is the role of the donors, the big organizations and the small NGOs to get prepared for this challenge?

Dara Johnston: I think that there needs to be more recognition of the role that NGOs play in communities and how they actually can support that the community don't have dependence on aid assistance, but they



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have their own strengths and they have sustainable programming so that if the system breaks down that they're able to fix it. If maintenance is required that the funds are there so that the long-term sustainability is there.

Hisham Allam: Second thing with that, another important dimension is voice and representation. How do NGOs act as ambassadors or bridges between local communities and international organizations like UNICEF, for example, or other multilateral actors?

Dara Johnston: NGOs can often be our most direct communication channel to the most vulnerable in the community. We learn a lot from our NGO partners which we might not know from our own interactions or from our government partners.

And I have often seen how local governments rely on NGO staff. To be kept informed of issues within the community. So these NGOs are really a direct or independent voice for the community members, and they're able to tell us where the real issues are and if programming is being effective or not.

So I, I think that's maybe one of the biggest strengths of NGOs is that they have that trust of the community, and they have that outreach to write down to the poorest in the community.

Hisham Allam: Dara, to close our conversation on a helpful note, as we celebrate International NGO Day, what message or hope would you share with listeners who value the work and the mission of NGOs around the world?

Dara Johnston: NGOs have played a vital role in humanitarian and developing programs for many decades now. They have grown and evolved and become stronger with every year of experience. As I've said earlier, although we would like to see a world where the services are not needed, at this time they're probably needed even more than ever. In many parts of the world, services and assistance, just like UNICEF's work, is needed today more than ever.

Hisham Allam: Dara, thank you for joining DevelopmentAid Dialogues again and for sharing your experience on how NGOs and large agencies like UNICEF work together on WASH and wider development.

For our listeners, International NGO Day is a reminder that real change depends not only on global institutions but also on NGOs rooted in communities and close to people's everyday realities. If you enjoyed this episode, follow and subscribe to DevelopmentAid Dialogues on your favorite podcast platform, and share it with anyone interested in the work of NGOs and global development.

I'm Hisham Allam, signing off. Thanks for listening, and see you next time. Goodbye.