**Alumni/DFID lunchtime seminar on working with NGOs. 13 October 2017**

Alumni and DFID met on 13 October to share perspectives from former DFID staff working in international NGOs and to explore how constructive dialogue between former and current DFID staff on civil society issues could be strengthened.

 Issues were raised on how government development policies were seen from the angle on international civil society, how NGOs can influence government policies when they benefit from government funding and what the experience was of aid delivery and of the role of private contractors.

Reflections by Tamsyn Barton (BOND), Howard Taylor (ex Nike/Girl Effect), Laurie Lee (CARE), Sam Sharpe (SCF), Ian Shapiro (Crown Agents) and Gerard Howe (Head of Inclusive Societies Dept, DFID) were followed by a lively and well-attended discussion.

The seminar discussed the challenges faced by the NGO sector and the feeling of being under siege, trusted less, more regulated and less able to lobby. The need to reset the tone between funder and implementer was emphasised, based more on trust and partnership and on the recognition of what NGOs could offer in terms of local knowledge, expertise and readiness to work in very difficult areas excluded for the purposes of normal official aid dialogue.

The importance of compliance and due diligence was recognised and accepted, but this needed to be balanced by an assessment of risks and opportunities. Payment by results made sense for regular and well-tested interventions, but undermined efforts to promote innovation and risk-taking.

There was a need to harmonise donor practices in relation to NGOs, particularly for the audit of NGO activities. The example of an NGO in Africa having to handle over 100 internal and external audits in a six-month period was quoted. Endless audits required by different donors put an enormous strain on the resources of NGOs, even large ones. An ISO type standard ought to be developed.

In developing new types of entrepreneurial initiative, there were lessons to be drawn from experience about pro-active communication, managing expectations from the start, recognising the different culture of start-up enterprises and looking for measures of success beyond the logframe.

The challenges of managing an NGO business as a strategic supplier for DFID were discussed, including the management costs of fragmented support and how to cover the overheads and working capital that institutional donors were not ready to finance.

The particular challenges face by small NGOs was mentioned, including the need for proportional systems of scrutiny.

The seminar provided a frank exchange of views on how to balance the political realities and sensitivities of support for civil society with the desire to achieve the best impact on development outcomes. The value of tapping the experience both of DFID staff moving to the NGO sector and NGO staff coming to DFID was recognised. There was a readiness to explore how the alumni framework could provide an additional channel for regular dialogue on NGO issues with DFID, building on the issues raised in the seminar. We will be exploring with DFID how best to do this.

Simon Ray

7 November 2017