

Case Study

Aspect

Connecting the
UK NGO sector

2021





Venture

NGO Explorer



Social science discipline

Urban Development



Aspect Members

University of Manchester
and the University of
Sheffield



Sector

Third Sector



Route-to-market

Research collaboration

A website is enabling users to search for UK-based development charities across the world and enabling the building of networks for smaller NGOs and reducing inequalities in the sector

The development Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) sector has grown enormously since the 1980s. Many NGOs have strong roles to play in the UK and across the world but the data on the number and diversity of these organisations, was up until recently, non-existing. For existing NGOs, who seek data on their counterparts in the UK or the developing countries they are working in, it can be difficult to access data from the Charity Commission records. This reduces the opportunity for collaborative working across the sector.





Found 17,383 UK NGOs working in all countries

Figures refer to charities registered with the Charity Commission for England and Wales, based on areas of operation supplied to the Charity Commission by the charities themselves. Charities that say they work in more than 50 countries are not included. Total spending of these organisations includes work they carry out outside of all countries.

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Researchers from the University of Sheffield and University of Manchester decided to tackle this challenge. Professor Dan Brockington of the University of Sheffield and Dr Nicola Banks of The University of Manchester set out to map and understand the UK's development sector through extensive research of data available in the public domain, on the NGO sector. Their research produced new insights that show a sector that grew consistently, both in terms of income and number of organisations, from 2005 - 2015.

After talking the findings through with smaller development charities, many of whom are based outside of London, Dan and Nicola recognised the need for a simple tool that would enable charities to find each other more easily. They built a website, NGO Explorer,

which would provide records on the sector plus be an effective connecting and networking tool.

The simple, accessible and powerful tool enables users to:

- Search for UK-based development charities by their location in the UK or overseas.
- Filter organisations by their size and activity of charities.
- Access information in an easy-to-read dashboard, which can also be downloaded.

The site is based on Charity Commission data for England and Wales, made accessible and kept updated via Charity Base, created by Dan Kwiatkowski. The difficulty on finding this data made the researchers realise why nobody had ever done it

for this sector before and was a much bigger project than first anticipated.

The researchers' backgrounds in social science research played a vital part, whilst using quantitative methodologies to collect the data, they deployed qualitative methods in the testing of the website. They engaged heavily with NGOs, via focus groups to test the site, to discover deep insight into what NGOs would use the website for, and test the functionality and user friendliness. The anticipation is that NGO explorer will drive social impact and be used as a spring-board for contacts, interactions and exchange in the sector. This move to connection adds to the broader ecosystem of networking activities and organisations, which ultimately provides new ways for international NGOs to collaborate and coordinate.



We know that the development sector acts quite differently from civil society as a whole, so it's important we know more about it. With 90% of development expenditure concentrated amongst just 8% of large organisations in the sector, we're excited to help to connect smaller organisations.



Dr Nicola Banks

The impact

- The research has revealed significant new insight into the sector. It has discovered that there are over 17,000 organisations in England and Wales and approximately 6,666 organisations that work internationally.
- The NGO explorer tool had enabled NGOs to come together and find people working in similar areas – whether that's countries or themes eg. Water management, feminine hygiene projects.
- Many Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) policies encourage NGOs to work collaboratively and in partnership. The tool is supporting enabling more collaboration and partnership working, as NGOs can now find counterparts in similar countries doing similar projects and drive opportunities for working together.
- The research has revealed that there are thousands of smaller NGOs working on very small incomes. This insight had provided very valuable for the UK Government, who have up until recently been financially contributing into NGOs as foreign aid – this new evidence on the size and diversity of the sector will play a part in reducing inequalities in opportunities for funding and improving civil society policies.
- One NGO which is working to eradicate orphanages, rehome orphans, found the tool useful in finding UK NGOs to work together on finding better alternatives to orphanages – this will have impact on getting a stronger collaboration on driving new policies in this area.



Key learnings



The NGO Explorer project was funded by the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account, the Global Challenges Research Fund and supported by internal funding from both the Universities of Sheffield and Manchester.

Nicola credits the ESRC Impact Acceleration Account in particular, who had placed a funding call for research in the NGO sector. The researchers also received support from the relevant research teams and professional staff in their respective Universities for guiding them during the funding application processes. Nicola states

that Universities are really supporting impact and providing support on helping academics take their research further than publishing and driving real impact in society as a result.

Some key advice:

- People who manage impact in school/depts are always keen to hear new things and if ideas or in progress, go and talk to them about your research ideas and they will advise you on the routes and funding mechanisms available to help you take it further.

- Don't be afraid or hesitant to go beyond your research – explore the ways in which you can make it more accessible beyond the world of academia – it can be daunting and expensive but you gain personal satisfaction seeing the real impact of your work in wider society plus there are lots of funding posts available to help seed research and turn it into practice.
- Looking beyond your initial research can bring real insight into another sector which can teach you new things too – helping others in other sectors is really important.

What's next for NGO Explorer?



The researchers are currently working on 'Reimagining the international NGO' which has been started by social change organisation 'Rights Collab' and has brought 50 diverse people across the world engaged in various sectors. Niki will be the only academic on it and will be working with people who have worked for global NGOs, donor agencies etc. The project will explore how to improve international aid systems and make it more equitable across the sector. Currently, larger and international NGOs are driving the sector and instructing partners on what they need to do and how to do it. However, smaller NGOs don't have the funding to make the same changes as the larger NGOs. This project will try to make more collaborative/working together and build a community.

Additionally, the team are working on NGO Connector – taking NGO Explorer to the next level, the connector will provide local NGOs with access to information on funding, enabling them to access funds which are usually limited. The connector will also enhance partnership building between international and local NGOs.

Background Information



Dr Nicola Banks



Role

Lecturer in Urban Development



Degree

Niki's PhD at IDPM explored the ways in which employment can facilitate escape from poverty in urban Bangladesh. Using employment (in particular, access to employment) as a lens highlights vividly that we must understand urban poverty's political roots, as well as its economic and physical dimensions. She then spent a year living and working in Uganda as Head of BRAC's Research and Evaluation Unit where she managed the NGO's research portfolio in Uganda, Tanzania and South Sudan. She has also lived and worked in Uganda as Head of BRAC's Research and Evaluation Unit where she managed the NGO's research portfolio in Uganda, Tanzania and South Sudan.



Contact

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Background Information



Prof. Dan Brockington



Role

Co-Director of SIID,
Theme Lead: Natural Resources
and Rural Livelihoods



Degree

Dan is Director of SIID, previously Professor of Conservation and Development at the University of Manchester. He trained as an anthropologist at UCL, where he wrote his PhD under Kathy Homewood's supervision, and then worked at the Geography Departments of the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford before moving to Manchester and Sheffield respectively. His broader interests include work on global overviews of the social impacts of protected areas, media and conservation and continental-wide examinations of the work of conservation NGOs in sub-Saharan Africa. Most recently he has worked

on celebrity and development, based largely on work in the UK. He is happiest conducting long term field research in remote areas of East Africa but also learns much from studying organisations and the occasional plush fundraising event.



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Aspect

Transforming Society Through
Social Science Innovation

Aspect (A Social sciences Platform for Entrepreneurship, Commercialisation and Transformation) is a network for organisations looking to make the most of commercial and business opportunities from social sciences research.

Supported by Research England's Connecting Capability Fund, Aspect members sit at the epicentre of discovery, imagination and progress in the social sciences. We draw together pioneering academics with innovative industry leaders to tackle the most complex societal challenges of our time.



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