

# IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research findings at a glance from the  
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## Changing the World by Changing Ourselves: reflections from a bunch of BINGOs

This paper contributes to ongoing reflections and debates about if, and how, big international NGOs (BINGOs) can be more effective agents of 'progressive social change'. It documents conversations between BINGO staff and IDS Participation, Power and Social Change (PPSC) members, taking place between July 2008 and March 2009.

This paper has two objectives: to facilitate learning by organisations wishing to promote 'progressive social change', and to raise awareness and encourage reflection amongst practitioners about recent debates on the changing roles of INGOs. It reflects critically on the BINGO conversations and explores the types of changes BINGOs are trying to achieve and how they go about them, as a prelude to considering how various organisational and external factors influence the ability of BINGOs to respond to a progressive social change agenda.

This paper reflects on the complex challenges facing BINGOs as they move towards pursuing more progressive social change, striving to align their espoused goals with the practical reality of their work.

The author summarises discussions, case studies, inputs from academic critiques of BINGOs and practical tools to explore the types of changes that BINGOs are trying to achieve and the approaches they use – their models of change. This highlights the heterogeneity that exists

between and within organisations staffed by people from, and working in, a variety of political, economic and cultural contexts.

The implications of these differences, as well as the homogenising influences of competition and staff movement between organisations, are further considered in a section that focuses on factors commonly perceived to prevent BINGOs pursuing more radical agendas. The discussion, based on an earlier co-authored literature review, draws attention to efforts BINGOs are making to respond to the criticisms levelled at them. It raises provocative questions for BINGOs concerning their financial growth targets; their assumptions about the conservatism of donors and supporters; how representative they are in international policy spaces; the costs and benefits of their relations with corporations; the effects of management tools adopted from other sectors to demonstrate accountability and effectiveness; and the power inequity that is often said to characterise their relations with Southern civil society organisations.

The author suggests that reflection on these questions as well as others raised by BINGO participants may be a first step to fostering critical consciousness among strategic actors working within BINGOs, equipping them to advocate for organisational change to greater effect. References to discussions about the changing external environment and organisational theory and case studies shared by participants, provide lessons that may be used to inform efforts to transform BINGOs into more effective agents of progressive social change.

### Key research findings:

- Although the global landscape offers opportunities to contribute to progressive social change, sections of most of the participating BINGOs do not manage this consistently.
- Some BINGOs have done more work on exploring their theories of change and understanding how power relations affect their work, than others.

“ This paper contributes to ongoing debates among practitioners about if, and how BINGOs can be more effective agents of 'progressive social change' ”

“ In the wake of the global financial crisis, increased competition between BINGOs for funding and higher profiles provides opportunities for reflection ”

- The heterogeneity between and within organisations operating in various contexts with staff from different backgrounds, makes it challenging to develop organisation-wide goals that value this diversity.
- The critical literature on BINGOs does not yet fully reflect the complexity of the challenges to organisations, and the efforts of some BINGOs towards becoming better at promoting progressive social change.
- BINGOs pursuing radical rights-based agendas recognise they need to better understand their supporter base, rather than assuming that supporters favour ‘poverty reduction’ over political change.
- Top down organisational change directives based on assumptions that BINGOs behave like machines are largely ineffective.

There is scope for BINGOs to make greater contributions to progressive social change, however making the necessary shifts is challenging. Leaders can play key roles in creating organisational cultures that support such change. However, they have little control over complex and emergent change processes, because of the diversity of staff backgrounds and knowledge, and the varied contexts in which BINGOs work.

The recent global financial crisis provides opportunities for further reflections by BINGOs about whether competition for financial growth is the best approach, or whether increased collaboration around a shared political vision could do more to further progressive social change.

### Key policy lessons / implications of research:

- Conversations encouraging practitioners to analyse the terminology used and their change theories, are a good basis for NGOs becoming more effective agents of progressive social change.
- BINGOs need to consider their roles as agents of change in a rapidly changing world vis-à-vis other development actors: e.g. private sector, new philanthropists, and southern CSOs.
- Reference to organisational theory can inform how organisations work, and feed into change strategy development.
- There may be value in the sector continuing to discuss desired changes and identifying a shared political project, in conversations offering increased scope for participation and topic range.

### Credits

Cathy Shutt,<sup>1</sup> ‘Changing the World by Changing Ourselves: reflections from a bunch of BINGOs’, Research Summary of Practice Paper 3. October 2009

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<sup>1</sup>Cathy Shutt is an independent consultant with over 15 years’ experience of research and practice within the international aid system. She became part of the Participation, Power and Social Change team that convened the process described in this paper while completing a DPhil on power relationships between local NGOs and their international funders.

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