

HOW TO BUILD A GOOD SMALL NGO

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SECTION C: THE NGO OFFICE

This Section consists of part of Chapter 9 and Annex 3.
The original numbering is left in place so that extracts can be traced back.

BUILDING GOOD BACK-UP SERVICES

9.1 Good administration

However it is organised, whoever does the work, good administration in an organisation does the following:

- it keeps the organisation in touch with important contacts, through letters, e-mail etc.
- it makes the office the hub of the wheel when other staff go off on various tasks; so that no one is lost or feels isolated,
- it keeps correspondence ordered, up-to-date, findable
- it makes sure that everyone gets paid on time
- it keep some files, like personnel files, locked up and confidential
- it keeps financial records and receipts up-to-date.

Everybody in the organisation should have good administrative skills: if computers are used, then everyone should be able to use them including the boss; if there are procedures and practice in use, everyone should use them, whether forms for internal memos and monitoring or rules for e-mails. It is very important to ensure that the NGO does not have donkeys, the poor people at the bottom of the pyramid who end up doing all the boring work for everyone else, carrying an impossible load.



Don't put too many tasks on the office junior

9.2 Logistics

The job of logistics is making projects happen – ensuring that there are supplies and transport when and where needed. Some tasks need logistics that are quite complicated.

For example, you want to vaccinate small children at the right times, so you need to get to the vaccinating points four times a year (measles vaccine, for example, has to be given when a baby is nine months, but babies are born all through the year...). And you need to keep the vaccine cold from the point it leaves the Ministry in the capital city, to the point where it is given. So you need what is called a Cold Chain, a series of fridges and insulated boxes, which in turn means electricity, paraffin or solar power. And at the same time you need a system to sterilise needles and equipment, with pressure cookers and boiling water and paraffin cookers. There are other things you will need, but the Ministry, UNICEF or a bigger NGO will help you identify

them all. But definitely you will need a vehicle and a driver and diesel fuel and spare tyres and somebody to keep the vehicle mended and so on.

EXERCISE:

You could do this even if you are not a health NGO. It will help you to start to think like a planner.

Find a map of your town and the surrounding districts. You are going to visit three villages four times a year, taking three community nurses, vaccines in cold boxes, sterilising equipment etc. Start listing what you will need.

Which villages are the best for getting to the most people?

Think about where the people are living – they will not walk more than ten kilometres to get a vaccine. Do they move during the year?

**How much time will it take for the team to get to the villages and back?
Will you have to stay overnight?**

Then there will be more things to take with you. The villages are poor, so you cannot depend on them for food.

One of the most important tasks of the logistician is to plan ahead. When there is an earthquake, the logistician thinks not just of the emergency tents which have to be flown in immediately, but also about what will be needed in three months – because it takes three months for boats to bring the corrugated iron and cement to start rebuilding houses.

ANNEX THREE: COMPUTERS

A good NGO does not need a computer in order to do good work. Most of what a computer does can be done with pen and paper – often much more efficiently.

But in the long run you can do better work and save a lot of time and if you do have a computer. A computer is particularly useful for creating documents that require regular updating, careful wording, precise calculation, or clear presentation.

Areas of operation that benefit most from computerisation:

- planning (e.g. budgets)
- organisation (e.g. task management)
- calculation (e.g. management accounts)
- presentation (e.g. bids for funding)
- communication and research (via the Internet)

Be patient: A computer will not instantly make your NGO better. It can take time and perseverance to set up and learn the programs you need before you can start processing a lot of data effectively. In the beginning you will spend more time on a computer than you save.

And remember the GOLDEN RULE: If you put garbage in, you will get garbage out! You are the guarantee of quality, not the computer.

With these qualifications, here are some of the practical benefits for NGOs:

IMPROVED WRITING SKILLS: Many people find that their writing style improves with a computer. A sentence can be re-written until it is clear and pleasant. A long paragraph can be worked at until it is much shorter. A chunk of text can be easily moved from one place to another where it makes better sense. Text can be styled (bold, for example) to draw attention to it.

E-MAIL AND CONNECTION TO THE WEB: Via e-mail you can talk to other organisations working in the same field. You can have discussions back and forth with partners in the North. You can even send in a nice long report (as an e-mail attachment). The downside is you will have no excuse for sending a report in late! If you read and write your emails while offline, telephone charges should be very small. (Unless you send in *very* long reports . . .)

Important! Virus protection: A NEW VIRUS IS LAUNCHED ONTO THE INTERNET EVERY FEW MINUTES. Thankfully, most die away without spreading very far, but a few spread like wildfire (such as the 'Anna Kournikova' virus, recently created for 'fun' by a Dutch teenager). These major viruses are always quickly reported by the media – but only after they have infected millions of computer systems. Points to remember:

- Anyone who has your email address on their computer is a potential source of infection. (i.e. all your closest friends . . .)
- Viruses are contained in attachments, not the email itself. You can safely download all your e-mail and any e-mail without an attachment is almost certainly safe to open. *But do not open an attachment unless you know what it is. If you are not sure, delete the e-mail straightaway (and empty the bin) and contact the sender.*
- Get hold of and use a good anti-virus programme. Because new viruses are created all the time, you will still need to be careful (although you should be able to download free updates for your programme from its website – see for example www.Mcafee.com if you have a Mcafee virus scan programme. A good policy is to upgrade about once a month).
- Do not believe any warnings you receive by e-mail about dangerous new viruses. Most are misinformation. Do not pass them on. Instead check the facts from a reliable source such as The Computer Virus Myths website (www.kumite.com/myths/home.htm)

If you can get onto the Web there are many useful sites, with materials, including whole books and reports, which you can download and print out (see our list of resources in Annex Six). You are unlikely to encounter any viruses on the Web. Be careful, though – 'surfing the net' can be seriously fun and you can find yourself doing it for much longer than you planned. (And you *will* get a huge telephone bill . . .)

ORGANISING INFORMATION: As with a paper filing system, you can store information in an organised and very structured way so that you can get the files you need quickly and easily. Storing information on the computer will also force you to select and summarize only the

information you really need. You can up-date text, graphs and spreadsheets at any time without having to redo the whole file. But remember:

Important! Privacy and confidentiality: KEEP PRIVATE INFORMATION PRIVATE. KEEP CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION CONFIDENTIAL.

For example, information on employees should be kept private. So ask whoever supplied your computer, or your technician, to install a system in your computer which asks, each time a new person starts your office computer, for his or her personal specific password. (e.g. the nickname of somebody's auntie living 400 kilometres away, which nobody could guess). This ensures that selected information is only accessible by those who have a mandate to work with it.

Important! Back-up safety: KEEP KEY INFORMATION SAFE BY MAKING BACK-UPS.

Important computer documents need to be copied onto diskettes and safely stored away.

- Back-up diskettes must be kept in a fire-proof safe or taken to a safe home. (Diskettes can degrade over time, especially in hot wet climates, so start with new ones every two years.)
- Keep a second copy of the most valuable files in a safe.
- In addition, every evening, the person in charge of computer documents should think "Tonight there might be a fire" and make a copy onto a separate diskette of all the documents worked on that day. (That diskette can be over-written each evening with the new back-up files.)
- Write something meaningful on the diskette's label so you know what files it contains.
- It is useful for the name of the computer file to appear on 'hard copy' (printouts), too, so you can find it quickly if changes are needed.

Recommended programmes:

N.B. This section is accurate for 2001, but by 2003 may be out of date.

A very well-known 'package' is *Microsoft Office*. It is available in many editions and its latest version (called *Microsoft Office Premium*) contains up to 9 different programmes. But an older version, *Microsoft Office 97*, will probably be more than sufficient for your requirements, and certainly much cheaper. (If you find it is no longer available, ask for a *Microsoft Office 2000* standard package.)

Microsoft Office 97 has in its standard version 4 key programmes: *Word*, *Excel*, *PowerPoint* and *Outlook*. What can these programmes mean for your NGO?

WORD: As its name suggests, this programme is used for making text files. It can make very neat reports for you, which, if properly printed, will look as good as the work of the best printer in town. You can also make tables with *Word*, you can even draw your own specific organogramme with arrows and boxes. A typical small NGO could probably execute 95 % of its ordinary computer work with this one programme.

EXCEL: A spreadsheet programme. Mainly used for accounting purposes as it has all kinds of (very sophisticated) calculation functions in it. So *Excel* is great for drawing up budgets, for comparing actual expenditures with budgets, for stock-keeping purposes, for making profitability calculations, for anything maths-related. *Excel* can also produce nice visual charts from the calculations.

If you already have *Excel* on your computer you could try and learn by playing around with a copy of the Mango accounting system spreadsheet provided with this manual. Try this

EXERCISE:

- 1 **Open the Excel file called 'budget.xls'**
- 2 **Select column F by clicking its label 'F' at the top.** All the cells in the column should now be highlighted (meaning they are selected).
- 3 **Go to the Insert menu and select Columns.** A new blank column 'F' should appear. (The data that used to be there automatically shifts to the next column along, 'G').
- 4 **Select cell 'F6' by clicking in it.** Note that the other cells in column 'F' are now no longer selected.
- 5 **Type '% of' and press Return.** Now the text '% of' is in cell F6, and by pressing Return you have moved to cell F7.
- 6 **In cell F7, type 'total cost' and press Return again** (moving to cell F8). You have created a heading for your new column of data, well done!
- 7 **Press Return again to move to cell F9.** We will use a formula to provide the data for this cell – based on a calculation of data from two other cells...
- 8 **Type '=' and then click in cell G9.** The text 'G9' automatically appears after the equals sign; and the cell G9 now has a moving frame.
- 9 **Type '/' and then click in cell G8.** The formula now reads '=G9/G8' (and cell G8 has the moving frame).
- 10 **Press Enter instead of Return this time.** Only cell F9 is selected again and we should have some generated data in it now. However we will need to change the cell format to display the data correctly as a percentage.
- 11 **Go to the Format menu and select 'Cells...'** A window appears (called 'Format Cells').
- 12 **From the tabs at the top, select 'Numbers'; then select 'Percentage' from the Category listing. A box for decimal places appears – set it to '1' and click 'OK'.** If all has worked then we should now be able to see that the Programme Manager represents 18.5% of the total spending on international staff. Let's see how this figure changes if we double the Programme Manager's workload...
- 13 **Click in cell E9, type in '24' and press Enter.** 31.2% of the International staff budget is now being gobbled up by the Programme Manager – correct?.

Of more marginal use are:

POWERPOINT: With this programme you could make up your own professional presentation of your NGO, or your programme, and beam your colourful images onto a wall – top of the modern life! But probably not very feasible for you as the cheapest beamer to connect to your computer would cost you about U\$ 3.000.

If you have an overhead projector, you can make a very decent presentation just by printing out your beautiful PowerPoint pages onto a laserprinter, or a humble inkjet printer. Or you can even use a flip chart.

OUTLOOK: A search programme. It will help you to retrieve a file which you have on your computer but cannot find anymore. Suppose you would like to retrieve the file about your women's cooperative in dress-making, but cannot remember the file name. You simply fill in the word 'dress-making' under the text search and your computer will locate all files which have anything to do with dress-making. Could be handy one day...

Printers as a district resource:

There may be many smaller NGOs in your district. Perhaps you could think of them – some of them at least – as future colleagues and resources who now need help. You could offer to print materials they need, perhaps for the cost of the paper.

Important! Virus protection: IF YOU DECIDE TO OFFER SUCH SERVICES TO COLLEAGUES, ALWAYS CHECK THEIR DISKETTES FOR VIRUSES. When you put the diskette in your computer, do not open anything on it immediately. First open your anti-virus programme and tell it to scan the new diskette. Do not think “we are far out in the bush, new viruses do not come that easily here”.