

KEYSTONE PERFORMANCE SURVEYS
NGO Partner Survey 2010

Exec Summary

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www.KeystoneAccountability.org

In association with Bond, NIDOS and InterAction



Executive summary

During 2010, Keystone, in association with Bond, InterAction and NIDOS, brought together a group of 25 northern NGOs based in Europe and the USA. As an independent agent, we surveyed the southern partners of the northern NGOs, asking partners to rate and comment on different aspects of the northern NGOs' performance. We guaranteed that partners would be anonymous and the northern NGOs would not be able to identify who said what about them. 1,067 out of 2,733 partners responded, a response rate of 39%.

This report presents what the respondents said. It presents benchmark data from across all 25 NGOs, setting out the range of performance ratings they received. Each NGO also received their own confidential report, showing their specific performance compared to the benchmarks. The 25 NGOs include a variety of large, medium and small NGOs including many household names. This report does not identify any specific NGO's performance.

The northern NGOs were involved in all major stages of design and implementation, including developing and piloting the questionnaire. The questionnaire was implemented in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish. It was carefully designed to cover all major activities carried out by northern NGOs to work with and add value to their southern partners.

The survey has generated two major findings.

FINDING 1. THE DATA ARE CREDIBLE, POWERFUL AND COMPARABLE.

The findings consistently differentiate high and low performance among northern NGOs. Individual NGOs can identify their specific strengths and weaknesses. Performance can also be compared and benchmarked between NGOs. All NGOs in the cohort can see what levels of performance are possible. This creates the basis for identifying concrete actions for improvement and measuring progress in the future.

The data are not objective. They present what southern partners say about their experiences in comparison to expectations, which may vary. The survey process ran within various practical constraints and the benchmarks need to be interpreted with care. However, the strengths of the process appear to outweigh the weaknesses. Southern partners are uniquely placed to understand how well northern NGOs work with them. The data from this 'constituency voice' appear to be among the most reliable performance indicators available to northern NGOs of their particular contribution, similar to customer satisfaction in the private sector.

At a sector level, we believe the process could contribute to a new standard for reporting the performance of NGOs that work in partnership with southern organisations. A draft standard is proposed:

Every year, NGOs publish systematic feedback from their southern partners that is independently collected on an anonymous basis and is structured and presented in comparison to similar feedback received by other NGOs

This standard could create a powerful new basis for funding decisions, so funds are better directed towards those NGOs that are seen as working most effectively by their southern partners. This could strengthen incentives for more effective collaboration, enhancing impact and creating the conditions for sector-wide continual improvement. It applies the principles of transparency, accountability and bottom-up empowerment within the NGO sector itself.

"I believe this survey will assist [the northern NGO] in assessing its relationship with its partners and provide an opportunity to narrow any existing gaps in terms of its internal management. This survey will be an important tool for long term planning for [the northern NGO] and its partners."

– SURVEY RESPONDENT

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We present a collective action agenda for building on this survey:

- 1 Identify and disseminate best practices in working with partners among northern NGOs.
- 2 Repeat this survey every 12 – 24 months on a collective basis.
- 3 Adopt the reporting standard from January 2013 onwards.
- 4 Carry out a similar 'donor survey' of NGOs' experiences of their institutional donors.

FINDING 2: RESPONDENTS WANT NORTHERN NGOs' HELP TO BECOME STRONG, INDEPENDENT AND INFLUENTIAL ORGANISATIONS. THEY CONTRAST THIS WITH BEING CONTRACTED TO IMPLEMENT NORTHERN NGOs' PROJECTS AND PRIORITIES.

There are significant variations between and within NGOs' findings. The detailed results in Appendix 2 paint a nuanced picture. However some findings emerge consistently from across the cohort.

In general, respondents rate northern NGOs' staff attitude very highly, along with how comfortable they feel approaching northern NGOs and how well northern NGOs listen and respond to them. This suggests strong personal relationships between staff. Northern NGOs also receive consistently high ratings for understanding respondents' sectors, strategies and contexts. Respondents say that most northern NGOs provide them with reporting formats and that the monitoring they do for northern NGOs helps them improve what they do.

In contrast, northern NGOs consistently receive low ratings in some areas. Respondents say that northern NGOs do not allow them to make changes they need to about how to spend funds. They feel that the amount and length of support is not well matched to their needs and that northern NGOs do not contribute enough to core costs. Respondents report that northern NGOs rarely involve them in shaping strategy or explain when they expect to stop working together. Few respondents feel that northern NGOs have complaints procedures they could use or that northern NGOs promote them much in the media or elsewhere.

No single factor appears to be directly correlated with the ratings NGOs received for 'overall satisfaction' and 'overall value added'. However, the NGOs that are rated highest in these areas also have high ratings for understanding respondents' strategies and sectors. They are rated most highly for being approachable and responsive, asking respondents for advice, taking a flexible approach and learning from their mistakes. In addition, they provide highly rated support in at least one of three areas: funding, promoting respondents' work, or organisational capacity building.

This accords with the priorities that respondents' identified for future support. Their top priorities are accessing other sources of support and developing joint strategies with northern NGOs. They ask for support in raising their profile and sharing lessons between similar organisations. They do not ask for help to strengthen specific technical or management capacities, even when these options were available.

On average, each respondent receives support from over five NGOs or funders. This reinforces the headline finding, above. Northern NGOs may best support southern partners by contributing to their efforts, rather than as a strategic leader or commissioning agent. Southern partners may struggle to follow five different strategies and sets of reporting requirements.

The data suggests that current performance among northern NGOs varies. Some respondents experience unequal relationships and have limited confidence in northern NGOs' abilities or understanding. Others report high levels of satisfaction with respectful, well informed and effective collaboration. Overall, the survey suggests that northern NGOs add most value to southern partners when they treat them as equal partners, sharing in decision making, rather than implementing agents or sub-contractors.