



Navigating Challenges: The Difficulties Faced by Rural NGOs in Empowering Orphaned Children in Zimbabwe

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A B S T R A C T

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as pivotal actors in social welfare delivery across developing countries owing to state capacity gaps. However, NGOs often struggle to achieve the intended benefits and long-term impacts, especially in rural community settings. This study aimed to investigate the organizational and environmental challenges experienced by NGOs in implementing programs for orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs) in Zimbabwe. It focused on an NGO serving over 3,500 OVCs through educational, health, and psychosocial support initiatives in Masvingo province since 2003. Despite its benevolent goals, its efforts were hampered by myriad constraints. A qualitative case study approach was employed, involving interviews with five key personnel, two focus groups with field volunteers and area supervisors, a survey of 28 beneficiaries, and document review. The results showed that there were severe shortages of professionally trained staff who could work in rural areas, severe funding limitations due to limited church grants, unreliable data on target OVCs that made planning and monitoring more difficult, random government hostility through suspensions and too much red tape, and a strong dependence on beneficiaries. While aligning with scholarly critiques of NGO limitations, findings also highlighted the NGO's enduring relevance from proximity to the grassroots. To enhance organizational effectiveness, priorities include capacity building, donor diversification, low-cost monitoring technologies, coordinated government engagement, and fostering beneficiary self-reliance. This empirical inquiry provides original insights to advance the public goods theory on factors undermining NGOs' effectiveness in filling welfare gaps despite trust advantages. The results can inform strategies adopted by practitioners to surmount barriers and achieve public service missions.

INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have become major participants in social, political, and economic development across the Global South (Martens, 2002). This enhanced role of NGOs has come as a response to the limitations of both governments and markets in addressing complex development challenges like poverty. In the specific context of Zimbabwe, the alarming rise in the population of orphaned and vulnerable children (OVCs) due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic has threatened the capacity of the state to provide adequate care and assistance. According to statistics from the National Aids Coordination Program, the number of OVCs in Zimbabwe grows by 60,000 annually leading to a total of 1.8 million in 2012 (UNICEF, 2008). This burgeoning OVC crisis has led to increased significance of NGOs as alternate channels for social service delivery to this marginalized population. However, while NGOs may be well intentioned in their poverty alleviation mission, they face a multiplicity of challenges that inhibit their efficacy and impact.

The origins and rationale behind the formation of NGOs has been extensively studied in academic literature. According to Matanga (2010), the emergence of NGOs as major development actors can be traced back to the post World War II rebuilding of war-ravaged nations in Europe. However, as reconstruction ended, NGOs reoriented their focus towards providing developmental and welfare assistance in lower income countries. This shift was underpinned by the inability of newly independent Southern states to adequately cater to their citizens' needs in the initial nation building phase. Weisbrod (1977) cited in Sama (2010) explains the origins of NGOs through the 'public goods theory' which argues that NGOs arise to fulfill unsatisfied demand for public goods that the state fails to provide fully. As

governments cater only to the 'median voter', NGOs serve excluded minority groups by providing tailored services. For instance, the formation of numerous NGOs dealing with HIV/AIDS care in Zimbabwe stems from the government's insufficient response to the needs of affected populations like OVCs.

Academic scholars have also critically studied the roles and functions of NGOs in developing countries. Banks and Hulme (2012) point out that NGOs fill critical gaps left by the inflexibility of state bureaucracies and their inability to provide innovative solutions to emerging issues like HIV/AIDS. NGOs are also seen to enjoy greater trust of local communities compared to government or firms due to their non-profit motives and proximity to grassroots. Furthermore, the contract failure theory articulated by Banks and Hulme (2012) explains that NGOs enjoy comparative credibility advantage in contexts where people cannot adequately assess services of profit-focused firms. Hence, marginalized communities may prefer NGOs over companies for social services. However, despite their espoused strengths, NGOs face myriad challenges that undermine their poverty alleviation mission.

A review of literature on NGOs in developing countries reveals a multitude of factors that pose challenges to their functioning and goal attainment. Malunga (2007) identify the limited public understanding and recognition of NGO legitimacy as a key external hurdle. This gets compounded by the complexity of being accountable to multiple donors, beneficiaries and supporters simultaneously (Banks & Hulme 2012). NGO relations with the state also vary across contexts from collaboration to antagonism. Najam (2003) points out that governments define the political and legal boundaries

conditioning NGO action. State suspicion of NGOs as competitors or foreign agents can lead to restrictions on their activities as happened in Zimbabwe in 2008 when NGO operations were temporarily suspended (NANGO, 2010). Over-dependence on international donors for legitimacy, resources and ideas is another external challenge that can undermine NGOs' autonomy and localized identities (Florini, 2000).

The role of NGOs in development and their relationship with the state continues to be debated. Evidence suggests NGOs face challenges fulfilling their potential development contributions due to deficient institutional arrangements and contextual issues (Nwauche & Flanigan, 2022). For instance, South African NGOs lack adequate procedural invitation into policy planning processes, despite legislated participatory planning (Nwauche & Flanigan, 2022). Exclusionary engagement platforms also limit smaller NGO participation (Nwauche & Flanigan, 2022). Partisan politics can further dampen NGO interest and tokenize engagement (Nwauche & Flanigan, 2022). An uncoordinated, fragmented NGO sector struggles to effectively organize and represent itself (Nwauche & Flanigan, 2022). South African NGO roles must align with national development priorities like the National Development Plan (Volmink & van der Elst, 2019). They can support government services, provide flexible innovation opportunities, mobilize volunteers, push boundaries, inform policymakers, and test models before system adoption (Volmink & van der Elst, 2019). But funding relationships often dictate activities, causing mission drift (Volmink & van der Elst, 2019). Corporate social investment also lacks systemic education impact (Volmink & van der Elst, 2019). Leadership, governance, staffing and accountability deficiencies additionally constrain NGO effectiveness (Volmink & van der Elst, 2019).

Progress requires increased government-NGO engagement, and a sustainable funding framework enabling diversity, collaboration, evidence generation and improved NGO status (Volmink & van der Elst, 2019). Ultimately, South African NGOs must strategically set system-level priorities with long-term, scaled impact. The state should coordinate this, but productively partner with NGO strengths (Volmink & van der Elst, 2019). Getting the government-NGO relationship right is vital to mobilize all development actors under a shared national vision.

These participation barriers relate to contested NGO-state power dynamics. The rise of NGOs as alternative service providers under structural adjustment programs intended to shrink African states, but weakened local governance capabilities (Nega & Schneider, 2014). Though valued for flexibility and grassroots links, small NGOs inherently lack capacity for long-term, large-scale development (Nega & Schneider, 2014). Scaling up carries bureaucratic risks (Nega & Schneider, 2014). Microfinance successes like Grameen Bank expanded dramatically but could not solve systemic poverty (Nega & Schneider, 2014). Where corrupt states cause harm, 'working with government' risks enabling abuses, as occurred with Ethiopian human rights NGOs (Nega & Schneider, 2014). The Grameen case shows NGOs potentially undermining developmental states by promoting market-based poverty solutions (Nega & Schneider, 2014).

Apart from external factors, NGOs also encounter internal organizational limitations. According to Banks and Hulme (2012), NGOs' narrow focus on specific issues or communities can inhibit responses to problems outside their niche area. This restricted scope also breeds inefficiencies from the lack of scale in

operations. Shortage of financial, material and human resources further throttles NGO capacities to design long-term, large-scale initiatives. High turnover of staff and volunteers compounds organizational instability. As Marshall, Telofski, Ojiako and Chipulu (2011) note fragmented competition between NGOs for limited funds also hampers collaboration. Finally, paternalism in decision making is another insidious challenge arising from NGOs' position of power over marginalized communities.

This paper aims to extend academic understanding of the organizational challenges confronting NGOs in Zimbabwe based on a case study of a local NGO. The NGO in question operates inside the Masvingo district, where it carries out several programs aimed at assisting OVCs. These programs include providing educational subsidies, supplying food, and offering psychosocial support. Despite its benevolent intentions, the selected NGO faces myriad obstacles that hamper effective poverty alleviation delivery as discussed in this paper based on extensive field research. Insights from the experiences of this NGO will have wider relevance for development scholars seeking to unravel the complex multidimensional challenges inhibiting NGO operations, especially in rural community settings. Findings could inform strategies adopted by NGO practitioners to surmount hurdles to their organizational effectiveness.

Theoretical framework

This study on analysing the challenges faced by an NGO in implementing OVC programs for poverty alleviation is underpinned by the public goods theory put forward by Weisbrod (1977) cited in Sama (2010) to explain the origins and roles of the non-profit sector. The public goods theory argues that NGOs emerge to fulfil the residual unsatisfied demand for public goods that are not adequately provided by the government (Weisbrod 1977, cited in Sama 2010). The state tends to supply public goods like education, health, and social welfare only up to the level preferred by the median voter. However, significant minorities may desire specific kinds or higher quantities of certain public goods that lack majority appeal. Their demands remain unmet by the government. In such cases, NGOs organize collective action to deliver tailored services to particular groups filling the gaps left by the state.

The public goods theory contends that heterogeneous societies are likely to have larger NGO sectors as varying groups seek custom provisions from NGOs when uniform state welfare does not suffice (Weisbrod 1977, cited in Sama 2010). This is relevant in the Zimbabwean context where the HIV/AIDS epidemic has led to the emergence of a vast population of orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) with very specific socioeconomic needs. However, the government lacks the capability and resources to address the sheer scale of their welfare and development needs. Hence, NGOs like the anonymous one studied have arisen to fill these gaps by providing education, nutrition, healthcare, counselling, and livelihood support exclusively focused on the OVC segment.

The public goods theory also illuminates that NGOs enjoy an advantage over the state in catering to minority preferences owing to their small size, decentralization, and proximity to grassroots. They can design their programs based on close interactions with target communities gaining superior understanding of localized needs. The NGO under study has relied on village volunteers to gain insights into OVC requirements within different locales of Masvingo district.

However, as the findings will show, despite these inherent qualities possessed by NGOs, they encounter many organizational and environmental challenges that limit their effectiveness in delivering public services.

Therefore, this research is anchored in the public goods theory's premise that NGOs emerge to serve excluded groups. But it aims to extend understanding of their limitations in fulfilling this role completely and effectively due to a myriad of internal and external obstacles. The findings on specific difficulties faced by an NGO catering to the excluded OVC population in Zimbabwe based on empirical field data will enrich the public goods theory. They can add nuance regarding scenarios when NGOs underperform in filling gaps despite good intentions. The results can inform strategies for these civil society organizations to overcome barriers and deliver their espoused missions more efficiently.

Thus, the public goods theory forms an appropriate anchor for this study focused on investigating challenges undermining NGO poverty alleviation interventions for vulnerable groups failed by state welfare. The results will provide contemporary evidence to update this theory and enhance its practical relevance in the Southern context. This will enable better application of its principles in guiding policy and practice geared towards strengthening NGO effectiveness as development actors.

METHOD

This study utilized a qualitative case study approach to gain in-depth insights into the organizational experiences and constraints faced by TAP, an NGO providing OVC assistance in rural Zimbabwe. Data was gathered through interviews with key TAP personnel, focused group discussions with field volunteers and area supervisors, open-ended questionnaires for beneficiaries, and a review of TAP's documents. The interviews and focus groups examined themes around TAP's background, activities, difficulties faced, and relations with government agencies. Qualitative techniques allowed nuanced understanding of the processes, causal factors, and meanings underpinning the identified challenges of inadequate staffing, funding shortfalls, high turnover, data issues, and problematic government relations. Data analysis involved coding and thematic interpretation guided by the research questions and literature. The study included various measures to assure methodological rigor, including the use of voluntary participation, anonymity, secrecy, data triangulation, and efforts to minimize researcher biases.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Exploring the Escalation of OVCs in Zimbabwe: An In-depth Analysis of Interventions by a Selected NGOs

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Sub-Saharan Africa has resulted in a burgeoning crisis of orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) lacking adult care and support. The [UNAIDS Global Report 2013](#) estimated that over 3 million children were living with HIV in the region accounting for 90% of the global total. Zimbabwe particularly has a high OVC rate as the adult HIV prevalence rate has reached 15% ([ZIMSTAT 2015](#)). According to the Ministry of Labour and Social Services, the number of orphans rose from just under 500,000 in 1994 to approximately 1 million by 2006 ([UNICEF 2011](#)). This spike was driven by factors like poverty, low awareness, inadequate health infrastructure and social practices like polygamy. The National AIDS Council has

projected the total OVC population to reach 1.8 million by 2015 exacerbating Zimbabwe's socio-economic challenges.

The loss of parental care and guidance exposes OVCs to adversities like food insecurity, lack of education, child labour, early marriage, emotional trauma, and susceptibility to abuse. [Desmond et al \(2005\)](#) point out that OVCs face social exclusion and stigma which hinders their human capability development. The Zimbabwe National Orphan Care Policy defines an orphan as a child below 18 years who has lost one or both parents. It uses the composite term OVC to also include children rendered vulnerable by household illness, disability, or poverty irrespective of orphan status. Assisting OVCs through provision of basic services, livelihood support, healthcare and psycho-social care has emerged as a key priority for Zimbabwe. However, the capacity of government agencies to address the sheer scale of the crisis is severely limited.

As a response to the state's constraints, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) have taken on a pivotal role in caring for OVCs. NGOs are non-profit entities organized outside government to pursue declared humanitarian and developmental goals (Willet 2002). The selected NGO is given the pseudonym The AIDS Programme (TAP). TAP was founded in 2003 as the charitable arm of a church denomination to provide home-based HIV/AIDS care in 5 districts of Masvingo province. It has since expanded coverage to 6 districts reaching over 3,500 OVC beneficiaries. TAP's core initiatives include educational subsidies, agricultural inputs, and food handouts to ensure OVC retention in schools. It also runs village health worker training, HIV counselling, orphan registration, birth certificate assistance and vocational training.

Despite TAP's benevolent intentions, its efforts to mitigate OVC adversity have been hampered by a myriad of organizational and contextual challenges. A World Bank study found that 60% of community interventions for OVC care in Sub-Saharan Africa confronted severe obstacles reducing program quality, reach and continuity ([Subbarao et al 2008](#)). Therefore, this paper analyses TAP's specific impediments to unpack why NGO-led social welfare interventions fail to achieve intended benefits at scale. The learnings can inform strategies adopted by NGO practitioners to enhance organizational effectiveness in serving their target beneficiaries.

Challenges faced by the NGO in implementing OVC programs

The data collected through interviews, focus groups and survey questionnaires revealed a complex web of internal and external challenges constraining the NGO's effectiveness in delivering quality OVC assistance. The key themes are discussed below:

1. Shortage of trained personnel

A recurrent finding emerging from 80% of organizational respondents was the acute scarcity of qualified, skilled personnel willing to work in remote rural areas on OVC issues. The NGO's Program Coordinator lamented the difficulty in attracting experienced development professionals like counsellors and project officers with expertise in child trauma and agriculture respectively. This was largely attributed to the lack of infrastructure like roads, schools and electricity which inhibited adaptation by urban-educated specialists. High salary and benefit demand of qualified applicants also exceeded the NGO's budgetary limits allocated for personnel costs. Their recent

strategic plan stipulated capping this to 20% of total program expenditure to maximize spending on direct OVC services. The preference for voluntary employment terms by the NGO also deterred professionals. Consequently, many staff lacked advanced skills to design, manage and evaluate the impact of interventions. The situation was exacerbated by Zimbabwe's brain drain crisis with emigration of health and social workers. The lack of skilled personnel has far-reaching consequences for TAP's operations. For one, it hinders the ability to accurately track program outcomes and demonstrate efficacy to donors, which can threaten future funding. Additionally, deficiencies in areas like child counselling undermine service quality and limit the depth of support for beneficiaries' complex psychosocial needs. Ultimately, building local staff capacity is crucial for TAP to enhance the scope, sustainability and community-centeredness of its OVC interventions over the long-term.

2. High staff turnover

Closely linked to recruitment challenges was the problem of high turnover among both paid NGO staff and volunteers that was highlighted by 90% of respondents. Review of secondary records showed a 70% attrition rate from 2008-2012. Many professionals used the NGO as a transitional experience before moving to better prospects locally or abroad. This constant attrition depleted institutional memory and eroded continuity in managing initiatives. For instance, the M&E Officer had under 1 year of experience making longitudinal tracking of OVC outcomes difficult. The churn also increased costs of repeated recruitment and training. Among volunteers, high dropout rates occurred as they left for income-generating opportunities having gained experience. The NGO's heavy reliance on volunteers for last-mile service delivery meant frequent retraining of replacements wasted resources. High turnover also disconnected beneficiaries from trusted local guides creating psychosocial strain. As the Program Officer noted, retaining experienced staff is vital for strengthening organizational capacities. The constant turnover of staff likely caused beneficiaries to feel abandoned and anxious, as they had to continually rebuild relationships of trust with new staff members assisting them. Having to repeatedly open up about traumatic experiences to new, inexperienced staff could have been frustrating and discouraging for beneficiaries seeking help. The lack of continuity and institutional memory also meant that beneficiaries may not have received properly tailored and consistent assistance, as new staff struggled to provide informed guidance.

3. Funding constraints

Approximately 95% of organizational respondents identified the lack of sustained, adequate funding as a huge impediment. The NGO relies solely on restricted donations from foreign churches and has limited opportunities to secure external funds. It places a higher emphasis on partnering with professionalized agencies. The primary school fees amount to \$10 every term, while secondary school prices range from \$20 to \$40 per term. Additionally, there is an annual cost of \$20 per kid for school uniforms. However, it is evident that the current budget is insufficient to meet these financial obligations. The adequacy of the educational sponsorship was assessed by beneficiary feedback, revealing that 80% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction.

Surging inflation in Zimbabwe further erodes purchasing power. The shortage of funds cascades across operations. The M&E officer lacked financing for beneficiary household surveys. The Field Officer could not afford transportation for school monitoring visits. Funds were insufficient to guarantee food handouts and agricultural inputs annually leading to inconsistencies. Resource scarcity thus undermined organizational capacities and credibility.

4. Unreliable beneficiary data

Nearly all personnel pointed to the lack of reliable, updated data on target OVCs as a massive challenge. Record keeping and tracking was very poor. Numbers were approximated based on registers maintained by schools and health clinics but actual attendance and needs could differ substantially. For instance, the Field Officer found nearly half the listed OVC beneficiaries were not coming to collect supplies possibly due to migration, dropouts or even deaths. Such data discrepancies complicated planning and distribution of inadequate resources besides weakening monitoring.

5. Government relations

Another external challenge cited by most respondents was the occasionally antagonistic relationship with local government agencies. They cited instances of sudden suspension of NGO operations by political administrations on grounds of protocol non-compliance. One such statewide crackdown in 2008 forced the abrupt halting of all activities leading to beneficiary deprivation. Excessive bureaucracy in registration, permissions and monitoring was seen to hamper programs. The district administration was also felt to lack understanding of the NGO's complementary role leading to duplication of efforts in some areas but gaps in others. Constructive engagement was limited.

In general, the result obtained from the field research emphasized the range of organizational capacity and contextual factors encumbering the effectiveness of NGO aimed at improving the well-being of OVC. Addressing these deeply rooted difficulties necessitates the implementation of comprehensive policies that prioritize the mobilization of resources, the establishment of robust data systems, effective government coordination, and the retention of qualified personnel. The final segment will examine crucial strategies that the non-governmental organization (NGO) should focus in order to surmount obstacles and amplify its beneficial influence.

CONCLUSION

This study sought to investigate the organizational and environmental challenges experienced by NGOs in delivering welfare services to orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs) in rural Zimbabwe. The findings from interviews, focus groups and surveys with personnel and beneficiaries of an anonymous NGO revealed a complex web of constraints inhibiting its effectiveness in improving OVC wellbeing despite noble intent.

Shortage of professionally trained development staff suited to remote rural settings was a major internal capacity gap. Financial limitations dependent on restricted church grants also severely curtailed the scope, consistency, and adequacy of educational, nutritional, and psychosocial support. Unreliable data on target OVCs compounded planning and monitoring issues. Sporadic government antagonism through sudden suspensions and excessive red tape created an uncertain operating climate.

Beneficiary dependency was entrenched by the inability to guarantee sustainable self-reliance.

These empirical insights on factors undermining NGO performance in filling welfare gaps align with the contract failure theory's contention that NGOs face institutional limitations despite comparative trust advantage. Findings also validate scholarly observations on deficits of material resources and professionalization throttling nonprofits (Banks & Hulme 2012). The dependence consequences and occasional state-NGO hostilities reaffirm academic critiques. However, the grassroots embeddedness, volunteer mobilization and focus on the excluded discussed earlier underscores NGOs' enduring relevance despite challenges.

For enhancing organizational efficacy, the NGO must prioritize initiatives to attract and retain skilled personnel through structured training, career growth and competitive incentives using benchmarks. Donor diversification, partnerships with corporate funders and social enterprise models can expand funding pipelines for long term financial sustainability. Low-cost technology applications need integration for beneficiary monitoring and accountability. Structured coordination mechanisms with government agencies are necessary to align activities and establish operational legitimacy. Recipient self-help capacities can be built by adding vocational training and supporting youth collectives and micro-enterprises.

The public goods theory contends NGOs arise to satisfy unsatisfied demand for tailored welfare by excluded groups like OVCs (Weisbrod 1977, cited in Sama 2010). But it does not elaborate on scenarios when NGOs fail to fulfill this role optimally. This study's nuanced exposition of diverse organizational and environmental challenges encumbering an NGO's OVC assistance interventions in rural Zimbabwe thus provides original empirical insights to advance the theory. The granular evidence on factors like resource constraints, data deficiencies, staffing issues and political volatility explain why NGOs underperform despite advantages like grassroots embeddedness.

In conclusion, while NGOs may be formed with benevolent intent to fill welfare gaps left by states, they encounter daunting internal and external hurdles that inhibit their efficacy and impact. Ensuring organizational effectiveness in serving excluded populations like OVCs crucially requires strategies focused on capacity building, funding mobilization, stakeholder engagement, collaboration, and beneficiary agency development. With appropriate investments in these areas, NGOs can surmount barriers and fulfill their espoused public service missions, thereby filling critical holes in the social safety net.

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