

Title:

Identifying key training needs for leaders of Civil Society Organizations operating in local development

Abstract:

In Argentina, as in other developing countries, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) or Non-profit Organizations (NPOs) often have certain institutional weaknesses that undermine the effective implementation of their missions. This problem is accentuated when it comes to small organizations that operate locally (in their neighbourhoods), since they tend to be staffed by highly motivated volunteers who are not adequately prepared for many of the tasks they face. To fill these gaps, these leaders should receive adequate training, but the question arises: ¿how to choose the topics that should be transmitted? Precisely because of the gratuity of their work, it usually elapses in the limited free time that each one has. This shortage of time, coupled with the large differences in prior individual knowledge, creates a highly heterogeneous group of students, with a high demand for training needs but at the same time the requirement for them to be very practical and expeditious.

This paper seeks to identify key training needs and reflect on questions such as: What must a social leader know?, How to choose the priority issues?, How do we teach it, and what duration and intensity should be involved in the educational process?, How do we evaluate this learning?, etc.

These questions are useful, not only in Argentina, but also in other developing countries.

For this study, we have interviewed a significant number of participants in various training instances (both onsite and online, in over twenty countries), to try to unify needs and achieve effective curriculum design. The study of the learners themselves as a source of educational objectives seeks to determine what changes should be aimed for to achieve their formation.

The analysis of the needs of these students has allowed the identification of those considered as paramount: institutional fragility, insufficient funding, deficiencies in internal and external communication and lack of human resources.

Key words:

Civil Society Organizations (CSOs); Non-profit Organizations (NPOs); training needs; educational objectives; curriculum design.

Author:

Prof. Stephen Beaumont

Centro de Tecnología para el Desarrollo (CENTED)

Debenedetti 602 1°18, La Lucila (1636) Buenos Aires, Argentina

+ 54 11 4711-0334

info@cened.org.ar

www.cened.org.ar

Introduction

Since 2003, the “Centro de Tecnología para el Desarrollo (CENTED)” / Centre for Development of Technology (CENTED) works to promote the development of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) or Non-profit Organizations (NPOs) through training and education of its leaders. In 2008, when we conducted the first survey throughout more than 200 organizations from 15 Latin American countries, we found that although training needs and the development of professional competences are similar, this is not sufficient by itself to identify specifically the curricular content these leaders need. (Beaumont, 2009)

Starting from the identification of key institutional weaknesses that small, locally operating CSOs present, the need arises to achieve an adequate professionalism of the members of these organizations so that, in this way, they achieve greater effectiveness and efficiency in the conduction of their respective entities; since frequently they find themselves in situations which demand greater knowledge than they actually possess. We need to inform the members of the organizations about which instances, basic procedures and responsibilities the conduction of these organizations involve, ever since its constitution through its regular operation over time. But above all **this training should aim to awaken new ideas, create spaces for reflection and revitalize motivation.**

Clearly there is a need, mainly dissatisfied, to gain knowledge on the part of those who are involved in activities of social organizations. However, supply is scarce and exclusive (extensive college studies, expensive seminars.). The reality is that the vast majority of these people want practical training that is accessible and applicable; they want practical solutions to specific problems.

This raises the key factor in any successful curriculum training: the didactic design. Choosing the appropriate content, structuring them properly and effectively communicating them, forms the basis upon which we can implement a successful learning process.

It is important to note that, when assessing academic offerings, we must take into account three factors that those who are responsible of this particular training must possess. In the first place, the prospective teachers should have extensive theoretical knowledge on CSOs and all aspects involved in their management. In the second place, they should possess adequate experience working with these organizations. The theory and practice complement each other and further enhance their impact. Finally, these two aspects must be supported on the basis of educational experiences, both theoretical and practical, that allows knowledge to be transmitted efficiently. We must remember that there is no teaching if there is no learning.

The educational process

In practice, most leaders of CSOs (members of boards of directors, committees, or the equivalent nomenclature in each country) are people who have no specific training in CSOs and have a very limited time to work therein. In this context, we are constantly reflecting on questions such as: What should a social leader know and what would be convenient for them to know?, How do we choose the priority issues?, In what way should they be taught?, What duration and intensity must the education process have?, How do we evaluate the outcome of this learning?, etc.

Given these concerns, both from the point of view of the teacher as from the student, there is a need to analyze the entire educational process and identify the critical components that not only should not be absent, but must be optimized to achieve greater efficiency and effectiveness thereof. Education is a process of systematically and intentionally directed communication toward achieving goals previously set or adjusted on the fly and whose essential components are: the person who must be educated, the educator, the message, the educational environment and the numerous interactions between these different factors. (De Ketele, 1984)

To plan a **teaching program**, the first thing we have to be clear about is their objective, which defines the criteria used to select the material, design the program content, the teaching procedures and the development of tests and examinations. The questions that arise are basically: Where do these objectives come from?, How do we set them?, What are the sources we use to define these objectives? Tyler argues that "there is no single

source, but each one has certain values and all of them must be considered when designing a comprehensive educational program." (Tyler, 1974)

Tyler considers the following sources:

1) Study of the learners themselves as a source of educational objectives

The study of the learners themselves seeks to determine which changes in their conduct should the educational institution aim to achieve. This observation of the learners themselves indicates educational goals only if we compare the data obtained with desirable levels allowing the difference between the student's current condition and the desirable one. This gap between reality and aspiration is often called necessity. The study of the needs of a particular group of students will cover identification of those which have not been met, as well as the identification of the role of the educational institution in this regard. This argument sustains that the everyday environment of learners provides, generally, a considerable part of their education, so it is unnecessary that the educational institution cares about these educational experiences that have been already properly achieved. In other words, the work of educational institutions should focus on the weaknesses and gaps that appear in the current training of students. Another way to know the characteristics of the potential students is researching their interests. The progressive education theory is that the fundamental basis of the objectives focuses on the student's own interests, which should first be identified and then serve as the centre of attention of educators.

2) Study of contemporary way of life

There are two arguments in favour of the analysis of contemporary life as a source of suggestions of educational objectives. The first one sustains that, as contemporary life is extremely changing and complex, the effort must focus on the most important educational aspects, so as to avoid wasting the time of students on things that are not currently valid. The second argument is based on training flexibility. Studies on the application of training indicates that there are more chances of the student applying the teachings if he recognizes certain similarity between the situations of contemporary life and those which are intended to be taught to him.

3) The specialists in each subject suggest objectives

Taking into account the textbooks written by specialists in each subject, as well as the curriculums prepared by groups of various educational institutions, an approximation can be inferred about the goals that educational institutions should strive to meet. Suggestions about targets in these three cited sources provide more material than any educational institution could include in any program. Hence, some are incompatible with the rest, so it is necessary to select a limited number of important and consistent purposes. "An educational program cannot be efficient if it pretends so much that it ultimately accomplishes nothing." (Tyler, 1974)

The curricular design

As a result of the above steps, one can select a list of important and achievable goals, which, as they come from various sources, may be stated in different ways. When planning a single list of important objectives, it is convenient to list them in ways that are useful to be able to select learning activities and also guide these. Since the real purpose of education is not that the instructor performs certain tasks, but instead to promote significant changes in patterns of student behaviour, it is important to recognize that every statement of objectives will be related to the changes experienced by the students.

Meanwhile, Stenhouse argues that there are two ways to view the curriculum, the first one is to consider it as an intention, plan, or limitation on what we want to happen; the other idea is to see it as the state of things that really happen. Therefore, he clarifies that the study of the curriculum must be concerned with the relationship between the intention that this curriculum actually has and the reality of its implementation. After all, the curriculum is what happens in real situations. It is not the hope, but the achievement. The problem when one specifies it is to accurately perceive, understand and describe what actually happens. The curriculum is an attempt to communicate the principles and features of an educational purpose in a way that it remains open to critical discussion and can be effectively implemented. (Stenhouse, 1987)

The curriculum should, at least, provide the basis for planning a course, study it and justify it empirically. The most important principles that must be respected are:

- Selection of content: what should be taught and learned.
- Development of a teaching strategy: how must this be taught and learned.
- Decision-making on the sequence of events.
- Diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses of each student and their possibility to adjust to various cases.
- Study and evaluation of progress of both students and teachers.

The central problem of any curriculum project is that of content and, in a more general sense, knowledge. The **didactic transposition** is the adaptive transformation process (whether it involves distortion, substitution or creation of knowledge) by which scholarly knowledge constitutes itself in the knowledge or object to be taught and, in turn, knowledge or object actually taught. (Poggi, 1990)

Chevallard states that any social teaching and learning project is built dialectically by means of the identification and designation of contents. A content knowledge that has been designated as knowledge to be taught, then suffers a set of changes that will make it suitable to occupy a place among the objects of education. (Chevallard, 1997)

The experts who develop a curriculum become the mediators between scholarly knowledge and knowledge to be taught. Thus the curriculum becomes a bridge between theory and action, even more so if it allows freedom to both teachers and students.

Teaching Strategies

Having selected the content, one must also choose appropriate teaching strategies to achieve the desired goal. Designing teaching situations takes into account the assumptions concerning both teaching and learning. According to Fenstermacher and Soltis, there are three approaches to teaching, regarding how the teacher is conceived:

- The executive approach sees the teacher as an executor, a person responsible for producing some learning, and to achieve this uses the best skills and techniques available.

-The therapist's approach sees the teacher as an empathic person responsible for helping each individual in their personal growth and achieving a high level of assertiveness, understanding and acceptance.

-The liberating approach sees the teacher as a liberator of the individual's mind and a promoter of moral, rational and integral human beings. (Fenstermacher y Soltis, 1999)

According to Bruner, students can be classified as:

-Imitative apprentice: The students aim to achieve specific goals by steps or procedures.

-Didactic exposure apprentice: The student constitutes himself as a receptacle of knowledge.

-Thinker apprentice: There are exchanges among peers and the student expresses previous knowledge, but without theoretical support.

-Apprentice as objective knower: The student performs exchange, but with theoretical support (he must give valid theoretical arguments).

The way to propose the class depends on how the learner is considered, according to the content, the student group and the moment. The concepts of learner are dynamic and complementary, not exclusive. (Bruner, 1997)

In defining and prioritizing certain facets of a topic and providing those meanings to be promoted, the teacher anticipates the general context in which this process will develop, plans sequences of work, studies different ways to combine tasks, etc. This outline is precisely the adoption of a strategy: a plan that allows us to attain predefined goals. Stenhouse defines this plan by saying: "Teaching strategy seems to refer more to the planning of teaching and learning based on principles and give greater importance to teacher judgement. It involves the development and implementation of a course of conduct." (Stenhouse, 1987)

Having established these theoretical considerations; we must first identify which areas present the greatest institutional weaknesses within CSOs, so as to later set educational goals.

Major weaknesses of the Civil Society Organizations

Based on regular studies undertaken by the “Centro de Tecnología para el Desarrollo (CENTED)” / Centre for Development of Technology (CENTED) among its students, alumni and the general public who approach the organization, interested in obtaining training or education, we have determined the main weaknesses presented by CSOs which operate locally (mainly in their own neighbourhoods). These problems have been individualized based on empirical research and have also been widely recognized by the organizations consulted. Grouping them by subject area, we mainly find:

1 - Institutional Fragility

Lack of specific training in governance and managerial responsibilities:

Everyday activities such as convening an Assembly (and getting a significant percentage of associates to attend), or representing the interests of the organization before a Government organization, require technical knowledge and skills that not everyone possesses at the time that they join a CSO. There are many issues that are virtually unique to CSOs, and even though these people may be highly experienced in other sectors (such as commercial companies or Government departments), this does not enable them to make the best decisions simply based on the analogy with previously known situations. This is particularly true in the case of voluntary personnel, such as Board Members. This situation often differs in the case of larger organizations which operate with paid, professional staff, for example no one would hire an Executive Director who does not have the appropriate expertise for the job position.

Lack of technical knowledge of administrative and accounting topics:

Similarly, there are many specific issues for CSOs in the areas of administration and finance. These skills neither are obtained spontaneously, when assuming a position on the Governing Board, but must be learned in some determinate context. The problem is this knowledge is usually transmitted from more senior members to just newcomers, and this, by itself, does not guarantee that they are at all accurate. Unlike examples of ancient tribal knowledge, containing wisdom and traditions of generations, management, accounting and legal skills quickly become obsolete, due to the speed of change in today's world.

Lack of efficient information systems:

In general, there is a very low level of implementation of information technology administrative systems in small and medium organizations. Information technology is generally limited to word processors and spreadsheets, but these organizations lack specific software. One reason is the lack of standardized systems for these organizations and on the other hand, custom designed software exceeds most budgets of small CSOs.

2 - Insufficient and discontinuous funding**Lack of financial planning:**

The first problem that many CSOs face when they begin to operate is that they have not foreseen a funding model to ensure their sustainability. Most organizations are born as a solution to a particular problem or social need, identified by its founders. These founders often focus their efforts on devising possible ways of solving these problems but, too often, do not perform an objective evaluation of their real possibilities of obtaining the necessary financing. Instead, they tend to rely on their good intentions and selfless dedication and believe that this, somehow, will attract the necessary resources. Another problem related to funding occurs in organizations which are sustained, in their initial phase, by the economic contribution of their founders. Unfortunately, this model is not sustainable over time as, unless the founders have an unlimited economic capacity, at some point the growth and needs of the organization grow beyond their ability to respond to these needs. In addition there is a significant lack of formal financial planning. In most cases, no assumptions are made about future fiscal periods (this is often justified by the discontinuity of revenues).

Discontinuous funding:

CSOs usually base their funding from various sources, which in turn have very different economic cycles. For example, membership fees, which often constitute (individually) small amounts, have the advantage of being a relatively regular income. At the other extreme, for example, a state grant can represent a sizable income but the process from application to obtaining it can be extremely extensive. For reasons like this, CSOs often have intermittent income, alternating between bad months and some very good ones. This invariably makes proper financial planning more difficult, but by no means should it be a reason not to go ahead with it. There are many organizations that rely on

discontinuous income but even so are also well planned financially, for example those who base a significant portion of their funding on particular annual fundraising events.

Increased number of Civil Society Organizations:

The significant growth of the third sector that has occurred in recent years has a direct consequence that affects the economics of CSOs: today there is more competition for resources. No matter where they come from, these resources are always limited. Let's imagine a City Hall who has \$ 100,000 which it can assign for child nutrition programs, which are distributed among the 10 existing organizations according to some given criteria (which is irrelevant). If at any time you create five other organizations and they approach the City Hall to request financial assistance, it is likely that this will affect the amounts of the subsidies that the other organizations receive, as hardly City Halls can increase their budgets indefinitely, solely based on the amount of organizations that are created.

Difficulty in calls for submissions to grants:

Often national and international calls for funding of social projects involve presenting considerable documentation which involves a great amount of effort in quite scarce time spans. The complexity of the application forms often requires a lot of additional documentation which organizations do not always have ready in the appropriate time and form. CSOs without experience in this kind of calls sometimes see this as an insurmountable obstacle and this makes them desist from presenting their projects.

Donor interests that do not match the needs of the organizations:

Very often, the missions of certain organizations fail to attract the same response from donors than others. There are a lot of causes that influence donor preferences: personal convictions regarding some specific issues, specific knowledge of any social conflict, information received by media, issues that are "fashionable," and even the mere chance of receiving a request at the right time, etc. Unfortunately, beyond effective image campaigns and corporate communications, organizations can not influence the interests of donors. They will be the ones that will decide whether to support a particular cause or another. This sometimes creates the illusion that there are low levels of donations when instead what is occurring is that these may simply be diverted to other purposes, or even to other similar organizations.

3 - Deficiencies in internal and external communication

The various members of the organization seem to have very different objectives:

Internal communication is a critical factor in the success of any type of organization; however, it is quite neglected in many CSOs. There is a tendency to assume that all members are pursuing the same institutional goals and, while the intention of the people may be precisely that, there is no guarantee that the interpretation of these objectives is coincident between all the parties involved. Given that CSOs boards are voluntary commitments and are independent of the occupation of each member, the time that these people can dedicate to these boards is, in the best case, limited. Consider, for example, a small company where the majority of its members, from the President to the guard at the entrance gate, share the same physical space for a minimum of 8 hours per day for 5 days a week. How often does a CSO board meet?

CSOs do not get the media to publicize their activities:

Despite sending information to the media on several occasions, it does not get published. This is a common statement by many organizations. But seldom do they stop to wonder why? There are many factors that affect the successful drafting of statements or press releases and in many cases these are not taken into account by the organizations.

4 - Lack of human resources

Decrease in the number of members:

Many CSOs are mainly based on their members, both to fulfill their social purpose and for funding (clubs, commerce chambers, etc.), but unfortunately they fail to associate the amount they would wish, or even worse, the amount that they have had in the past. It is very common to hear the former Board members of some clubs talking about the “golden ages” when the institution was overflowing with people and it was an important reference in the neighbourhood.

Low levels of volunteer recruiting:

Sometimes certain CSOs have the need to incorporate volunteers but are unable to attract suitable candidates.

Professional management: the gap between the profile sought and compensation that can effectively be paid:

Because of the limitations inherent in the forms of governance in CSOs, such as insufficient time, lack of technical skills, etc., as have been described before, these organizations are virtually forced to hire paid professional staff. The problem is that for many organizations, the monthly expense this would cause is not within their possibilities.

5 - Lack of planning in medium and long terms

In many cases, a strategic plan doesn't even exist:

No commercial enterprise subsists without planning. Obviously the complexity of this planning will be directly linked to organizational complexity, but nevertheless it will be a complete business plan that will guide the decisions of major importance in the company. CSOs, however, do not rely on formal and explicit planning. Too many issues are assumed by inertia, or simply because "this is the way things were always done here." They lack instances of introspection and reflection on their own organization, so as to examine what is being done and if this truly is leading to the organizations goals. For an organization to be able to have clear and realistic objectives, it must have a clear definition of its mission and purpose. This is the basis of strategy: plans and setting priorities. In fact, the entire structure of the organization subordinates itself to strategy and this must be present at all levels of the organization and in all of the decisions of its members. Strategy will determine the essential activities that must be carried out to be able to accomplish its mission and purpose of existence.

Conclusions: Skills to be developed to achieve institutional growth of Civil Society Organizations

Having individualized major common weaknesses in the various CSOs, we can start designing a successful educational process. It is very difficult to determine an order of priorities for the various problems, as there are significant variations between individual

organizations. However, the order is not mandatory and we see that improvement in one area usually produces an effect that unlocks many other problems. Following all identified weaknesses and areas requiring further development, presented above, an effective curriculum should contain at least the following objectives:

1 - Institutional Fragility

- Improve management and technical skills of directors of the organizations (decision making, leadership, etc.).
- Training in basic Management and Accounting issues, at least for some members of the Governing Board.
- Implement strategies to optimize the time of managers (for example Board meetings).
- Training in the use of information technology (IT) resources that facilitate the administrative work.

2 - Insufficient and discontinuous funding

- Build capacities to achieve financial stability for CSOs.
- Analyze the productive circuit of each organization and consider possible improvements.
- Examine the various funding models: Key features of each (pros and cons) and which are applicable to each type of organization.
- Examine the various sources of funding to improve fundraising.
- Provide training in Design, Implementation and Evaluation of Social Programs: How to structure an idea into a project.
- Integrate the concept of Corporate Social Responsibility to supplement funding.

3 - Deficiencies in internal and external communication

- Work on the image as this is the main asset of the organization.
- Strengthen Institutional Communication
- Provide specific training in areas of Press and Public Relations: aim to achieve lasting ties with media, from local ones to national ones.
- Gain knowledge of Marketing for CSOs.

- Attain greater visibility to organizations: strengthening the communication channels that provide information on their activities (websites, newsletters, etc.).
- Establish better practices of transparency and accountability through self-regulation mechanisms that enhance the positive image of the organization.
- Consider ways to improve communication exchange between organizations (networks, federations, etc.), so as to spread information about the actions and impact of the organizations as a whole.

4 - Lack of human resources

- Promote citizen participation at the local level (members, volunteers, etc.).
- Train leaders in Human Resources Management.
- Analyze various forms of association (volunteering, internships, CSR programs, etc.).

5 - Lack of planning in medium and long terms

- Train members of the Governing Body in Strategic Planning issues.
- Analyze the Mission, Vision and Values, and introduce possible improvements. Set objectives and targets.
- Reflect on organizational capabilities (strengths and weaknesses).
- Analyze production cycles of products or services and compare them to those of the competition.
- Create mechanisms to promote institutional development.

Bibliography

- Beaumont, Stephen. 2009. "La formación de los dirigentes de las Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil: la importancia fundamental del diseño curricular." - VII Conferencia Regional de América Latina y El Caribe de la ISTR. Tecnológico de Monterrey, México.
- Bruner, J. 1997. "La educación, puerta de la cultura." Madrid, Visor. Cap.2.
- Chevallard, Y. 1997. "La transposición didáctica." Aique.
- De Ketele, J. M. 1984 "Observar para educar." Visor.
- Fenstermacher, G. y Soltis, J. 1999. "Enfoques de la enseñanza." Amorrortu, B. Aires."

- Poggi, M. 1990 “Sobre la teoría curricular y la transposición didáctica.”
- Stenhouse, L. 1987. “Investigación y desarrollo del curriculum.” Morata.
- Tyler, R. 1974. “Principios para la elaboración del currículo.” Troquel.