



Season 3. Episode 13: NGOs: From Band-aids to Real Impact. Breaking Silos with NCA's Linda Nordby

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Hisham Allam: Hello everyone and welcome to DevelopmentAid Dialogues. I'm your host, Hisham Allam. On February 27th, 2026, we celebrate you - the NGO is making a difference every day. In honor of the World NGO Day, DevelopmentAid is offering a special 1+1 offer. Secure one membership and get full platform access for two organizations. This means you and your partner NGO, will have full access to the largest database of grants, tenders, jobs, and Calls for Partners. Visit developmentaid.org to double your impact today.

As we mark international NGO Day, we are shifting the lens to how international NGOs can genuinely empower grassroots movements and communities on the front lines on crisis and change. We will explore how organizations balance rapid emergency response with long-term transformation and what it really takes to stay relevant amid ranking civic space, funding pressure, and protracted crisis.

I'm very pleased to be joined by Linda Nordby, a humanitarian expert from Norway and the head of the humanitarian division at Norwegian Church Aid. She holds a Master's in international relations from the London School of Economics and has led crisis response in Ethiopia, Myanmar, Palestine, Liberia, South Sudan, and the Philippines, which is giving her a rare perspective on how NGOs connect local realities with global responsibilities.

Linda, it's a pleasure to have you on DevelopmentAidDialogues, and thank you for joining me to reflect on international NGO Day.

Linda Nordby: Thank you for having me Hisham.

Hisham Allam: Linda, to start with big picture from your vintage point at Norwegian Church Aid, how do you see the distinctive role of international NGOs today, especially when it comes to empowering grassroots actors and movements for a more just and sustainable future.

Linda Nordby: I think from Norwegian Church's point of view working together with local communities and local civil society is part of our DNA. So, this is basically the way we've been working since to start. What I do see now in the changing context of our sector is that this kind of work is even more important.



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We need to be able to work alongside national actors in order to address the vulnerabilities and the needs in fragile contexts.

Hisham Allam: You mentioned in our earlier exchanges that sometimes people at the head offices are a bit removed from the day-to-day alarms colleagues face in the field. Can you take us into a recent moment, visit a conversation or a kind of decision where something from the ground really challenged or reshaped how you think about your job in Oslo?

Linda Nordby: I think, all visits to the field are sort of enlightening in the sense that knowing exactly what faces our colleagues when they work is something that we don't encounter every day at a head office level. It could be everything from bureaucratic impediments that we don't really understand here. Thus, putting unreasonable pressure on our colleagues in the field. It could be the safety and security situation for our staff. And it could also be the mirror social dynamics in certain communities that we work that we do not quite understand when we're not in country.

Hisham Allam: But how do you handle this?

Linda Nordby: There needs to be of course, close collaboration between the country offices that we have and here at head office. Dialogues. There also needs to be visits from head office to country offices to better get a good grasp of what's actually going on. But there are also a lot of conversations going on on some of these big topics at the global level as well.

Hisham Allam: You know what I'm asking this, because for me as a journalist as well on my personal level when I was getting training or lectures or studying with partners from Europe, and they are advising me, my colleagues, you have to do this, you have the right to do this. But when we tell them that the situation on the ground is completely different. Something that you feel it should be done by default. We struggle in Africa or the Middle East to have it done. And this is a challenge and it needs courage to do something that you can do in your normal life, Norway, for example. I totally understand that the challenges that the frontline workers in the Middle East and Asia and Africa are completely different from the perspectives that you see in Europe, right?

Linda Nordby: Yes, I agree. And also, this is important of course, when we set up our systems and our procedures and our guidelines from the head office to take this into account.

So, we are trying to the best of our ability at least, to include and incorporate input from our field offices and our country offices.



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Hisham Allam: Staying with those frontline realities for a moment. Let's zoom out across some of the places you have worked, you have led responses and places as different than Ethiopia, Myanmar, South Sudan, and the Philippines.

When you look back across those crises, is there a pattern in how communities themselves organize and respond? And how an NGO, like NCA can either strengthen or unintentionally weaken that local energy.

Linda Nordby: I think, as a general observation, I would say that people living in this harsh and fragile context are quite resilient. How do they respond? I have experienced depends on a little bit from context to context but in general, I would say there is a lot of community support and collaboration. And as an NGO, this is also what we're trying to tap into through working with local organizations and local communities, is to strengthen that already existing network or structure so that becomes stronger and also more resilient when a crisis hits.

Hisham Allam: You've hinted at the tension between responding fast and thinking long term. So, let's dig into that a bit more. I would like to discuss the balance between emergency and long-term work in your own division. How do you decide when to stay in firefighting mode and when to invest and approach it in a way that builds resilience and dignity over years, not months.

Linda Nordby: I think as a dual mandated organization, Norwegian Church Aid is really well placed to do both at the same time. So, we are lucky in the sense that we have long-term development money and also humanitarian funding in many of our protracted crises where we work and the fragile context where we work.

So that kind of flexibility gives us the opportunity to both build some resilient structures like I spoke about before, together with the communities or with civil society organizations, and also strengthen the civil society organizations and our partners to be able to do humanitarian response when needs spike.

So, I feel that for us, we can do both at the same time. And it is important now, I think, in this changing world, that we are able to do both at the same time and be able to address both underlying vulnerabilities, but also then immediate needs when that's called for.

Hisham Allam: That makes a lot of sense. My next question is about Sudan, which is one context where NCA has tried to bring humanitarian and development work together for what you call compounded effects. Without going into operational sensitivities, what feels genuinely new or different about that approach, and what are you learning from it so far?

Linda Nordby: I think is something that we have done to some extent before but given the decrease in funding and very difficult context on the ground in Sudan. We have found that working more strategically around certain areas with different types of funding sources has been more useful and to think in a way that we are able to set up a response where we can also exit because in the end humanitarian aid is a little bit of



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a band aid. And what we need to think about is that we want to leave behind a more resilient community than what was there before we arrived? So, I think just as an example, what we're looking at is not only addressing the needs of IDPs, but also looking at what host communities need.

Looking at markets. Looking at small scale farmers, trying to create some sort of system where we can provide the IDPs with cash and then small-scale farmers with some agricultural inputs. And then also making sure that they have access to the market so that the local community can sustain itself.

Hisham Allam: I have a question in mind that I used to ask recently to all my guests. During the international aid cut, have you faced any situations that you have to abandon or to skip some areas or topics that you feel are a matter of interest?

Linda Nordby: We're still in that process of seeing what we are unable to do with the aid cut. For us it's also been, we've seen this trend coming and we've seen that. 14 of the 20 OCD DAC countries have reduced their aid in 2025, not just the US. And it's slowly been pointing in that direction.

And Norway and a few others are still having modest increases, but in general funding is going down. There's nothing in particular that we are like a huge part of our work that we are abandoning at the moment, but there are small things, of course, that we have to stop doing.

And we're also, of course, looking at improving our efficiency. I don't think we'll be able to balance out or compensate for all the funding cuts by improving efficiency.

Hisham Allam: Interesting. Thank you. The world at NGO Day this year focuses on empowering grassroots movements. From your perspective, what does empowerment actually look like in a place facing active conflict or severe restrictions beyond the language we use in the strategies and proposals?

Linda Nordby: I think. It means that we need to have a proper partnership. It is hard because there is a power imbalance with funding, et cetera, but establishing that. Establishing trust between grassroots movements or local organizations. In our instance, for the most part is key of course that takes time. So that has an impact sometimes on our ability to be a very fast and timely responder, especially when we're entering into new partnerships.

But as NCA, we do have a lot of longstanding partnerships with a lot of trust, a lot of church-based communities with huge networks and with them it's to a large extent about making sure that they are operating within the framework that they need to operate and also to build their capacity when it comes to everything from more operational things, but also more organizational things.



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Hisham Allam: That is a helpful way to frame it. And this is my next question. It's about localization. Which has been on the agenda for years, but funding and decision making it still sit largely with international actors. Where do you see real progress on localization and NCA's work, and where do you feel most frustrated with how slow the system is to change?

Linda Nordby: Yeah, this is true. We've had this conversation for several years. I think for us, it is about engaging and also shifting the decision making to our partners. So, this can happen more at a country level where we do partner consultations and make sure that they are basically designing the responses that we have.

Of course, with input from the beneficiaries. But at the more organizational level, what we are doing is doing thorough consultations in the regions with our partners from different countries on our partnership policy and on the way we work. And we are getting feedback from our partners annually on how we're doing, basically being a partner and trying to improve.

So, I think that's giving them the voice and also adjusting according to their inputs is a way of giving them some impact on the way that we as an international organization work. I think the frustration with, I guess the big issue is to some extent, at least what we've discussed here in the organization, is how to overcome some issues with shifting the power to more so to local actors is will we pass the audits of our donors basically. And as long as the audit requirements are what they are, it will be hard for quite a few of our partners to work on their own standard and take that role that we're encouraging them to take.

So, I think that we need to look at what kind of requirements we are putting on the local actors.

Hisham Allam: Very candid. Thank you. And the context is only getting tougher. Access, security and the shrinking humanitarian space are major concerns in many of the contexts where you have worked. How are these pressures changing the way NCA plans its response and shares risks with national partners and local staff.

Linda Nordby: Yeah, a broad question. So, with regards to access, there are security and safety impediments. There are bureaucratic impediments. And all of these we try to work together with our partners, to overcome. I think what we are trying to do to a large extent in order to help our partners operate on the ground is to be as flexible as we can.

So, say there are access issues in one area, we will try to discuss and find ways to implement a response in a different area. So having that constant dialogue, trying to find solutions, I think is one of the ways that we're trying to enable our partners to operate in this challenging environment.

Hisham Allam: Linda, that's an important point. The Norwegian Church Aid is a faith-based organization with deep church and community networks. In practice, how does that identity help you reach people and



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build trust in crisis? And are there situations where it also creates the dilemma as you have to navigate carefully?

Linda Nordby: Maybe to the last thing first, I think yes, of course. Having church in our name can be challenging in certain contexts, so we find ways to overcome that in those cases. And there is also the fact that we do have had a long history in many countries. So, we are often fairly well known.

I think working with churches means that we are working with structures and individuals that have a lot of trust and outreach in communities. And that is something that we have actually benefited from in certain situations, whether that's about negotiating access, or if it's about sort of getting a large volunteer network up and running. These kinds of things we have benefited from. What I see we get a huge benefit from when it comes to church and faith leaders in general because we also work with other faith-based actors, is advocacy work that we do and also working on norms change and also issues on more like behavioral change. Then I feel that having faith-based partners and faith-based sort of background is a real asset.

Hisham Allam: Thanks for unpacking that. Linda, if you look at the broader humanitarian sector, what is one habit or way of working you think international NGOs really need to leave behind, and what should replace it if we are serious about accountability and affected people?

Linda Nordby: I think we are working very siloed. When you go places that everything connects to everything, right? So, in a way it's also sometimes limiting us by being so siloed, like development, humanitarian, different sort of sectors. So, I am hoping that we will manage somehow to look at things from a more holistic perspective. Addressing issues in a community or in, in a certain geographic area from several angles.

And trying in that way to create those compounded effects that we spoke about in the beginning.

Hisham Allam: That is a strong challenge to all of us. For colleagues in smaller or national NGOs who may feel overshadowed by international players, what practical advice would you offer on how to engage with organizations like NCA as equal partners rather than just implementers?

Linda Nordby: Yeah, I think it's important that local smaller NGOs challenge international NGOs. Most of us have signed up to different types of charters or are committed to partnering with local organizations in a way that does not make them service providers but actually entering into a proper partnership where they have an equal standing with the international NGOs. It is of course difficult because of the power balance, and you probably as a national NGO would like to receive funding from the international NGOs. But I think it is important to stand your ground and point out the duties that we have as international NGOs towards the national NGOs.



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Hisham Allam: Very practical. To close on a message to the front lines on this international NGO day, what message would you like to share with frontline staff and partners in places like Myanmar, Palestine, or South Sudan who are holding services and the communities together under extremely difficult conditions?

Linda Nordby: I will just like to express my admiration and gratefulness for the work that you're doing, given the fact that most of them are IDPs or affected themselves and living through the humanitarian crisis that they are responding to. And I would also say that we are keeping in mind from the head office level the challenges that you are facing and that we are constantly trying to improve our way of working so that we can make your life easier.

Hisham Allam: Linda, thank you for joining DevelopmentAid Dialogues and for sharing both your field experience and your reflections from leading Norwegian Church Aid's humanitarian work. For our listeners, International NGO Day is a reminder that real lasting change depends not only on global institutions, but also on NGOs and a community-based organization that stand closest to people's everyday struggles and hopes.

If you found this conversation valuable, please follow and subscribe to DevelopmentAid Dialogues on your favorite podcast platform, and share the episodes with colleagues and partners interested in humanitarian action and the future of NGOs. I'm Hisham Allam, signing off. Thank you for listening and see you next time.

Goodbye.