

Chapter One

Finding Your Organization's Place in an Increasingly Global World

That the world is becoming more global has become a common phrase. So what does this increasing global interdependence mean to you as a nonprofit practitioner and to your organization? If you have been thinking that there is a place in the international arena for your nonprofit organization but you are not sure where or how to begin, this book is for you. If you have made some movement into the international arena but have not yet found the right niche for your organization, this book might help to stimulate some new thoughts. And if you already have experience in the sector, you might nevertheless benefit from the refresher course in this book.

When you and your organization make connections internationally, the work of your organization can have significant impacts internationally while helping your own organization and its local constituency at the same time. And it does not need to cost a lot.

Consider the case of the Chicago Foundation for Women (CFW), a successful community-based group that could have limited its focus locally but developed its international engagement and enhanced its local programs through the vision and experiences of its board members and staff. According to Isabel Carter Stewart, executive director of CFW in 2003,

In 1995, on the occasion of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the staff leadership of the Chicago Foundation for Women became mindful of the international context in which women's and girls' rights should be considered. The next logical step was to build on the Foundation's intention to create a broad based

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community of women from across the patchwork quilt of cultures represented in the cosmopolitan arena of Chicago. Given the convening power of Chicago Foundation for Women, it was relatively easy to invite diverse women to the table to begin discussions that would seek common ground and lead to a local understanding—and embrace—of human security as the term relates to all women. Convening immigrant women from among our grantee partners and American women of all the backgrounds among our board and volunteers to discuss international issues that affect us locally allows us to be true to our mission and broaden the conversation at the same time.”¹¹

Volunteers of America (VOA) is another example of an organization that had a highly successful national program in the United States for over one hundred years and did not have to become more internationally engaged to continue to be successful. In fact, not all of its leadership was sure the organization should proceed in this direction when the idea was initially brought to its board by one of its members. But it did think the idea had enough potential for the continued success of the organization in a changing world that it decided to conduct a feasibility study on increasing its international engagement. Through this study, VOA determined that it would begin to develop an international program, but at a slow and deliberate pace. Five years later, it had successful networks and a joint venture with an overseas partner, all strengthening its national work.

Both of these organizations (and many more that you will read about in this book) have found that they could enhance their mission and improve their local and national programs by becoming more internationally engaged.

International engagement is a process of connecting with the international nonprofit community and the broader world around your organization in ways that can help to strengthen your local or national programs. Sometimes an organization will have its global

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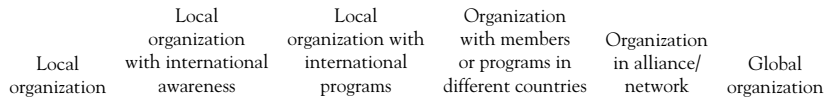
awareness raised because an issue it is dealing with locally, such as environmental protection or controlling AIDS or other diseases, does not limit itself to geographical boundaries. The leadership of other organizations will decide to review global trends to see how their organization's work can benefit from what is happening in other parts of the world.

There are many ways to become strategically more internationally engaged, some of them quite simple and not as resource intensive as you may believe. From sharing ideas and lessons learned with nonprofit organizations in other parts of the world to inviting speakers to make presentations on topics of international interest, there are many ways to add an international dimension to your organization. This book offers ideas and practical tips from other organizations that can be put to direct use in your daily operations. You will also discover if going international is an interesting concept but not quite right for your organization—at least right now.

Often the leaders of local, regional, or national nonprofit organizations think that starting an international program is a significant undertaking to which they will need to allocate extensive resources. But as the information and organizational examples in this book demonstrate, you do not need to plunge in and form a full-scale international program right away.

Figure 1.1 shows a spectrum of increasing international involvement that many organizations travel along as they develop their international engagement. On the starting side of the spectrum (the left side of the figure) are organizations that are primarily locally or nationally based but are beginning to link their programs to international trends, or they have a few members from outside the United States. On the far right side of the spectrum are the organizations that are truly global, with members, programs, or operations in many different regions around the world and having a multinational board of directors or other decision-making group.

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Figure 1.1. Spectrum of International Engagement

We often think of organizations as being either local or global in nature. Although the focus is often placed on organizations at either end of the spectrum, many organizations lie at different stages along this spectrum of international engagement. It is important to realize that such a spectrum exists to know that there are many options and models that can be used as a guide in choosing the level of engagement best suited to your organization. Some organizations continue on a path along this spectrum toward a greater international engagement, and others find compatibility with their missions and programs at the beginning parts of the spectrum. They may broaden their international awareness but not change their core constituency or organizational structure.

Organizations along the spectrum vary by the degree of international engagement, as well as the type of international engagement they choose. As organizations move along the spectrum (toward the right side of the line), they are developing a greater degree of international engagement—for example, having more members from outside the United States, more programs with international partners, or more overseas partners or advisers involved in their programs, conferences, or decision making. Along the spectrum are different types of international engagement that an organization can choose. For example, as you will see in succeeding chapters, organizations can become more internationally engaged through their annual conference or other meetings (Chapter Four), through networking or partnership with organizations from other countries (Chapters Five and Six), or through their membership or decision-making structures (Chapters Eight and Nine).

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For examples of organizations on the beginning side of the spectrum—those with international awareness and some international programs—you can read more about the Chicago Foundation for Women and the Association for Volunteer Administration in Chapter Four. For examples of organizations further along the spectrum, one that has chapters in a few countries and one that has a network of partners in many parts of the world, read about the Association of Fundraising Professionals and Sister Cities International in Chapter Nine. And for the truly global organization with activities or operations throughout the world and a multinational board of directors, take a look at Chapter Twelve, which is devoted to these organizations and the lessons that organizations at earlier stages of internationalization can learn from them.

The goal of this book is to demonstrate to organizations that are feeling this pull into the global arena and would like to have a greater engagement with an increasingly global world that there are many options. It is indeed possible to be connected to a global community and benefit from this network without changing your mission or dramatically altering existing programs or operations. This book also explores the trends of locally or nationally based organizations that are becoming more international and provides specific examples to illustrate these trends. Many of these projects have been previously undocumented as examples of the increasing international awareness of the nonprofit community and will be helpful to colleague nonprofit organization leaders looking for models and the experiences of others to learn from.

To be effective, international engagement needs to be customized to the organization. The many ideas provided in this book are intended to be illustrative, not prescriptive. There are many ideas that are presented for your organization to consider, refine, build on, modify, or otherwise adapt as appropriate to your goals and resources.

This book will help you to address some of the fundamental questions that are important to consider before embarking on a

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path of international engagement. Why does your organization want a greater international engagement? What are the opportunities? What obstacles might you face? How can you best prepare your organization to go down this path? Do you want to just follow international issues and trends, occasionally identifying some opportunities, or be actively involved in international activities? Do you want to import (be the receiver), export (be the giver), or facilitate (be a catalyst) the sharing of cross-border knowledge? The answers to these questions will affect the strategies you pursue to accomplish your goals.