

Governance between abstraction and tangibility – lessons learned form an evaluation in a Malagasy slum area

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Introduction

Since the nineties, the term "governance" has gained in popularity. Etymologically, the term has the same origin than government, namely the Latin verb "gubernare" which means "to steer the boat" [BASLE]. Rare are the political speeches nowadays that do not include an allusion to this concept, even though (or because?) not many citizens have a precise idea of what the term means [CASSEN].

In the academic world the expression is used to describe the institutional framework where interactions and transactions of organisations take place. The governance is "good" when the transaction costs between individuals, firms or different kinds of organisations can be reduced [NORTH, WILLIAMSON]. In other words, a framework of good governance should facilitate adaptations to technological and structural changes, avoiding serious political crises [HAYEK].

Other definitions exist, but it is futile to look for any strict criteria they could have in common. The concept of governance is to be taken more like an analytical framework, allowing for different perspectives and different interpretations, drawing from various disciplines [SINDZINGRE].

Good reasons exist for choosing Madagascar as the context for an NGO evaluation in terms of governance: Malagasy government is one of the examples of countries currently devoted to the principles of governance and democracy¹. The important civil movement that brought Marc Ravalomanana, the current President, into office, was based on the objection of the official result of the presidential elections in December 2001. Corruption, electoral fraud and lack of transparency were amongst the strongest criticisms of the former regime of Didier Ratsiraka. Being a private entrepreneur, with little political experience,² Ravalomanana was considered independent of the old political classes and his claims to improve effectiveness

¹ See, for instance, the speech of Marc Ravalomanana, President of Madagascar
(<http://www.madagascar.gov.mg/modules.php?name=Sections2&sop=viewarticle2&artid=29>)

² Marc Ravalomanana was the mayor of Anatanarivo for a few years before running for President. He is the owner of TIKO, the biggest Malagasy foodstuffs firm.

and efficiency of public services as well as of private firms carrying out public contracts were very popular. Madagascar being a hilly tropical island with a road system in a desolate state, personal visits of the President on road construction or rehabilitation sites to supervise the advancement received a strong echo in the media. All these different aspects correspond in one way or another to commonly used indicators of governance,³ confirming further the Malagasy governments strive for better governance.

The calls for an active participation of the civil society in a concerted effort for better governance show that the government attributes an important role to the associations and NGOs. Indeed, the NGOs working with international partners or funding agencies played an important role already in Ravalomanana's accession to power. Especially in the French context, where the media stayed relatively close to the French government's position (which was officially a neutral one, but which represented in reality a considerable support to the former government), the French organisations relayed the voice of Malagasy NGOs about this post-electoral crises, criticising the position of the French government. On a more local level, the Malagasy NGOs tried to compensate the general breakdown of the economy caused by the road barricades (instrumented by Ratsiraka) and the general strike (in support of Ravalomanana).

In the meanwhile, a certain disenchantment has gained the Malagasy people, facing the effects of unpopular reforms.⁴ In this context, the NGOs do consider themselves as representatives of civil society and want to be considered as key actors in the process of working for better governance in Madagascar.

The present paper relates an attempt to evaluate a Malagasy non-governmental organisation (NGO)⁵ in terms of governance. This was one aspect in a much larger evaluation covering efficiency, effectiveness and impact carried out by the author and his co-evaluators in May 2004. The focus on governance could not be analysed separately during the evaluation (for instance, no specific survey could be carried out) but was undertaken retrospectively, based on already available data and information. Instead of being a systematic evaluation exercise, it is a case study, developing certain key aspects of a NGO's evaluation in terms of governance. These circumstances imply that this document represents only a first test phase for this kind of evaluation. The analysis is incomplete and it will have to be deepened at a later state.

The NGO in question is situated in a slum area on the outskirts of the Malagasy capital Antananarivo, working on the grass root level. It has activities in the social sector (dispensary, etc), in the economic sector (micro credit, etc.), in the environmental sector as well as in vocational training. The period to be considered is 2000-2004, including the Malagasy post

³ See for instance the comparative research programme DIAL of the French Institute for Development Research (IRD). Some of the criteria they use for measuring governance through the perception of the population are :

- perception of the main problems of the administration
- level of support for the liberal reforms and disengagement policies
- appreciation of the efficiency and the effectiveness of the public administration
- degree of confidence in the different institutions, including media, etc.
- credibility of the political class (political parties, Parliament)
- transparency of politics
- incidence of corruption (% victims)
- access to public services

⁴ Many reforms were carried out even though the population was against them and had expressed its hostility through devices of participation (see also Cling JP, Razafindrakoto M. and Roubaud F. éd. [2002], *Les nouvelles stratégies internationales de lutte contre la pauvreté*, Paris, Economica)

⁵ For reasons of confidentiality, the author has chosen not to reveal the full identity of this NGOs. Throughout this paper, it will be referred to simply as "the NGO".

electoral crises and the rehabilitation phase afterwards, until May 2004, when the general evaluation of the NGO took place.

In order to choose a framework for this evaluation, to define its criteria, we have chosen to base ourselves on different reactions and responses from the European civil society to the White Paper on Governance published by the Commission of the European Communities in July 2001 [Commission]. The paper in itself as well as the debate it has stimulated contain a certain number of key elements that can be used for the elaboration of an evaluation methodology in terms of governance. The contextual indicators chosen for each criteria are not exhaustive and do not allow to undertake a comprehensive evaluation of the NGO in terms of governance. Nevertheless this case study might be able to contribute to the evolution of the evaluation of key actors of governance, other than the government itself.

The choice of this kind of base line and approach instead of a methodological framework based on more a theoretical concept was motivated by its operational character. The evaluation criteria derived from the different documents of the Platform of European Social NGOs (an alliance of over 30 European social NGO networks and federations) and others have not just been elaborated by some isolated researchers on their desks. The views expressed in these documents are the results of a relatively wide consensus and they largely reflect the ways these potential key actors of civil society want to position themselves concerning governance.

Quite obviously the situation of the European civil society is very different than that of a Malagasy NGO and the Malagasy Republic has not much in common with the European Union. Nevertheless, the views expressed in the responses to the European white paper can be considered as quality standards that the European NGOs have given themselves. They are quiet rudimentary at this stage but this lack of precision facilitates their adaptation to a different cultural and political context.

Based on these documents, an evaluation of an NGO in terms of governance can be situated on two levels:

- First of all, the evaluator can assess the role of the NGO as an active member of civil society, with a certain ability to contribute to the governance of the government and its administration. The two main issues at stake are the relay function between "the governing and the governed" and the representativeness of the NGO.
- Secondly, one can verify if the NGO itself complies to certain standards of good governance (applying to oneself the lessons one teaches...). This is an important condition for being credible as far as advocacy for good governance is concerned.

Bridging the gap between governing and governed

When considering the role of NGOs within European governance, the ambition is to form the missing link for good governance by "bridging the gap between the governing and the governed" [SOCIALPLATFORM, 2002]. In order to link the public with the political process, NGOs should be key actors in building a structured civil dialogue between citizens and governments.

The expression "bridging the gap between the governing and the governed" puts the emphasis on the relay function NGOs are supposed to play. The image of the "bridge" the NGOs are supposed to form can be misleading because it induces a certain neutrality. However, conflicts

about institutions and politics seem to be inevitable in a democratic regime and governance might simply be a set of principals for regulating these conflicts.

Many NGOs aim to be a spokesmen for vulnerable and marginalized groups of populations, for those that have no voice. They do not stay neutral in situations of conflict but take a stand in favour of their beneficiaries. The "organizaciones civiles", civil organisations that have evolved in Central America in the second half of the 20th century, are a perfect illustration of this type of advocacy NGOs. They define themselves as organisations of citizens, of private nature, but with public aims. They recognise the role of the excluded, marginalized and poor population as subject of political, economical, social and cultural rights, able to defend itself [PONCE VASQUEZ]. In these cases, the "bridge" formed by the NGOs allows mainly one-way traffic, from the population to the decisional levels.

Other NGOs are in reality not as "non-governmental" as their name may suggest: they may be mere civil extensions of certain members of government or political parties [SANTISO], serving as an instrument for gaining legitimacy [SAPIR]. They are actively involved in all kinds of devices of participation, supposing to represent the civil society. As could be seen in France since certain electoral drawbacks in early 2004, the objective of such a semblance of participation orchestrated by the government is to "explain" the government's choices rather than to express and take into account preferences of the population. Once again, the NGOs relay function works mainly in one direction, opposite of the bridge formed by the advocacy organisations.

In the light of these distinctions, it becomes difficult to elaborate indicators that can measure this bridging function. In order to stay on a relatively impartial ground, we can choose to evaluate the NGOs efforts to build a structured civil dialogue between citizens and governments. Considering the intermediary position of the NGO and the tensions that might exist between "the governing and the governed", the evaluation must concentrate on the means employed by the NGO rather than the results obtained, at least as far as a short term perspective is concerned.

The NGO of our case study is deliberately not very politicised, wanting to be at the service of the whole population of their area of intervention and avoid tensions about political issues amongst the beneficiaries. The executive staff has a relatively paternalistic attitude towards "their" population, feeling responsible to speak up on their behalf. Advocacy is not amongst the NGO's main activities, but can be an occasional event. The press release published in May 2004 (see Annex) when the latent economical crises threatened to become acute, is representative of this kind of specific action.

On other occasions, the Malagasy government or certain administrations have requested the participation of the NGO, for instance for the elaboration of the national Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). We suppose that the NGO has been solicited because it is seen as an informal representative of the local NGOs as well as a spokesman of the inhabitants of the "lower quarters" of Antananarivo (see below), but this point needs to be confirmed.

These requests demonstrate a recognition of the important role of this NGO. At the same time, the executive staff can be quite suspicious towards new appeals of participation. The important fear of being instrumentalised for political reasons or of having one of their projects taken over by a local politician, for instance, explains a certain reluctance.

One experience from before the post-electoral crises has marked the NGOs attitude about being a relay "between the governing and the governed". In September 2000, the administration of Ravalomanana (at the time mayor of Antananarivo) had ordered the destruction of 230 houses in the area of the NGO, considering that these illicit constructions were impeding on the ground for the construction of a new road to the international airport.

The NGO had tried to mediate before and after the destruction of these huts, asking for compensation and rehousing facilities. Since this mediation was not successful, the NGOs reputation was seriously affected. Being used to almost regular damage of houses due to typhoons, the NGO had emergency facilities for rehousing 30 families. However, the criteria for choosing 30 out of 230 families in need for housing were not always understood and created further dissatisfaction with the NGOs role. Affected by this event and its consequences on the population's perceptions, the NGO launched an important project for constructing a 100 low cost houses, affordable for the newly evicted families through a credit scheme. However a tentative of instrumentalising this project by local politicians, accompanied by serious suspicions of corruption of certain key actors in the political scene pretending to speak in the name of the NGO, made the project fail, damaging further the NGOs reputation amongst the inhabitants of its area of intervention.

During the post-electoral crises, the NGO has taken officially a moderate position in favour of the opposition candidate (Ravalomanana, the mayor), while relaying regular information on the crisis by e-mail to its foreign, mainly French partners. This position was not shared by the whole of the local community, still baring a grudge against Ravalomana, held responsible for the destruction of the houses in their neighbourhood.

The NGO supported the general strike against the former President, sending their employees to participate in the demonstrations. This practice, but also the increasing shortage of all sorts of commodity goods led to an important reduction of its services to the population. At the same time, they strongly reduced the nominal fee patients have to pay for consultations at the dispensary in order to continue to provide an accessible minimal service to the local community.

At the end of the crises, in August-September 2002, the NGO carried out a special survey in order to measure its impact on the inhabitants of this slum area. They subsequently created a special programme to alleviate the hardships of the local population, financed by its usual foreign partners and funding agencies (this kind of search for funding had been explicitly encouraged by the new government).

The director of the NGO has been solicited to join the new government, but has declined the offers, being conscious about the incompatibility of this position with his role as director of the NGO. On the other hand, this would have been a formidable occasion to "bridge the gap between the governing and the governed", at least as long as he would not yet have been "absorbed" into the realms of "the governing" himself.

This experiences and the fact that the former mayor is the current President have obviously influenced the NGOs relatively low profile role as far as its possible relay role between "the governing" and "the governed" is concerned. It seems indeed that in the past, and in particular during the post-electoral crises, its intermediary function was mainly between the local population and the foreign donors.

Outside the periods of crises, in more normal circumstances, the NGO encourages poor families without birth certificates for their children (and sometimes even for the adults) to undertake the necessary steps to apply for them, with the help of a lawyer employed by the NGO. As these certificates allow the children to go to school and the adults to vote, one can consider that this activity contributes to creating conditions for better governance, since without education and without the right to vote a participation in a structured dialogue between citizens and the government seems improbable.

Representativeness: "For whom do you speak?"

On a more general level, it is obvious that NGOs can only gain the necessary credibility in the eyes of all stakeholders if they are representative of their mandate. The lack of representativeness or, more crudely, charges of defending corporatist interests or illegitimate minorities against a silent majority, are major arguments used by governments and public administration against a more active implication of NGOs in their decision making process.

The Socialplatform [2001, 2002] of European NGOs takes a clear position as far as representativeness is concerned: As NGOs seek to make an input to policy-making, and to influence the political process, answering the question: "for whom do you speak?" is both reasonable and necessary. Yet the answer to this seemingly simple question of identity varies widely between different NGOs. The Socialplatform [2001] distinguishes three types:

- NGOs directly representative of particular groups (of other NGOs or of citizens – umbrella NGOs);
- NGOs advancing the interests of those unable to do so themselves (Human rights NGOs, for example);
- NGOs "representing" or advancing public interests, ideas, issues or values (for instance: Environmental NGOs representing the interests of the environment because it has no voice).

With such a diversity of functions, it is impossible to create a single standard of representativeness that can be used to derive general indicators for measuring all NGOs. The evaluation of representativeness must therefore be based on a judgement, made on qualitative and quantitative grounds, of the extent to which NGOs represent their mandate.

Considering the above typology, our Malagasy NGO seems to represent a case apart. Legally an association⁶, its members are about a dozen of administrators that have been "handpicked" by the founding father. During his lifetime, they played the role of advisors, the real decision making power stayed in the hands of this charismatic figure. Since the death of the latter almost ten years ago, several attempts have been made to redefine membership and to open the association to a wider participation of leaders from the area of intervention of the NGO. However, the final decision to change the statutes and co-opt new members from inside the local community was never taken (even though a new version of the statutes had already been elaborated). The reasons for this preservation of the status quo are difficult to understand retrospectively. They seem to be manifold and fear of change is probably one of them.

Some of the administrators are originating from the area the NGO is operating (most of them are living elsewhere nowadays), others are outsiders, deliberately chosen at the time to provide impartiality and avoid favouritism. The executive staff can be divided in two groups: The locals who have been employed by the founder, having benefited from several training opportunities and those who have been recruited more recently, exclusively on the bases of their competences, coming mainly from outside the intervention area.

When analysing the results of the survey carried out in the context of the recent evaluation, it becomes clear that the local population considers the NGO above all as a social centre. The comments made by the surveyed sample indicate that the population sees the NGO as a substitute for the insufficient public service. Criticism of a minority include allusions to favouritism (in favour of the families of certain local executive staff members) in access to employment and to certain services show that the presence, inside the NGO, of members of the local community seems to be a source of distrust rather than of feeling represented. In any case, it becomes clear that the local population does not feel directly represented by the NGO

⁶ According to Malagasy law, associations and NGOs are two distinct forms of moral persons. Nevertheless, many associations et particularly those, that have salaried employees and professional working procedures, consider themselves to be NGOs rather than associations.

which therefore does not belong to the first category of the above typology, at least as far as its current configuration is concerned.

Considering the socio-economical characteristics of the local population in the NGOs intervention area, one could consider that the NGO belongs to the second category: NGOs advancing the interests of those unable to do so themselves. Specific activities, like the press release cited above (see annex), provide some evidence for this assumption. However, unlike a Human Rights NGO, for example, the representation of the local population is not the main objective of the NGO, but only a secondary action.

This ambiguous situation makes the appreciation of the representativeness of the NGO very difficult. It is certain that the NGO speaks in the name of its administrators and its executive staff and that both of these groups are sincerely motivated to represent the population of this slum area. But no hard evidence is available at this stage for a more affirmative conclusion.

Meeting general governance standards

The UE White Paper on European governance insists on five principles underpinning good governance [Commission]: **openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness, and coherence**. The interpretation of each of these principles in the White Paper makes governance standards out of them and they will undoubtedly represent the main criteria for future governance evaluations of the European Commission.

The members of the platform of European social NGOs endorse these five principles as forming good governance [Socialplatform, 2001, 2002]. Faced with such unanimity, it seems logical to look into applying these standards also to the NGOs. Indeed, how can NGOs fight for the respect of these principles by administrations and governments, without applying them to their own organisation? Especially in the light of the necessary representativeness of these NGOs, meeting these governance standards seems to be a justified claim, at least towards those they want to represent, if not towards the public in general.

Trying to adapt their interpretation in the White paper to the case of NGOs, we can come up with the following standards:

- **Openness**: NGOs should work in a transparent manner, communicating actively about what they do and the decisions they take, using language that is accessible and understandable for the beneficiaries.
- **Accountability**: Closely linked to the first principle, the accountability depends on the openness of the institution. It is necessary to explain not only what the NGO does, but also why it does it. Processes of decision making, managing and monitoring activities must be clear to the concerned outsider.
- **Participation**: The quality, relevance and effectiveness of the NGOs are enhanced through a wide participation of all stakeholders, including the final beneficiaries of the NGO's activities.
- **Effectiveness**: Projects must be effective and timely, delivering what is needed on the basis of clear objectives, an evaluation of future impact and of past experience.
- **Coherence**: The different programmes and activities of an NGO, as well as their partnerships must be coherent in their conditions and approaches.

In the case of the Malagasy NGO, openness and accountability are part of the NGOs deontology. Important efforts have been made during the evaluated period in order to improve the transparency of their decision making process and to weaken the repeated allusions of favouritism. Precise selection criteria have been defined for each type of activity and these criteria are being made increasingly public. Furthermore, for the selection of the micro-credit beneficiaries, a committee of external personalities with good knowledge of the

informal sector has been created, "externalising" the responsibility of these important decisions.

The recent survey has shown that these measures are not yet sufficient in the eyes of a dissatisfied minority. Concerning the information about the selection criteria, their publication seems to produce a negative side effect: the candidates now can "arrange" their answers to the NGO's social workers' inquiries in order to pass over the hurdles.

As explained above, the participation of the wider community or its leaders in the decision making processes has been attempted twice in the past and is again amidst the recommendations of the recent evaluation. The focus group discussion we had with representatives of the local associations showed clearly that they do not feel that they participate actively in the NGO. However they perceive the NGO as a strong and influential partner for specific actions. The attitude these associations have towards the NGO has a strong resemblance with the attitude towards a funding agency: the NGO should provide funding and other kinds of support for them. On the one hand, this perception indicates that the local population and community-based association do not consider the NGO as a participatory structure. On the other hand, we found no clear evidence that the local population and the leaders of the local association make claims for more participation in the NGO. Based on these findings we consider that the NGO is not truly community based in its present configuration.

The NGO's activities are overall effective nowadays and most of them produce positive results. The great efforts that have been made in the past for improving effectiveness have born some fruits. However some programmes systematically set targets they do not seem to be able to meet. The timeliness is unfortunately hampered by the fact that certain European funding agencies seem to pay systematically after the date originally decided upon. These circumstances show the great vulnerability of NGOs depending entirely on external funding.

Concerning the coherence of the NGOs project, the co-existence of a great variety of different programmes, ranging from a social centre to a micro-credit programme (amongst others), is not without creating a certain confusion in the minds of the potential beneficiaries. Whereas the micro-credit programme wants to transform the beneficiaries into responsible self-relying micro-entrepreneurs, the social centre of the same NGO might give hand outs and keep up a fairly paternalistic attitude. Even though all these activities target the local population, the specific target group of each activity might in fact differ. Such a variety of different programmes turns the external communication into a complex task. It is therefore not only difficult to achieve an overall coherence, but also to communicate a coherent image towards the outside.

Conclusion

When summarising this very incomplete attempt to evaluate an NGO in terms of its contribution to governance - from local to national level - the image of a complex situation imposes itself. In an important number of points, this image stays superficial and needs to be completed at a later state. Several obvious aspects have been completely ignored, like a possible influence of the NGO on election participation of the population of this poor slum area.

The evaluation of the criteria linked to the five principals of governance shows that the NGO makes efforts in all five fields, with a success that is variable. Indeed, the NGO's history is a burden, making all significant changes difficult, as well as a strength, providing the NGO with an impressive experience record and a fairly good reputation, in particular outside its direct intervention area. Its particular situation - being a rather non-democratic structure

with a strong link to the area of intervention - makes the evaluation of its role in terms of governance very complex.

The three first principles - openness, accountability and participation - are probably decisive for the representativeness that conditions the role the NGO can play in terms of governance. The NGO is not directly representative of the local population, but it does occasionally speak up in the defence of the local inhabitants. The NGO might not enjoy a great representativeness in absolute terms, but nevertheless, it is relatively representative in comparison to many other NGOs who have much weaker links with the local population.

Whereas the five principles and the representativeness are conditions for obtaining credibility as an actor in favour of governance, the aspect of "bridging the gap between the governing and the governed" refers to specific actions in terms of governance. The NGO of our case study has tried to contribute to building a structured civil dialogue between citizens and governments. However, being not a specific advocacy organisation, this relay function might sometimes be in conflict with the other activities the NGO carries out. A strong fear of being instrumentalised leads to a distrustful attitude and makes the NGO search for a relatively neutral position. Playing a relay function between the governing and the governed is indeed a risky endeavour in the Malagasy society as long as the overall governance in the country has not been further improved.

On a more general level, a certain number of observations can be made. First of all, even more than in any other evaluation, it is necessary to take a historical perspective when evaluating a civil society organisation's contribution to governance. Furthermore, the specific context of the NGO in question has to be taken into account in order to appreciate its strong and weak points as well as the opportunities and threats it might face. Finally, instrumentalisation being one of the hidden dangers of the important role given to NGOs in the general strive for better governance, it is necessary that the NGOs themselves develop their own quality standards which can be decomposed into evaluation criteria and indicators adapted to each specific case, taking the local and historical context into account.

Undoubtedly, the concept of governance stays very abstract in the mind of most citizens, despite its very frequent use in the language of public administration, of politicians, but also of advocacy NGO. The attempts to evaluate the role of the latter in the strive for better governance (the present case study being only a modest preliminary to these efforts) can contribute to make governance more tangible for the citizens. The resulting specification of what governance means and of how these intermediary organisations of civil society can contribute to it, can become an important step in the fight against the monopolisation of good governance by the governing.

NB: The above reflections have been made on the bases of a very operational definition of governance, ignoring the ideological dimensions the term can take. When choosing the definitions underlying the publications and speeches of institutions like the World Bank, the evaluation of the role of NGOs as key actors of governance will necessarily be different. The evaluation of governance must always be founded on a clear statement on what governance means in a given context, in order to avoid ambiguous or even contradictory meanings and a hidden instrumentalisation by a certain ideology.

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Annex

Press release on May 10, 12, 14, 15, 2004, in the following malagasy newspapers: MIDI MADAGASCAR, L'EXPRESS DE MADAGASCAR, MADAGASCAR TRIBUNE, GAZETIKO and LE QUOTIDIEN

APPEL A LA SOLIDARITE

Devant l'inflation galopante et généralisée qui sévit actuellement, le peuple malagasy traverse une situation difficile.

C'est pourquoi l'ONG lance un appel à tous les acteurs de développement, pour contribuer à alléger la misère de la population, surtout les couches les plus défavorisées, particulièrement aux :

- **transporteurs pour qu'ils établissent les tarifs de transport dans la mesure du supportable**
- **grossistes et détaillants pour qu'ils fixent leurs prix de vente avec une marge bénéficiaire minimale.**
- **industriels et producteurs pour qu'ils appliquent des prix en rapport au faible pouvoir d'achat actuel, surtout pour les produits de première nécessité (riz, huile, sel, sucre,...)**

Nous espérons que notre appel trouvera un écho favorable auprès de tous dans l'intérêt général et en conformité avec l'esprit malgache de l'entraide et du « fihavanana ».

**Au nom de l'ONG
XXX
Directeur Général**