Burkhard Gnärig

How do I engage with the selected project?

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by Burkhard Gnärig

Start your own social journey!

Foreword

Effective philanthropy is Active Philanthropy. A growing number of donors are able and willing to donate far more than just financial aid to resolving social problems: They also contribute knowhow and expertise as advisors, correspondents and liaisons to other potential patrons, or as volunteers. Many of these skills and resources, placed at the disposal of the projects by donors, are invaluable to the organisation behind the project. On the other hand, not every form of participation is constructive or successful. The ability to establish a harmonious union of target, donor and means to achieve this target, requires tact and caution – a fair partnership between the sponsors and the sponsored, as well as recognition of their respective abilities and experiences, is crucial.

This is where this guide takes off: it highlights the factors most crucial to the optimal participation of donors – the basic parameters of a project, personal contributions and regularity and level of participation. The author of this guide, Burkhard Gnärig, offers decision-making advice to donors wanting to actively participate in a project that they support. Using clear examples and criteria drawn from his extensive experience, the expert explains how and to what extent people committed to a project can best help to achieve its targets.

This brochure is part of an Active Philanthropy series of guides designed to help donors develop a systematic and strategic approach towards their charitable commitment. The focal points and questions of Burkhard Gnärig's other publications span the topics: choosing a cause and a solid organisation, assessing and evaluating the work performed by civil society organisations[1], clarifying the ideals and targets that underpin one's own commitment and measuring the impact of the donor's contribution. These guides can be read both, in one go, as well as used as reference where a particular chapter's advice is required.

As a non-profit forum, Active Philanthropy supports families and individuals in developing and applying a personal giving strategy. The forum offers a safe-haven for donors to exchange, learn and cooperate, as well as find practical advice for improving the concept of 'donating' as a whole. This is made possible through a variety of services – from useful publications, workshops and excursions to administrative support as well as individual consulting. Our activities are themselves made possible by similar means, with the charitable involvement of entrepreneurial families who support Active Philanthropy with words and deeds.

The Active Philanthropy 'Toolbox' contains publications concerning particular causes, such as 'children' or 'climate change', as well as methods and management-themes essential for effective giving. Donors are thereby given a leg-up toward a particular cause and the ability to find their niche – they are given practical advice and step-by-step instructions how to effectively donate. The guides contain one of two approaches – either accounts of successful donors and their stories and advice, or advice and pointers from experts from the respective areas.

Objectivity is fundamental to all our work, including our publications. Some examples and suggestions are drawn from the author's experience. We would ask you to respect that the approaches and the selection of organisations presented can be neither comprehensive, nor are they subject to any assessment or rating by either Active Philanthropy or the author.

We are grateful to the author, Dr. Burkhard Gnärig, CEO of the Berlin Civil Society Center, for synthesising his 25 years of experience at the forefront of varying civil society organisations in this guide. We owe equal thanks to the donors who read the initial drafts. Without their constructive advice and criticisms the book would lack its current polish. We would be pleased and honoured if this guide were to be able to help donors find their calling – in the most productive and successful way possible.

Dr. Felicitas von Peter
Managing Partner

Michael Alberg-Seberich
Executive Partner

[1] Civil Society Organisation (CSO): sometimes also called NGO = Non-Governmental Organisation or simply Charity. We use Civil Society Organisation or CSO here because we believe that this is the most comprehensive description of the wide range of organisations that are working to provide services for the benefit of society.

Welcome

Essentially philanthropy is all about a partnership in which a donor supports a recipient. But usually a number of intermediaries are part of the equation: a local civil society organisation implementing the project, a government department providing a formal framework, consultants offering advice etc. In most cases, especially if you are supporting overseas projects, these intermediaries fulfil useful and often indispensable roles. But, as necessary as they are, they add to the complexity of the set up. Therefore, thinking carefully about how and to what extent you should engage with 'your' project is an essential requirement for the success of your support.

This guide tries to support you in the decision about your own engagement by looking at the key factors determining your optimal involvement: the project needs, your own qualification, the intensity of your involvement, the level of your involvement. When reading this guide you should already have defined your goals as a donor, chosen a specific sector and an area of work you want to be engaged in and identified at least one concrete organisation and a project you would like to support.

Project Needs

Finance · Know-How · Capacity

First and foremost the needs of the recipients should guide everything we do. Being poor, exploited or under threat their welfare should be at the core of our considerations. Sometimes well meant interventions not only fail but add to the plight of those they were supposed to benefit. Over the years I have seen many failed approaches of this kind: one example is the number, timing and duration of meetings donors like to call, especially during the planning stages of a project. Often the whole village is being called together to discuss a project at a time when people should be out in the fields tending their crops or going about some other work to earn their living. For people who struggle for survival, losing precious working time at meetings can be very debilitating. If, after all these meetings, the support is still not coming at all, or not at a significant level, people are worse off than they would have been without outsiders' good intentions to help. Avoiding such a mishap should be the first priority when thinking about your involvement in a project.

Providing financial support is the most obvious and usually the most effective way of supporting a project. But there are a number of dos and don'ts you should keep in mind when providing financial resources. Those projects which need your money most will usually be the ones which have a very weak financial basis. For them it is vital to know exactly how much money you will donate and when exactly the funds will arrive. Sometimes when talking to people in desperate need of support donors have the impression that people are greedily trying to extract as much money from them as possible and that they hope for the funds to be delivered on the spot. When this should happen to you, remember that the people you are meeting may not know how to feed their children tonight, an experience you probably will not have made yourself. Finance for the poor needs to be reliable and on time. Whether you work directly with a project or through a civil society organisation, reliability and timeliness of your support are key requirements. Therefore, be clear in your commitment and deliver reliably what you have promised.

The other side of the coin is timelines of the implementation of your funds. Those who are looking for your support know that urgency of their cause is always a strong argument to convince donors to provide support. Therefore it may happen that you are being asked for your urgent support only to find that months or even years later your money is still sitting on the organisation's bank account waiting to be delivered as originally planned. Sometimes these situations are unavoidable because of unexpected changes in the project conditions but in other cases you may find that the need for funds has not been as dramatic as communicated to you. To exclude these situations as far as possible you should carefully check whether your support is really needed as urgently as explained to you. For larger amounts it is advisable to seek the advice of an independent expert – not only on the urgency of the support but also on the appropriateness of the requested amount.

Many projects need know-how as urgently as they need finance but know-how is often much more difficult to provide. It starts with the challenge that some projects are not aware of the need of additional know-how while others understand that they lack know-how but don't know exactly which. For example, in remote and traditional communities people may approach a challenge, like high infant mortality, by drawing on the know-how of their spiritual leaders – while the know-how of a modern scientist analysing the quality of their drinking water might be a much more effective way of securing their children's survival. Identifying the need for know-how is often a useful contribution outsiders can provide. But while outsiders often have the benefit of knowing more of the available options to solve a problem they usually have the disadvantage of not knowing enough about the local conditions. Identifying the optimal know-how to address a specific local challenge requires the full involvement of local people. Convincing the people that they need additional know-how which might not fit into their way of seeing the world is another, often very difficult story.

Do we have enough people to do the work? This is one of the most frequently asked questions in the implementation of projects. The lack of capacity often results from a lack of funds: the project does not have enough money to pay the required work force and therefore implementation of the project is delayed or even fails completely. Sometimes the only answer to a lack of capacity is to find more funds in order to pay for the required work. But often other ways are possible – and sometimes even preferable – to close a capacity gap. Recruiting volunteers in certain situations, and if it is done right, can provide the required capacity. As in the Anglo-Saxon countries where volunteering for the community is part of social life, most other countries have their own forms of socially, culturally or religiously motivated individual or communal volunteerism. Drawing on volunteers for projects delivering benefits to the local community will not only bring down project costs but it will also increase local ownership and strengthen the projects' sustainability. But working with volunteers brings challenges such as the reliability of the work force: people you pay for their work will usually show up on time and do the work they expect payment for, while volunteers may stay at home or go about alternative jobs securing their own subsistence more easily. Another challenge can be approaches others are taking in the neighbourhood. I remember a water supply project where the local community who, as their contribution to the project, had volunteered to dig the trenches for the water pipes, went 'on strike' when finding out that a similar project in a neighbouring village used an excavator paid for by the project to dig the trenches. Other ways to secure the required capacity to implement a project may be the formal transfer of ownership to individuals (shares) or a community or to provide non monetary benefits to the workers as the popular 'food for work' programmes[2] do or to offer training or follow-up engagements which bring a salary. From my own experience in low income communities I would recommend paying the work force a salary where ever possible because this generates a double benefit: the project gets implemented reliably and the local economy is being strengthened by a cash injection coming via the salaries.

Recommendations

Be clear how much money you will make available to a project and when and under which conditions the funds will arrive. Be reliable in your delivery: people's survival may depend on you. If in doubt about the urgency of your support or the suitability of the amount requested involve an independent expert.

Usually the best way of identifying the additional know-how a project needs is to equally draw on local people's expertise and the analysis of external experts.

The decision whether to use volunteers or employees (or a mix of both) to implement a project depends very much on the specific project conditions. In poor communities paying locally appropriate salaries is usually preferable as this strengthens the local economy.
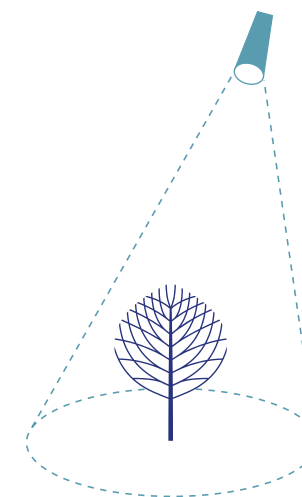
[2] 'Food for work' programmes are often used for infrastructure programmes in poor and remote areas. For example: all volunteers working on a community water supply project receive food for themselves and their families. This encourages people to turn up in time for the work and it contributes to raising the nutrition and health levels in the local community.

My Own Qualification

Technical · Social · Cultural

Your personal background will very much determine the way in which you can engage with the project you have selected. The first and most obvious question is the one of your technical abilities: are you an expert in tropical agriculture who can provide advice to local farmers in developing countries? Are you a medical doctor who can perform surgery for people who otherwise would not receive any healthcare at all? Are you an experienced manager who can support a small civil society organisation in developing a successful strategy or in reorganising their operations towards more efficiency? Which skills have you acquired, which experiences made? Which expertise do you have to offer? A mistake many of us commonly make when looking at small organisations or projects with limited scope is to think that running these is easy and that we would be able to do this better than the people actually in charge even though we might not have any appropriate experience or qualification. Usually this misconception arises out of our own ignorance which does not allow us to see the complexity behind the seemingly simple superficial picture. Often help which comes on the basis of insufficient experience and qualification creates more damage than benefits. I have seen many examples of this in countries of the South where poor and desperate people are easily prepared to accept the advice of people from the North whom they perceive as immensely rich and powerful. If the perceived Northern experts provide their advice on the basis of insufficient expertise and local knowledge, failure is to be expected.
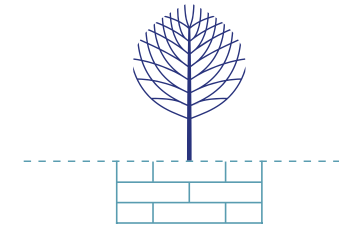
Besides your professional expertise, your social competency is of immense importance. In an environment where volunteerism is far spread people usually are motivated by non-monetary incentives. Therefore, the way in which you interact with the people around you is of utmost importance. If you are highly competent as a social being this will provide you with a strong basis for a positive contribution to a project. Here are some social qualities which are especially valuable in the context of interaction with the people in a project:

Patience is probably the most important quality you should bring. In an environment where resources are always scarce, progress is usually slower than in a commercial environment where you are able to throw large amounts of money at a problem as long as you can show that doing so is justified by the expected return. Especially when you work with a project in a different cultural environment you will have to adapt to the fact that progress is often much slower compared to Europe or North America.

Empathy is another crucial quality you should bring. If, for example, you decide to support a project working with homeless people because you do not want to see these 'dirty and rancid tramps' in your street you will probably fail. Poor and socially excluded people are very sensitive to what others think of them. They will easily detect your aversion toward them and this may hamper the project's success. But if you empathise with them, if you make a special effort to understand why they are how they are and if you show them the respect every human being deserves, you may gain access and start a valuable learning process for your own and the project's benefit.

Modesty is a special challenge for most people from the North working in the South, and generally for wealthy people working with the poor. Most of us, who are very privileged compared to the majority of people on this planet, enjoy said privileges, not because of their own merit but because we were lucky enough to have been born at the right time, into the right families, into the right communities, into the right countries. Constantly remaining aware of our luck helps us staying grounded in a way which is acceptable in an environment shaped by civil society activists. Feeling superior and behaving accordingly in most projects will prevent you from delivering a valuable contribution.

Closely linked to the social qualities you should bring to a project are the cultural ones. To give you an example I have come across countless times: people who only speak their native language usually cannot understand and appreciate what it means to communicate in foreign languages. As English is the language of global communication this is a special challenge for English native speakers. More than once I have come across monolingual English speakers addressing a room full of people who all have second, third or even fourth-language command of English – and yet the speaker does not take care over his pronounciation, nor does he slow down. As these monolingual English speakers had not made an effort to learn a foreign language they could not fully appreciate the trouble everybody else was going through in trying to understand what they were saying. Therefore, when recruiting people for positions requiring cultural sensitivity I put special value on them having acquired a foreign language. No matter which language the applicant had learned: they had understood how difficult it is to communicate in a foreign language and they would be sensitive to others' difficulties in doing so.

A question concerning cultural sensitivity which is especially relevant if you work in developing countries is how far you are able and willing to adapt to local habits. Observing the local dress code, respecting local rules of behaviour, showing an interest in the local culture, learning some words in the local language, all of these are important ways to better integrate into the local culture. 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do', this is still the motto for any intercultural exchange, and if you want to work outside your own culture you are well advised to observe it.

Recommendations

Be realistic and self-critical when assessing your own qualification against the requirements of a project and don't underestimate the complexity even of small projects and organisations.

Make a special effort to be liked and respected by the people in and around the project. Patience, empathy and modesty are crucial qualities.

Especially in projects overseas cultural awareness is a critical factor. If the people you talk to have to use a foreign language to communicate with you show your respect by talking slowly and pronouncing clearly.

Intensity of Involvement

Occasionally /Ad Hoc · Regularly · Full Time

The question of how far you can engage with a project also depends on how much time you are able and willing to invest. If you can only be involved occasionally on an ad hoc basis you should not aim for a role where the project depends on your availability. Quite often projects depend on the personal leadership of the founder or the donor and if that person cannot make sufficient time available, decisions cannot be taken on time, activities cannot be started as planned and the project's overall success is under threat. Therefore, if you are not absolutely sure that you can be regularly involved in a project, aim for an involvement which allows you to be close to the project without the activities depending on you. Participation in a project's advisory council might be one of the options.

If you can be involved regularly and if you have relevant skills to offer, there may be roles for you in the governance or management of the project, as a leader or as a regular contributor to the project's success. I have observed a major donor who regularly turned up at the head office of the organisation he supported financially in order to provide the organisation's leaders with management and governance advice. He even had his own office and a secretary at the organisations' head office. In other cases retired successful professionals limit themselves to donating their expertise to a project working part time as volunteers without pay in functions which otherwise would have to be filled by salaried staff.

Finally full time engagement allows you to take on any imaginable role in a project, provided you have the required qualifications. Again there are a number of retired executives who have chosen to continue working fulltime, only now as a volunteer in a not-for-profit context. The main challenge inherent in such a role is to integrate into the project in the same way an employee would. Demanding a special role because you work without pay could affect the projects cohesion and hamper the team spirit.

Recommendations

Provided you have the required qualifications you can play many different roles in a project. But it is important that your role is in line with the time budget you can allocate to the project. Don't hamper your project by making yourself indispensable while not dedicating sufficient time to fulfilling the respective commitments.
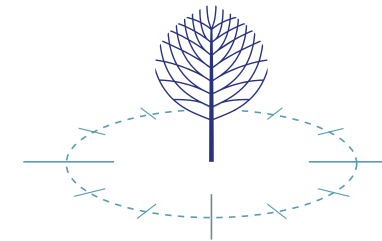
Focus of Involvement

Opening Doors – Providing Advice · Providing Leadership · Implementing the Project

As discussed before, most projects are always short of funds and – often due to the lack of money – short of know-how and capacity. Opening doors to potential supporters is therefore a very valuable contribution. As many projects have an advocacy component – e.g. the project supporting migrant children which lobbies for changes in the law to smoothen integration of newly arriving children – they also need access to decision makers in politics and business. If you are well connected in any of these fields, making your contacts accessible to the project's management, its fundraisers or advocacy people can be an enormously helpful contribution. In order to play your cards as a door opener well, there are a few things you may wish to keep in mind:

· think carefully about which of your contacts would really be a good fit for the project; don't waste anybody's time with setting up a meeting without a realistic chance of success;

· make sure the project has clearly defined its specific request to the contact you have provided; if necessary support the project in preparing for the meeting; consider whether it would be better for you to take part in the meeting;

· don't under use or exploit your contacts – I know examples for both, philanthropists who do not want to open up any of their contacts and others who tell me that their friends are greeting them with words like 'So, what kind of project would you like to introduce to me today?'

Opening doors usually becomes more effective if coupled with providing advice. But providing advice can be very useful in many other areas as well. Depending on your own qualification (please see above) you might be able to provide advice on issues like the project's legal set up, management, implementation, monitoring and evaluation and many other aspects. If you choose to do so, don't forget that providing advice will often lead to additional expectations: the local kindergarten you support wants to extend their playground. You volunteer to find out about the ownership of the adjacent plot of land. You find that the land is owned by the local community and advise the project to approach the mayor. This leads to the request: 'can you help us with gaining access to the mayor's office?' As a result of meeting the mayor the kindergarten can lease the additional land. Now a builder is needed to clear the land and erect the required infrastructure and as you have been so successful with your support so far, you are being asked … and so on. Many philanthropists enjoy being part of such a chain of developments which, if successful leads to a concrete outcome – in this case the extended playground being inaugurated with a little party in the presence of the mayor and with many happy children enjoying themselves. Another way of providing advice is by joining an advisory council or a similar structure which exist in many projects. These councils normally do not have any formal responsibility. They exist to provide the project's management with additional know-how as and when required.

Depending on the project and your own qualification you might be able to contribute by providing formal leadership. Being part of a supervisory council or a board will put you in a position where you can very directly influence the course of events. Having been a board member or chair in many organisations I would like to offer a few points of advice:
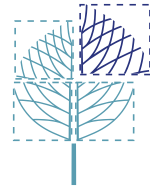
· Before accepting a role on a board, be absolutely clear about the time commitment expected from you. Usually the people who ask you to join a board underestimate or deliberately play down the time commitment required. Add 30% to what you are being told the time requirement is and consider whether you are able to commit to this. Board meetings which have to be postponed again and again because board members cannot make the time, meetings which take place but cannot decide because they lack a quorum and discussions which suffer from a lack of information because board members haven't found the time to read the preparatory papers are a waste of precious time for the project (or the organisation) – they will most probably hamper the project's performance.

· Take your role on the board seriously. I have been working with boards composed of high calibre experts who were leading very successful professional lives. But in the evenings, after a full day's hard work, they got together for our board meetings and wanted to relax and focus on their social lives. At times I found it extremely difficult to make these boards focus on the agenda we had in front of us and to take the decisions the organisation or project needed from their board.

· Manage your feeling of ownership. If you have worked for some time with a project or an organisation you will notice an ever growing feeling of ownership. Generally this is a positive effect of your engagement which you should enjoy. But I have seen board members who had developed an unhealthy dose of ownership which clearly stood in the way of the project's development. I remember a situation where I was involved in an effort to resolve a crisis and the board chair told me: 'this project is my baby – if it grows any bigger I will loose control.' Here the chair was clearly standing in the way of the project's development.

Being part of the implementation of a project can be a very rewarding 'hands-on' experience: it usually gives you the satisfaction of tackling a problem very directly with your personal efforts. I remember how much I enjoyed working in a project with a group of children. Doing practical work in a project also gives you a much better understanding of the activities you otherwise support with your funds and/or your involvement at board level. I know of cases where philanthropists donated anonymously to the project they worked in as volunteers. This must be a fascinating experience: gaining your own unfiltered insights into the activities you support with your funds. There are many good arguments for joining the execution of a project. But, as always, there are a few points to be aware of:

· The project first of all needs to serve its beneficiaries and not its donors. You should only think about working in a project if there is a need for your involvement. Most organisations are very protective of their projects – quite rightly so: for example, they want to avoid that the poor they work with feel like being in a zoo where occasionally some rich foreigners who look like tourists drop in to observe. You normally can rely on the judgement of the organisation running the project: if they can offer you a role in the project, however small it might be, you may accept it and if they do not have such a role for you, please do not insist in getting one.

· In agreeing your role in the project, be clear about what you commit to and reliable in delivering your contribution. Once accepted as part of the project's staff your contribution will be an element of the project's overall success. The project will depend on you: staying away for some time because you have other things on your mind should not be an option.

· Do your best to integrate as far as possible into the project. Don't expect any special treatment. Deliver your contribution in the same way and as well as any other volunteer or salaried staff would be expected to.

Recommendations

Opening doors can be a very useful contribution to a project's success. But don't spoil your contacts or waste the time of project staff. Focus on bringing about meetings with a chance of success and make sure everybody who attends is well prepared.

Providing advice often leads to follow-up requests. Be clear in what you can deliver and reliable in your delivery.

If you accept a role on a board make sure you have sufficient time available to play your expected role. Take your task serious, the success of the project depends on a well working board.

If you want to work in a project, follow the advice of the organisation running the project, adapt to the project environment and deliver your contribution in the same way and to the same standards as everybody else is being expected to.

Mistakes

Overestimating Yourself · Lack of Patience and Stamina · Making Yourself Indispensable

Hopefully it has become clear that there are many options for you to be involved in projects. Besides the ones briefly described here there are others which may arise from your special skills and experiences or from a specific project's requirements. What ever the way in which you may be involved in a project, there are some frequently made mistakes which you should try to avoid. I want to briefly describe three of these:

Firstly there is the danger of overestimating the contribution you can make. Having worked with German volunteers overseas I could observe how full of trust and, sometimes, naïve expectation local villagers would receive their young and relatively inexperienced foreign guests. As a European or North American you are highly respected in most parts of the world and local people often overestimate your knowledge and experience. Living and working in

such an environment can easily lead to overestimating ones own know-how. Similarly successful and self-confident entrepreneurs newly entering the not-for-profit sector sometimes underestimate the challenges of engaging in a totally different world with its own rules which often are quite different from the for-profit sector. In other words: they overestimate the relevance of their experience and quality and appropriateness of inputs they can give. Donors overestimating their own project-specific qualifications, and recipients who all too readily accept an outsider's advice are, in combination, responsible for quite a number of inappropriate structures and misguided strategies which often are leading to project failures.

Secondly, and often linked to the first mistake, lack of patience and stamina are other reasons for many flawed projects. In a sector in which the permanent lack of resources is one of the defining moments, patience and stamina play a very important role. Developments often take longer than one would expect and sometimes it takes a number of failed attempts before necessary steps are finally being taken. Another reason for delays is the aspiration to secure democracy and participation at all levels of decision making which unavoidably takes some time. In order to work successfully in such an environment patience and stamina are indispensable qualities. If you fail to be patient you will be sidelined or pushed out in many projects and organisations. On the other hand too much patience
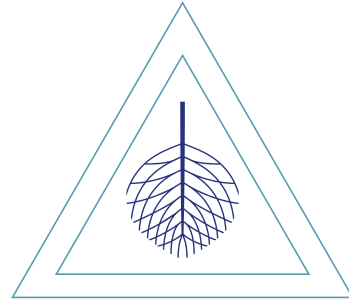
and acceptance of inappropriate ways and means produces stagnation which nobody in this sector can afford. Therefore, finding the right balance between patience and impatience is a crucial ingredient of successful leadership in the not-for-profit sector. People coming from the corporate world sometimes get too easily frustrated with the slowness of developments. Some give up early and others get cynical about the sector. There is no question that a lot of stamina is required in order to be successful in the not-for-profit world. In my work with different organisations I have often made the experience that the reception the very same proposal gets when presented more than once can vary massively – initially negative, then interested, and, finally, receptive. Acquiring the reputation of never giving up is a very useful attribute for working successfully with civil society organisations.

Thirdly you should not make the mistake of making yourself indispensable. Philanthropists who are involved with a specific project (or an organisation) over a long time, and at multiple levels of engagement, may, sometimes unwillingly, create a situation where the project is so dependent on their input that it may break down once they withdraw. To avoid such a development it is recommendable to make a conscientious effort to diversify the project's sources of funds, advice, leadership etc. If a project depends on many sources of support no single actor will become indispensable for the project's survival. Obviously this is better for the project. But it is also better for philanthropists giving them the option of ending their support for the project without damaging or even destroying it.

Recommendations

Especially as a newcomer to the not-for-profit sector remain self-critical about the relevance of your know-how. Take time to understand the sector before providing advice and leadership.

Decision-making in the not-for-profit sector generally takes more time than in the for-profit world. While you will probably have to accept this as the basis for your involvement, try to find the right balance between the necessary patience and the desirable speed of progress.

Avoid making yourself indispensable. Make sure that the project depends on many sources for funds, advice and leadership.

Successes

Project Success · Resilience · Qualified People · Multiplication

There is a separate guide on how to assess the outcome of projects[3]. Therefore we will limit ourselves here to briefly describing the dimensions in which success may manifest itself. The first and most obvious dimension is project success: Let's take the example of a project aiming at building a primary school in a remote village which previously did not have a school. As the main donor you are being invited to attend the opening ceremony in the village and you witness the immense joy of the village population when opening their school. You observe the first lessons run by well trained teachers whose salaries are covered by the government and you share the fun and excitement of children, who for the first time in their lives attend classes. No question: this is a successful project.

Now let us say you return to the village two years later. There are many different options what you might find. In the most extreme cases you might not even find a village: people might have had to drought or other threatening events. In other cases the village might be there but the school has burned down, the teachers are gone and children don't have any possibility to attend classes. Or, in the vast majority of cases, you will find the school still operational and children still enjoying their lessons: the project you supported is sustainable – it can maintain itself in the set-up created by the project. Now let's look again at the possibility that the whole village has disappeared: you start enquiries and find out that the village indeed has been hit by a terrible draught and that they have moved some 50 km into the bush where they have cleared some land near a river and restarted farming. You find a guide who leads you to the village. The village headman still remembers you and

explains – version 1: that very sadly they had to leave the school building behind and the teachers did not want to come with them to an even more remote location – their children cannot attend school any more. Would you be so generous to provide them with support once more in order to help them starting a school at the new location? You promise to think about this request. – Your project has not survived the threatening conditions the village had to cope with. You need to consider carefully whether you want to engage for a second time. Version 2: the village headman leads you to some small clay buildings with grass roofs and explains that when they had to move their children insisted that they would only come along if the school would move as well. So they convinced

the teachers to come along, in fact the village agreed to provide them with food and fire wood for free in order to top up their salaries. The first buildings they erected at the new location were these school houses and only a few weeks ago lessons have restarted. The headman asks whether you can help them with putting up some tin roofs because the grass cover is harbouring some nasty bugs and it is leaking in the rains. – Your project has shown resilience: even after dramatic changes of the conditions affecting the project the school is still there and thriving. In terms of a successful project there is not much more you can achieve.
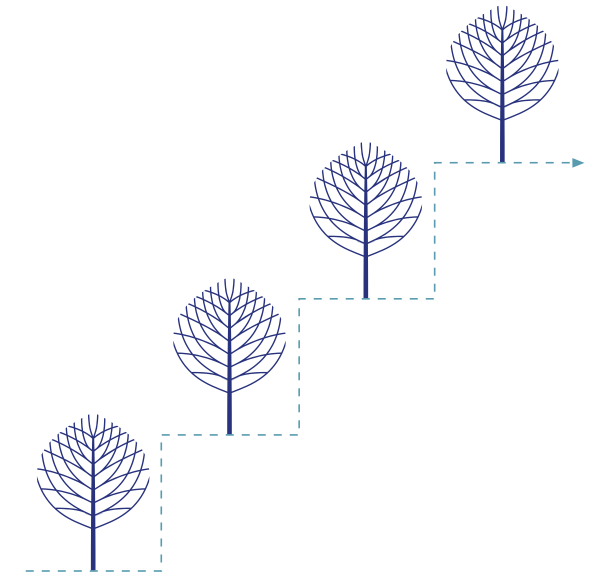
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[3] Please see the guide 'How do I assess the effects of my contribution?' by Burkhard Gnärig; Active Philanthropy, 2009

Another dimension of project success is qualification of people. Let's say you return once more to this project ten years later. The school is still there and the first generations of children have completed their education. Some of the most talented children have stayed at the school as assistant teachers and as they are supporting the trained teachers they are learning the trade. Talking to the assistants you find out that they plan to attend a teacher training college in order to attain a formal qualification. The school's headmaster shows you the school gardens where she and her colleagues grow some more nutritious crops unknown to the villagers until recently. After school they invite the students' parents to come and learn how to grow these plants and how to prepare them for eating. Finally they hand out seeds for the parents to grow in their own gardens. In this way the nutrition of the village and the health of the families are visibly improving. In these examples the project achieves qualification effects beyond its core purpose. Sometimes even projects which fail to achieve their original purpose leave behind a number of newly qualified people who are able to use their new skills for their own and their communities' benefit.
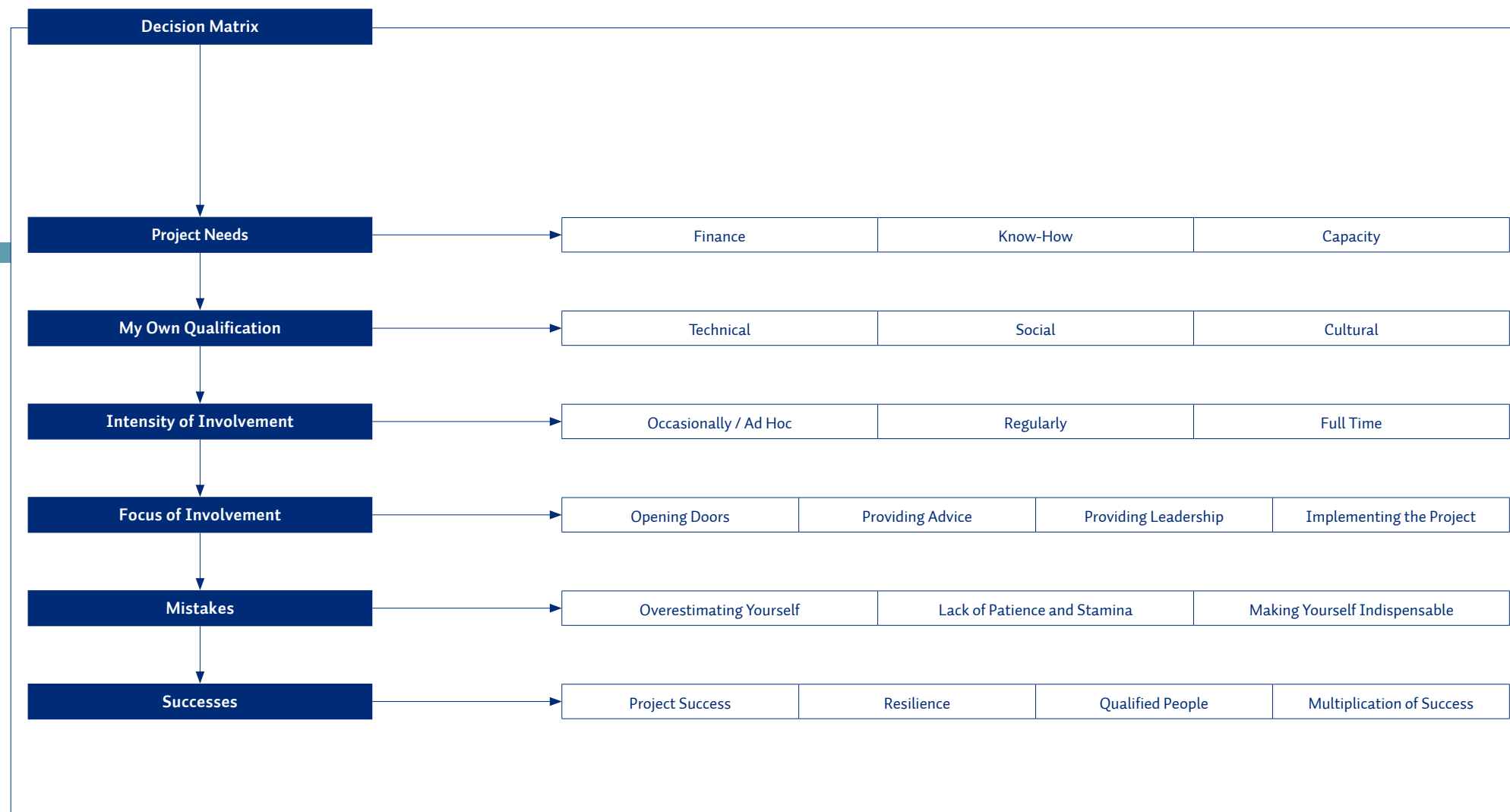
The final dimension of a project's success is that it is being copied somewhere else and thus its success is being multiplied. Let's stay with our example: the school's headmaster further explains to you that a few days ago they had a delegation from one of the neighbouring villages visiting. They had come specifically to see the school and talk to the teachers, the parents and the village elders about how to start such a school in their own village. Over the past few years they had had delegations from various villages visiting and to her knowledge there were now five or six schools in the area which had started by copying her school's success. For the village, for the staff of the school and for you as a supporter of the project there is not much which is more exciting than a development like this.

Recommendations

When engaging with a project, look at the different dimensions of potential success. As a minimum think about securing the project's immediate goals but also consider how to maintain success over time and how to spread success to comparable situations.

| Decision Matrix | | | |

Project Needs			
Finance	Know-How	Capacity	

My Own Qualification			
Technical	Social	Cultural	

Intensity of Involvement			
Occasionally / Ad Hoc	Regularly	Full Time	

Focus of Involvement			
Opening Doors	Providing Advice	Providing Leadership	Implementing the Project

Mistakes			
Overestimating Yourself	Lack of Patience and Stamina	Making Yourself Indispensable	

Successes			
Project Success	Resilience	Qualified People	Multiplication of Success

Other Resources

If you found this guide helpful for your own decision making you may wish to consult other texts from the same author:

What do I want to achieve with my support?
How do I find the right Civil Society Organisation to support?
How do I assess the work of Civil Society Organisations?
How do I assess the effects of my contribution?

Notes:

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Dr. Burkhard Gnärig is Executive Director of the Berlin Civil Society Center. As head of the Center he provides management, governance and strategy support to large international civil society organisations. Before establishing the Center he held the positions of CEO of Save the Children, Greenpeace and terre des hommes. He has led both terre des hommes and Save the Children through a redefinition of purpose, reorganisation and significant growth. Burkhard has been a board member or chair of civil society organisations in Germany, Italy, Switzerland, India, Korea and Japan.