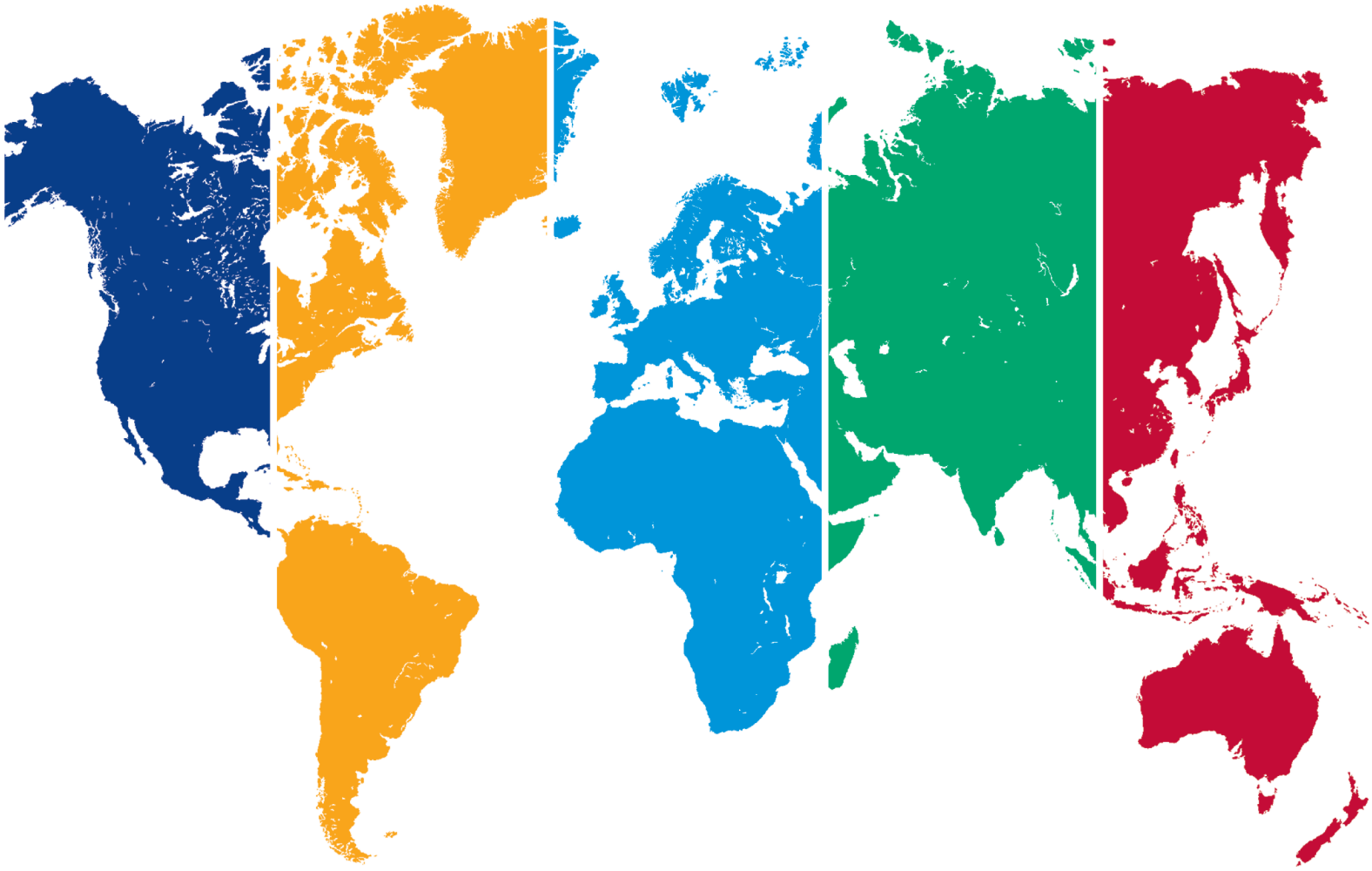
RESOURCE GUIDE FOR NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS

UNDERSTANDING NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS 1



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1.1 What is a national association?

"National associations are formed to fill a gap that might be identified as a collective voice. National policies are not developed or influenced by a single organisation, hence the need for the formation of national associations. The coordination of the sector helps prohibit the government from being able to divide and rule." [1]

Cephas Zinhumwe, *Secretary General of the National Association of NGOs in Zimbabwe*

National associations are country-based membership networks whose *raison d'être* is to represent the collective interests of members and the not-for-profit community more generally.

National associations play a critical part in bringing the sector together. They exist to strengthen the voluntary sector; create or advocate for an enabling environment for civil society; convene the sector; serve the needs of civil society organisations; and advocate on behalf of the sector on specific sector-wide issues. As representatives of the civil society community at a national level, national associations serve as vehicles for a constructive and coordinated voice for civil society. They are well placed to play the role of interlocutor between governments and civil society, and are in a position of strength to influence public policy.

National associations generally play a lead role in addressing issues that have reverberating impact on the sector as a whole (e.g. not-for-profit legislation). In issues that are more specific to a sub-sector (e.g. children's rights), national associations often play more of a facilitating role by providing a forum for members with similar interests to collaborate, and by supporting member initiatives.

National associations are different from other umbrella bodies, in that membership is open to all genuine not-for-profit, or voluntary, organisations in a country. In most countries, there are also more sectorally specific umbrellas, networks or platforms that represent organisations with a particular area of focus, for example, health-focused or education-focused organisations.

1 Information provided during the study previous to this guide. Member of the Affinity Group of National Associations (AGNA).

1.2 Why set up national associations?

There are a number of motivations to establish a national association. Some of these may be related to external challenges or opportunities for the sector; others may be more internal. The catalyst for establishing a national association varies from country to country. It may be civil society leaders responding to favourable conditions, or civil society leaders wishing to protect the sector from external threats; or it may be in response to a request from a donor or government; or some combination of these factors. Some examples include:

External challenges and opportunities

- **The chance to influence new legislation on not-for-profits**
- **A need to defend the reputation of the sector as a whole against negative media stories**
- **An opportunity to create spaces for dialogue between the sector and government**
- **The chance for dialogue with for-profit companies**
- **The opportunity to influence the priorities and methodologies of donors, to make it easier for civil society organisations to apply for funds**

Internal challenges and opportunities

- **Opportunities to exchange experience and expertise, to strengthen the sector's performance**
- **Common learning needs, creating a need for collectively-commissioned training**
- **Need to coordinate efforts and practices in the sector.**

In all of these cases, a key function for a national association is the responsibility for convening the sector: creating the spaces that enable organisations to meet, get to know each other, share information and knowledge and create common agendas.

Regardless of the specific motivation, the goals behind the establishment of a national association are likely to include advancing citizen participation and opening up spaces for civil society engagement. In some countries this is the sole mission, while in other it is linked to other goals such as ending poverty or promoting democratisation.[2]

2. Carrol, Thomas F., Intermediary NGOs: The Supporting Link in Grassroots Development. Kumarian Press, Inc., 1992; L David Brown, Bridging Organisations and Sustainable Development, in Human Relations 44, no 8, 1991; Brown, L David & Archana Kalegaonkar, Support Organisations and the Evolution of the NGO Sector, in Non-Profit & Voluntary Sector Quarterly 31 (2)

INFORMATION BOX:

Rise of National Associations

The first association was set up in 1919 in England, followed in the next few decades by similar associations in other developed countries. The real growth in the sector occurred in the 1980's and 1990's when most of the Affinity Group of National Associations (AGNA) members were established.

A national association is an NGO which builds links among various fields of concern to NGOs and responds to issues which impact on the national voluntary sector as a whole. "These NGOs have been variously termed as "intermediary NGOs," (Carroll, 1992); "bridging organisations" (Brown, 1991), and "support organisations" (Brown & Kalegaonkar, 2002)".

The rise of National Associations is an integral aspect of the more general burgeoning of civil society. "The expansion of civil society can be described as "a growth industry" and a "veritable association revolution underway at the global level that may constitute as significant a social and political development of the latter twentieth century as the rise of the nation state was of the nineteenth century." [1]

CASE STUDY BOX:

Motivation behind the establishment of three national associations

Here we provide three brief case studies that explain the impetus behind the establishment of three different national associations, one set up in response to favourable conditions and two set up in respect to a threat.

Barbados Association of NGOs (BANGO)

The Barbados Association of NGOs (BANGO) process was formally initiated in 1994 despite the idea being mooted in the 1980s. The process was helped by the availability of a building, given by Government to the now defunct Commonwealth Liaison Unit of Barbados (CLUB). CLUB offered a core resource to the BANGO initiators.

This immediately provided NGOs with an address, a telephone number that never changed, a fax number, secretariat and secretarial services and other technical assistance such as the design of logos, letterheads, newsletters, fliers, brochures, call cards and other printed materials, assistance with registration and advocacy. These services were offered by a team of five volunteers.

CASE STUDY BOX CONTINUED:

NGO Federation of Nepal

With the dawn of democracy in 1990 in Nepal NGOs expected policy changes and an enabling environment for the sector. But it did not happen. Instead there were cosmetic changes such as changing the name of the old Social Service National Coordination Council to the Social Welfare Council. Sadly, the rule and regulations stayed the same. In response NGOs organised a two day national convention of the sector in Kathmandu. The convention decided that there was a need to unite to protect the sectors freedom and autonomy. This was the birth of the NGO Federation of Nepal, an umbrella organisation of all NGOs of Nepal. The association started with 40 members and now has 3400 NGO members with district committee in all 75 districts of Nepal.

Pakistan NGOs Forum

In 1994, the government of Pakistan introduced restrictive legislation aimed at regulating the activities of NGO and increasing government control over NGOs' funding, activities and operations. In response collaborative efforts among CBOs and NGOs emerged. Civil society leaders across the country mobilised their own constituencies to prevent the passage of restrictive legislation. Not only were they successful in their initial aim, but they also capitalised on the network created for the purpose of circumventing government control to develop a permanent national association with the mission of defending the interest of civil society and of bringing greater credibility and effectiveness to Pakistan's voluntary sector. PNF is an Apex body of Five Networks of NGOs working in Pakistan and currently counts with a membership of more than 5,000 CBOs and NGOs.

1.3 Benefits of a national association

A national association benefits the whole civil society sector through some of its activities, and this can help non-members as well as members. There are also specific benefits of being a member of the national association and the organisers of the association must ensure that the benefits to members are strong enough for them to want to be part of the group; a large membership base then provides the legitimacy to deliver benefits to the whole sector.

National associations benefit the whole voluntary or non-profit sector by:

Convening the sector

- **Creating the spaces in which organisations can work out their common ground and interdependent needs**
- **Facilitating regular communication between members, and orchestrating opportunities for face-to-face discussions and collaboration**
- **Creating networking opportunities that enable organisations working in the same field or on related causes to collaborate and launch joint actions.**

Uniting the voice of the sector

- **Strengthening the message of CSOs by providing a collective voice which is more likely to be heard and acknowledged as legitimate by others, particularly decision makers**
- **Providing a powerful avenue for a stronger, more cohesive and more credible voice for civil society**
- **Providing a platform to consider and develop viable alternatives for policy makers, and to create greater opportunities to influence government and public policy**
- **Helping to raise and maintain the profile and legitimacy of the non-profit sector**
- **Acting as interlocutors between civil society and other sectors, and helping to link the non-profit sector with key institutions**
- **Defending the interests of civil society against oppressive regulations, coordinating a more effective response to external threats.**
- **Protecting and strengthening the rights and independence of NGOs and NPOs**
- **Serving as platforms to collectively monitor developments that affect the sector.**
- **Enabling collective engagement with donors, to ensure donors understand the priorities and needs of civil society organisations, and to negotiate application and reporting procedures that are transparent, sufficiently rigorous for the donor, but easy and cost-effective for organisations.**

Enhancing the quality of the sector's contribution to society

- Generating knowledge, and facilitating the exchange of helpful tools, frame works and guidelines to strengthen the work of member organisations
- Supporting members in important areas such as fundraising, programme development, human resources, etc.
- Helping members and the sector at large by identifying and fostering best practices.
- Affording their members the capacity building expertise.
- Serving the sector by undertaking action research that aims to improve civil society organisations' individual and collective impacts.
- Helping to build the capacity of civil society, and promoting citizen participation in improving in communities by sharing skills, knowledge and information.
- Providing a vehicle for self-regulation to both foster good practices and monitor the sector.

Reducing the overall costs of the sector

- Providing CSOs with financial benefits such as discounts for services or products (e.g. conferences, training courses and publications).
- Channelling of resources more effectively through collective efforts.

An individual organisation can benefit from membership of the national association by:

Making use of the national association's convening role

- Participating in forums and meetings, and having the opportunity to meet other organisations with common interests
- Staying up to date with information on and from the sector
- Amplifying the voice of its sub-sector (e.g. child rights NGOs) by working with others under the umbrella of the national association
- Participating in the sector's interaction with donors, so that it can target funding applications effectively and be knowledgeable about donors' application and reporting requirements.

Improving its own effectiveness

- Participating in collective training courses
- Meeting, and learning from the skills and knowledge of, others in the sector
- Building its own advocacy skills by participating in collective advocacy efforts of the national association
- Striving to attain standards collectively set by the sector

Reducing costs

- Benefitting from collectively negotiated discounts for services and products
- Sharing training costs with other members, through the collective training provided by the national association.

National associations are often considered resource-efficient and capable of achieving greater impact for the benefit of the sector than individual CSOs. However, this can set up competition for donors' funds between a national association and its own members. In most circumstances, members will permit their national association to approach these donors for funds only if they can see real benefits to themselves from the national association's resourcing.

Finally, a country benefits from a national association. A robust country requires a strong civil society as well as a strong state, each holding the other accountable and balancing power to prevent any abuse. National associations have an important role to play in helping to strengthen the civil society component of any given national context. For example:

CASE STUDY BOX:

An example of the benefits of a national association, Pakistan NGOs Forum

Pakistan NGOs Forum has provided several benefits to members. It has linked members with donors, built the capacity of the sector through training, raised awareness of violations and most importantly successfully lobbied for the scrapping of a proposed Government crafted NGO Code of Conduct.

UK context

The UK has the oldest established national associations. The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) was established in 1919 at the close of the First World War to develop a more inclusive approach to social services at a time of great social change in Europe. Subsequently, during the challenging years of the 1930s and 1940s, separate associations were established in Wales (Wales Council for Voluntary Action, WCVA), 1934; Northern Ireland (Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action, NICVA), 1938; and Scotland (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations, SCVO), 1943.

These 'sister' councils have expanded their services over the years and lobby for the ongoing and expanded recognition of the sector. They provide members with regular access to decision makers, opportunities to participate in campaigns, latest information on changes in legislation and funding, as well as training and support on themes like fundraising, good governance, impact measurement and recruitment. The strategy has been to provide a broad range of services to meet many different members' needs.