

A Review of Organizational Effectiveness in NGOs

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Abstract

The paper discussed the effectiveness of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and discussed various models of organizational effectiveness (OE) that have been applied in NGOs. Furthermore, different viewpoints that emerged from research over the past four decades are synthesized. The review of models and research studies revealed little agreement among the academic community to conceptualize NGO effectiveness. While early studies focused on the assessment of NGO effectiveness highlighted organizational goals, contemporary studies focused on the processes that contribute to NGO effectiveness. Most of the studies found the governing board as a common dimension of NGO effectiveness. The paper conceptualized NGO effectiveness as a multi-dimensional social construct with an ability to achieve an organizational mission through a competent governing board, strong NGO-employee relationship, and efficient financial measures. The paper concluded that it is difficult to develop a universal standard definition of NGO effectiveness because NGOs work on diverse themes, issues, scales, and approaches. On the basis of the analysis, it is suggested that future research on NGO effectiveness should focus on specific cultures, focus, and scale of NGOs.

Keywords : organizational effectiveness, NGO effectiveness, NGO management

JEL Classification : D23, L25, L31

Paper Submission Date : April 4, 2015 ; **Paper sent back for Revision :** May 11, 2015 ; **Paper Acceptance Date :** May 25, 2015

By and large, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are considered effective alternatives to bureaucratic government machinery (Brinkerhoff, 2002 ; Lipsky & Smith, 1989 ; Young, 2000). Nonetheless, the effectiveness of NGOs varies across organizational type, scope, and objectives. Researchers have shown considerable interest in the effectiveness of NGOs because as compared to for-profit organizations, it is relatively difficult to measure NGO effectiveness. By virtue of their origin, for-profit organizations exist to generate profits for shareholders. Calculating financial metrics like return on equity, asset-liability ratios, and earnings per share is far easier and offers a quantitative picture of an organization's performance over time. On the other hand, NGOs have multiple, uncertain, qualitative goals, and produce intangible services like social security and child education. Moreover, NGOs are accountable to multiple stakeholders, that is, target groups, the society, employees, volunteers, funding organizations, individual donors, and governing board members. These intrinsic properties of NGOs generate interest among researchers and practitioners to explore the effectiveness of NGOs.

What is an effective NGO? This central question has invited the attention of NGO practitioners and researchers over the last four decades. Some researchers (like Balsler & McClusky, 2005; Drucker, 1990) argued that the extent to which an NGO achieves its missions determines its effectiveness. Additionally, financial efficiency in raising funds and administrative expenses have also been associated with an effective NGO

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(Callen, Klein, & Tinkelman, 2003). However, assessment of NGOs' effectiveness is plagued by a few problems. It is possible that an NGO might serve its mission but cannot sustain adequate funding for the future. Moreover, mission statements of NGOs are stated in abstract terms like 'social upliftment,' 'sustainable rural development,' 'generate awareness,' and 'enhance gender equity'. Additionally, in some cases, the target group of an NGO - like children and mentally challenged persons are not in a position to evaluate the quality of services and hold an NGO accountable. This leads to the question: Is there a set of indicators to measure an NGO's effectiveness? It is a challenging task to assess the mission accomplishment of NGOs, even with a moderate degree of certainty.

From a practitioner's viewpoint, funding organizations like corporates, governments, and multilateral agencies collaborate with NGOs to implement specific programmes. However, as NGOs work in a diverse set of programmes, an NGO may perform effectively in a particular programme, while not so in another programme. Thus, funding organizations need to collaborate with suitable and appropriate NGOs, rather than the most effective ones. In academic literature, Lecy, Schmitz, and Swedlund (2012) reviewed 64 papers on NGO effectiveness and found that 43 out of 64 papers did not provide a definition of effectiveness. While some articles discussed NGOs' effectiveness in the context of influencing other actors, some defined effectiveness as employing management techniques to minimize costs. This demonstrates a research gap for both practitioners and academicians to conceptualize NGO effectiveness. This study aims to fill this gap through a systematized review of the literature on NGO effectiveness. This integration of research will have implications for both practitioners and academicians to enhance NGO effectiveness.

It may be noted that the term 'NGO' is commonly used in developing countries of South-East Asia and Africa, and the term 'non-profit organizations' is commonly used in the United States. Although both the terms are used to refer to similar kinds of organizations, some differences exist between the two. The term 'NGO' commonly refers to organizations working on social development issues like poverty, child education, and unemployment, and the term 'non-profit organizations' includes all organizations except business organizations, such as museums, theatre groups, churches, universities, and colleges. In this paper, the term NGO is used to refer to such organizations.

Against this background, the paper is organized into three sections. The first section provides a concise review of models of NGO effectiveness, followed by a summary of empirical and review studies. The third section discusses these studies in general, and highlights the managerial implications, limitations, and identifies the scope for future research.

Models of NGO Effectiveness

Studies have revealed that four models on OE have been proposed, that is, the goal model, systems model, internal processes model, and strategic constituencies model. These models, summarized in the Table 1, have been applied in all kinds of organizations. Review of literature on NGO effectiveness revealed that these models

Table 1. Overview of Models of Organizational Effectiveness

Model (Proponents)	Definition	Approach
	Organization is effective if:	Model preferred when:
Goal Model (Etzioni, 1964)	It accomplishes stated goals.	Goals are clear, consensual, time-bound, and measurable.
Systems model (Resource dependence) (Katz & Kahn, 1966)	It acquires needed resources.	Resources and outputs are clearly connected.
Internal processes model (Steers, 1976)	It has smooth functioning and no strain.	Processes and procedures are closely associated with output.
Strategic constituencies model (Connolly, Conlon, & Deutsch, 1980)	All constituencies are minimally satisfied.	Constituencies have significant power / influence over output.
Adapted from Cameron (2005)		

have also been applied in the case of NGOs, although with minor change in terminology. In NGOs, these four models are referred as (a) goal attainment model, (b) systems resource model, (c) reputational model, and (d) multiple constituency model.

The goal attainment model emphasizes upon the achievement of organizational goals (Etzioni, 1964), and has been used in various studies on NGOs (Byington, Martin, DiNitto, & Maxwell, 1991; Green & Griesinger, 1996; Lillis & Shaffer, 1977; Sheehan Jr., 1996). The organizational goals of NGOs are conceptualized through vision and mission statements that outline target groups (like children, adolescents, farmers, rural population, and orphans), and scope (like health, education, agriculture, advocacy, and environment). However, in practice, NGOs work across diverse target groups and themes, and innovate to serve emerging societal needs. In other words, the goal model conceptualizes an effective NGO through the extent of mission-attainment.

Using the systems resource model, which emphasizes organizational system and control, Yuchtman and Seashore (1967) proposed an NGO's effectiveness as its ability to exploit the environment through fundraising. The systems resource model contributes to the goal model by highlighting inputs and processes that lead to an outcome. Thus, the systems resource model views the organization as a social system, whereby an NGO interacts with the external environment. The model emphasizes that NGOs should raise funds as these are crucial for the survival of an NGO. Researchers like Crittenden, Crittenden, and Hunt (1988), Miller, Weiss, and MacLeod (1988), and Provan (1980) used the systems resource model to assess correlates of NGO effectiveness.

The reputational model of effectiveness emerged from a 5-year study of community hospitals by Georgopoulos and Mann (1962). The model suggests that NGO effectiveness can be conceptualized through the opinions of key stakeholders, irrespective of their diverse views and understanding of the construct. This model was far more holistic than earlier models because it included perceptions of stakeholders, and how each stakeholder viewed the same NGO. The model was applied by Herman and Tulipana (1985) and Smith and Shen (1996) to assess NGO effectiveness.

Kanter and Brinkerhoff (1981) proposed the multiple constituency model, which highlighted the judgments of stakeholders. The model demonstrated that different interests and criteria of NGO effectiveness provided a clear picture of priorities of each stakeholder. The model was used by Bradshaw, Murray, and Wolpin (1992), Cameron (1978, 1981, 1982), and Siciliano (1996) to highlight the judgements of stakeholders of NGOs.

The models of NGO effectiveness discussed above have been applied to NGOs' management systems like centralization and decentralization, organizational strategy and planning, NGO-employee relationship, and management capacity - which are discussed in the following section.

Research on NGO Effectiveness

Studies on NGO effectiveness can be classified into two broad categories: empirical and review. On the basis of this classification, this section is divided into two sub-sections.

↳ **Empirical Studies** : One of the earliest studies on NGO effectiveness conducted by Webb (1974) on churches used factor analysis. The study found four organizational characteristics, that is, Cohesion, Efficiency, Adaptability, and Support - that can improve NGO effectiveness. The study by Lillis and Shaffer (1977) used an economic approach of input-output analysis to measure the effectiveness of a university. The study revealed a positive impact of university grant on income and employment of a state's economy. The goal attainment model, one of the earliest approaches to NGO effectiveness, was used by Glisson and Martin (1980). The study found that centralization and formalization positively affected productivity and efficiency of NGOs. The results reflected the role and influence of the top management (governing board members and chief functionary) on mission accomplishment and outcomes. However, contrary to the above findings, Cameron (1982) found that faculty unionized colleges and universities were less effective than nonunionized ones with regard to academic performance and resource acquisition, when multi-domain approach of NGO effectiveness was applied.

From the mid-1980s, research on NGO effectiveness shifted towards the role of highest decision-making authority of an NGO: the governing board. Early research on the governing board was guided by the reputational model of NGO effectiveness (discussed in the earlier section). Herman and Tulipana (1985) found no relation of the influence of the governing board on NGO effectiveness. Later research on NGO effectiveness focused on a set of dimensions rather than a single criterion of NGO effectiveness (like the input-output ratio). Using a multi-dimensional approach towards NGO effectiveness in a study of 417 Canadian NGOs, Bradshaw et al. (1992) found a positive relationship between certain aspects of the governing board process (like use of strategic planning techniques, existence of a shared vision) and financial & reputational measures of organizational performance. Specifically, involvement of the governing board in strategic planning, meetings, and committees contributed to a positive impact on organizational performance.

A study of Arts organizations by Kushner and Poole (1996) found four components of effectiveness: (a) satisfying audiences, donors, and volunteers; (b) identifying and obtaining financial and human resources; (c) efficiently organizing resources into technologies; and (d) achieving program objectives. The study also found that highly effective Arts organizations exhibited a high level of engagement of organizational members in monitoring the above-mentioned components of OE. Thus, the study highlighted the critical role of internal stakeholders in operations and organizational management of NGOs.

Using the goal-attainment approach, Green and Griesinger (1996) found a strong correlation between NGO effectiveness and governing board performance, and between OE and activities of the governing board like policy formation, strategic planning, program monitoring, financial planning and control, resource development, governing board development, and dispute resolution. A study of 101 NGOs by Sheehan Jr. (1996) also used the goal-attainment approach to measure mission accomplishment and found that most NGOs had clear mission statements. Another study by Siciliano (1996) conducted on 240 NGOs explored the reasons behind effective governing board performance and revealed that effective NGOs had delegated strategic planning to a subcommittee of governing board.

As NGOs have a diverse group of stakeholders like funding organizations, target groups, the society, individual donors, employees, volunteers, and governing board members, they may perceive effectiveness differently and include dimensions based on their understanding and role in the organization. A study on health and welfare NGOs found that stakeholders' judgments on NGO's effectiveness varied significantly (Herman & Renz, 1997). However, 'board effectiveness' was a common dimension of NGO effectiveness perceived by all stakeholders. Another study by Herman and Renz (1998) highlighted that effective NGOs had effective governing boards (as judged by various stakeholders), had governing board members with high social prestige, used practitioner-identified correct management procedures, and employed change management strategies. The above review suggests that most of the studies found that governing board effectiveness lead to NGO effectiveness, while Jackson and Holland (1998) found that governing board effectiveness was a cause of NGO effectiveness.

Garain (1998) studied NGO effectiveness through the perspective of the NGO-employee relationship in Indian NGOs and found five dimensions of NGO effectiveness: perceived OE, job characteristics, organizational commitment, job involvement, and work involvement. Herman and Renz (2004) proposed NGO effectiveness as a multi-dimensional hypothetical construct comprising of nine dimensions, that is, financial management, human resource management, public relations, fund raising, program delivery, community collaboration, working with volunteers, government relations, and governing board governance.

Based on the social movement perspective of NGOs working on environmental and ecological issues in India, Panda and Pattnaik (2005) developed an index of NGO effectiveness. The study found six dimensions of NGO effectiveness: (a) awareness building among masses, (b) mobilization of masses, (c) mustering support from political parties, other voluntary organizations, and the media, (d) benefiting the people through their participation in various projects/schemes run by NGOs, (e) influencing policies and programmes of the government or that of similar bodies in the corporate sector (advocacy role), and (f) empowering the people

through their participation and creating grassroots level popular institutions.

Shiva and Roy (2007) proposed a model of NGO effectiveness by conceptualizing programme outcome as a proxy of NGO effectiveness. The model included four dimensions, that is, transformational leadership, management capacity, programme capacity, and management outcome. The model was modified and tested to study the effect of transformational leadership on organizational culture, which in turn lead to NGO effectiveness (Shiva & Suar, 2012). The study found a positive effect of transformational leadership on organizational culture, which further positively affected NGO effectiveness. Thus, it is clear that leadership plays a crucial role to create an enabling environment, which helps an NGO to perform effectively.

Willems, Huybrechts, Jegers, Weijters, Vantilborgh, Bidee, and Pepermans (2012) conceptualized NGO effectiveness through an NGO governance quality index comprising of 38 items. The index comprised of five dimensions of NGO governance quality: external stakeholder involvement, consistent planning, structures and procedures, continuous improvement, and leadership team dynamics. Liket and Mass (2013) classified determinants of NGO effectiveness into nine themes (like reporting, strategy, and evaluation) which were further equally divided under three pillars of NGO effectiveness: transparency, organization, and program. Mitchell (2013) interviewed 152 leaders of NGOs working in the United States and asked them how their organization defined effectiveness. Results revealed that 82% of the NGO leaders defined effectiveness as 'outcome accountability,' while 15% defined effectiveness as 'overhead minimization'.

↳ **Review Studies :** Review studies on NGO effectiveness provide a macro view of the evolution of the concept over time. One of the earliest review papers on NGO effectiveness by Forbes (1998) grouped NGO performance studies into three categories: evaluation studies (Lillis & Shaffer, 1977), correlation studies (Crittenden et al., 1988 ; Green & Griesinger, 1996 ; Siciliano, 1996), and process studies (Herman & Renz, 1997).

Baruch and Ramalho (1996) reviewed empirical studies of OE published from 1992 to 2003 and found that the criteria used to assess effectiveness varied by type of organization (business and NGO). In case of business organizations, majority of the studies used multiple criteria and 42% of the studies used financial criteria. On the other hand, in case of NGOs, nearly all the studies used non-financial and financial criteria with efficiency (input-output ratio) being the most commonly used criterion.

Discussion

The review highlighted that the concept of NGO effectiveness has dominated research on organizational behaviour over the last four decades. The concept has troubled theorists and researchers for years as it is a powerful, yet problematic concept (Forbes, 1998). The effectiveness assessment can be a useful tool to critically evaluate and enhance the work of organizations (Taylor & Sumariwalla, 1993), while it can be problematic because it can mean different things to different people (Kanter & Summers, 1986), and there are many alternative ways to measure it (Herman, 1990). The models of NGO effectiveness form a foundation to conceptualize and assess NGO effectiveness. However, despite these theoretical models of OE, “the practical challenge of measuring organizational effectiveness persists” (Mitchell, 2013, p. 326).

The review of the literature on NGO effectiveness reveals significant findings for both practitioners and academicians. The review suggests that NGO effectiveness is a multi-dimensional construct comprising of multiple dimensions that do not converge across the studies. Hence, conceptualization of the construct is a constraint due to lack of agreement among researchers. This disagreement seems to be the primary reason for the lack of operational definitions of the construct.

The review demonstrates that NGO effectiveness is a social construct conceptualized by stakeholders of NGOs. Each stakeholder has unique expectations from the organization in terms of organizational systems and practices. However, in spite of these differences across various studies and stakeholders, an effective governing board was found as a common dimension of NGO effectiveness. This 'common link' highlights the strategic role

of the governing board in policy formulation and strategic planning, which leads to an effective NGO. Cumulatively, it can be inferred from the review of literature on NGO effectiveness that correct management practices result in a positive relationship between an NGO and an employee ; provide the ability to gather support from stakeholders ; build transparent systems ; and enhance organizational efficiency, productivity, and adaptability, that in turn, can lead to effectiveness. Thus, the review highlights the critical role of the right set of management systems and practices to enhance NGO effectiveness.

Although the role of the governing board and its effectiveness was highlighted in various studies to be crucial and integral to understand and assess NGO effectiveness, some studies like Taylor, Chait, and Holland (1996) criticized the role of the governing boards and described effective governance by NGO governing boards as a “rare and unnatural act” (p. 36).

Managerial Implications

The review of literature on NGO effectiveness has implications for managers working in NGOs as well as in funding organizations. The managers will recognize that the governing board plays a critical role to determine an NGO's effectiveness because they design NGO's management systems and practices. The management systems and practices, such as human resource practices, financial management, overhead minimization, strategic planning, and public relations influence NGO effectiveness. Thus, NGO's managers can take specific steps to strengthen the quality of board governance - which can contribute to enhanced NGO effectiveness. Similarly, managers of funding organizations can assess potential NGO partners through the lens of the governing board, and predict the extent of mission attainment.

The review highlights that the acquisition of resources like human resources and financial resources is a precursor to attain an organizational mission. Hence, NGO managers need to undertake strategic planning for human resource planning, recruitment planning, fund-raising strategy, corpus management, and personnel training to equip the organization to achieve its goals (Bhojanna, Srikanth, & Tiwari, 2013).

The review suggests that mission attainment is the central theme and a critical parameter to assess an NGO's effectiveness. Various studies used different terms to refer to mission attainment, like programme delivery, constituent satisfaction, benefit to people, outcome accountability, and productivity. The managers need to understand how each stakeholder perceives mission attainment. This conceptualization of mission attainment will help NGO managers to document and present organizational achievements based on the target groups. The managers of funding organizations can ascertain specific financial measures to enhance NGO effectiveness like overhead minimization, financial management, input-output ratio, and cost minimization in an NGO. Similarly, managers of NGOs can take steps to improve these financial measures to enhance NGO effectiveness.

Conclusion

The paper reviewed models and research studies on NGO effectiveness published from 1974 to 2013 across the world. The review found a number of dimensions of an effective NGO, primarily related to correct management practices and systems, and the governing board. The review demonstrates that an NGO's management practices, operations, financial metrics, organizational efficiency, and so forth contribute to the survival of the organization. These dimensions are equally crucial for the effective performance of an NGO (Duan, 2010). The review of literature suggests that a focused and holistic view of an NGO is required to determine its effectiveness.

Since NGOs exist to serve societal needs, 'mission attainment' remains the central dimension around which the concept of NGO effectiveness has evolved. In other words, the review found that an efficient governing board led to correct management practices and systems in an NGO, which in turn result in NGO effectiveness. Thus, in the background of the review of literature, NGO effectiveness may be broadly formulated as:

- (1) A multi-dimensional construct,
- (2) A socially constructed construct,
- (3) Ability to achieve the organizational mission,
- (4) Build an efficient governing board,
- (5) Forge strong NGO-employee relations that promote organizational and work commitment among employees,
- (6) Efficient financial measures that promote transparency.

In conclusion, it may be reiterated that NGO effectiveness is a topic of interest for practitioners and academicians alike. The review unraveled few aspects of NGO effectiveness through a systematized review of relevant literature on models and research studies. The conceptualization of an effective NGO proposed in this paper can be applied across diverse NGOs working on varied issues, programmes, and geographical locations.

Limitations of the Study and Scope for Further Research

The review was focused on published research studies and did not include unpublished studies by practitioners (like managers of NGOs and funding organizations). This limitation of the paper is that the review of the literature found no study by practitioners, while academicians conducted most of the research. The limitation of the paper also suggests a disconnect between practitioners and researchers as lack of research by practitioners hampers action-oriented research. Thus, it was not possible to integrate and compare research from different viewpoints of practitioners and researchers.

The paper provides a reference point for future research on NGO effectiveness. Future research on the review of NGO effectiveness should concentrate on specific cultures (like Indian and United States), focus (like rural and urban), and scale (number of community members served). These studies will highlight the differences between different sets of NGOs, and how these differences influence the perception of NGO effectiveness. Such review studies will also support managers of funding organizations to take an informed decision to collaborate with appropriate NGOs.

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