

# Opinion: NGOs — here's how to strengthen your engagement with governments

By **Tim Hanstad** (/news/authors/1063176) // 26 July 2019

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Large-scale social change rarely occurs without government playing a key role in policy change, policy implementation, or both. Consider China's rural legal reforms ([https://ssir.org/articles/entry/to\\_spread\\_prosperity\\_further\\_philanthropy\\_should\\_take\\_lessons\\_from\\_china](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/to_spread_prosperity_further_philanthropy_should_take_lessons_from_china)) in the late '70s and '80s, which helped hundreds of millions of farmers lift themselves from poverty; the 19 (<https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendments/amendment-xix>)th (<https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/amendments/amendment-xix>) amendment in the United

<https://devex.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/115000950453>) women to vote and fueled wider gains for women's rights; or India's launch of a unique digital identification system (<https://blogs.worldbank.org/voices/giving-people-control-over-their-data-can-transform-development>), which has allowed tens of millions of families to access government poverty alleviation programs and services.

Yet, too few NGOs seek to leverage this tool to achieve durable social change at scale. In fact, NGOs often try to bypass government for a variety of reasons. However, NGOs can sideline government to their own detriment.

No government is a monolith. And NGOs that endeavor to find and collaborate with committed government officials reap oversized rewards.

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### **Opinion: How to strengthen NGO-local government collaboration (<https://www.devex.com/news/opinion-how-to-strengthen-ngo-local-government-collaboration-91425>)**

Successful partnership begins with both NGOs and local governments becoming firmly committed to collaboration — and convinced of its value. Public policy experts from American University and Texas A&M explain.

Consider many of the most impactful NGOs working today. They almost uniformly recognize the potential of working with the public sector, seek out committed government officials, and partner — deeply and over the long term. BRAC (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/brac-44479>), the largest development agency (<https://borgenproject.org/10-facts-about-brac/>) in the world, One Acre Fund (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/one-acre-fund-43211>), and Partners in Health (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/partners-in-health-44595>) are three great examples of organizations maximizing their impact through partnerships with the public sector.

There is little reason why NGOs that seek to advance large-scale social change through partnering with government on effective policy change or implementation are still outliers, not the norm.

The following 11 tips can help organizations more effectively identify potential opportunities for collaboration with the public sector and seize such opportunities as a path to promoting changes to policy or large-scale implementation that accelerate social change.

**1. Begin with the end in mind:** What is the large-scale change you want to help accomplish and what is the ideal role of government in achieving that large-scale change? Is it changing policy? Implementing a solution at scale? Improving an institution? Providing resources? Plan from the beginning to engage the government to achieve that end.

**2. Find champions:** Be intentional about identifying potential champions in government, nurture those relationships, build trust, and recognize that this takes time. Formalize this role in job descriptions. The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, or J-PAL (<https://www.devex.com/organizations/the-abdul-latif-jameel-poverty-action-lab-j-pal-54590>), for example, is well known for its research expertise, but it is leveraging research through government partnerships that creates its greatest impact. A common theme across all J-PAL's government partnerships is that they are led by a champion in government (<https://www.povertyactionlab.org/blog/2-5-18/what-have-we-learned-about-building-culture-data-and-evidence-use-government>) who is making evidence-informed policy a priority.

<https://civix.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/11500989453>

**3. Walk in their shoes:** Understand the perspectives, priorities, and incentives of government representatives. Seek to understand before seeking to be understood. If you do not align your objectives with your government champions' objectives, you will not succeed. For instance, Last Mile Health (<https://lastmilehealth.org/>) works closely with Liberia's ministry of health to advance the government's goals on universal health coverage. When asked to provide advice to NGOs on effective engagement with government, a senior official within the ministry recently offered this advice ([https://lastmilehealth.org/olasford\\_wiah\\_skoll/](https://lastmilehealth.org/olasford_wiah_skoll/)): "You come with your idea. I share my priorities. We integrate the two. And together we achieve stronger results."

**4. Agree on the problem:** Define and get aligned on the problem. If you are not aligned on the nature of the problem, it is challenging to get aligned on a solution. Harvard's Building State Capability's Problem-Driven Iterative Adaption (<https://bsc.cid.harvard.edu/>) approach can be helpful here.

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**5. Understand ground realities:** Conduct research to deeply understand local challenges and share these insights to add value to your partnerships with government. Better yet, ask government to partner on this research to develop a deep, joint understanding of the problem. Landesa's successful partnership with China's government (<https://www.landesa.org/press-and-media/china-eyes-further-reforms-to-rural-land-laws/>) over decades has included collaborative field research to ensure that ground realities inform the government's land policy reform. Proximity Design ([https://www.chandlerfoundation.org/pdf/Social-Investor-Web%20\(Interactive\).pdf](https://www.chandlerfoundation.org/pdf/Social-Investor-Web%20(Interactive).pdf)) leverages its experience with Myanmar's farmers' needs to constructively engage with the government on agricultural policy setting.

**6. Continually cultivate trust and credibility:** Mutual trust provides a foundation for any effective NGO-government engagement. And it requires ongoing attention and effort. This includes being proactively transparent about one's goals, motivations, and activities, as is illustrated by CARE India's experience with the state government of Bihar ([https://ssir.org/articles/entry/scaling\\_health\\_coverage\\_quality\\_and\\_innovation\\_through\\_the\\_public\\_sector](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/scaling_health_coverage_quality_and_innovation_through_the_public_sector)) and the work of One Acre Fund's local government relations team (<https://oneacrefund.org/blog/one-acre-funds-approach-engaging-local-governments/>) in Kenya.

**7. Co-create solutions with government:** Involve government partners in developing solutions that address the challenges you've jointly identified. If you come to your government partners with a solution that is already baked, you are likely missing opportunities to engage more deeply with government, gain their buy-in, and identify more culturally and politically appropriate and impactful solutions.

<https://devex.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/11500959453>

**8. Governments are not monolithic:** Remember, governments are composed of a variety of levels, ministries, departments, and individuals. They don't all share the same priorities. Look at government through a sophisticated lens, recognizing that “government” is not one huge stakeholder; rather it is many. Changing government policy or advancing government implementation will likely require cooperation from policymakers in different ministries with different interests and agendas; and these likely differ from the incentives of those who are responsible for implementing policy. All will require engagement to meet the goals of your cause.

**9. Be pragmatic, not partisan:** Be careful not to closely align yourself with a particular partisan point of view or party. Stay pragmatic and focused on your cause, remembering that unlikely partners can often help achieve surprising results.

**10. Prepare for the long haul:** Policy change or successfully transitioning an NGO program to government implementation is not something accomplished in a few months. It's a multiyear time horizon. In a recent article highlighting VillageReach's experience in transferring implementation of their programs to government agencies ([https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how\\_to\\_transition\\_social\\_solutions\\_to\\_government](https://ssir.org/articles/entry/how_to_transition_social_solutions_to_government)), the authors emphasize the long-term time horizons necessary for successful preparation and transition.

**11. Give government all the credit:** You may act as a catalyst, but they are the ones making the final decisions; adopting and implementing the legislation; changing the regulations; and taking the political risks. Whenever there is success, credit the government, and help it share the good news. As Raj Punjabi, founder of Last Mile Health (<https://centers.fuqua.duke.edu/case/2019/04/25/radical-collaboration-cautions-for-philanthropy-and-inspiration-3-themes-from-swf-2019/>), quoted: “It's amazing how much you can achieve if you don't care who gets the credit.”

Remember, achieving social change at scale is rarely achieved by ignoring or going around government. NGOs bypass government at their peril and to the detriment of the people we serve.

There is much to be done. NGOs can and should multiply their impact by approaching governments with humility and constructive engagement to affect change at scale.

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