



Getting Ready to Start an NGO



Women in Kebkabiya, Sudan, pump water at a system installed by international NGO Oxfam America. The pump provides clean water to 60,000 people displaced by the crisis in Darfur. *AP Images*

Solutions to large global challenges often start with small actions at the local level. Whenever you see a need or a problem in your community, you can make a difference by standing up and taking action. For example, an artist may see young people in his neighborhood with nothing to do after school and start an informal art program. An educator may see young girls from poor families who don't attend school regularly and set up a tutoring program for

them on weekends. A nurse may see that women in her community lack information about basic health services and organize informational workshops.

When you find yourself moved to take action—no matter the challenge or opportunity you choose to address—you will be able to do more when you have more resources and involve more people. That is why you might decide to start a non-governmental organization (NGO).

Recruit a Team

Getting an NGO off the ground requires many different kinds of support, from volunteers to people who can provide resources, to advocates who believe in your efforts. It is up to you to find these people and persuade them to join your cause. Start with people you know—your friends, neighbors, colleagues, and local business owners. Explain why your cause is important and why they should help do something about it. When

you speak with passion and show people what can be done, they will begin to believe in it too.

Define the Vision and Mission

Once you have a small team of people who share your beliefs and are willing to help establish an NGO, you need to develop a shared vision and mission. A vision is a statement about the long-term changes you seek. It describes how people's lives will be better thanks to your work. For example, if the educator who started the tutoring program for girls gets others involved and they set up an NGO called Knowledge for All Girls Now, the vision statement might be “We seek a community in which all girls are educated and empowered to reach their full potential.” Your vision statement should be big and bold.

Next, define the NGO's mission. Your mission is the unique way your organization will contribute to the broader vision. Research how NGOs in your area already work to address the problems and issues that you want to work on and find a gap that needs to be filled. Think about how you can work with rather than compete with existing NGOs.

Perhaps the educator finds that other NGOs focus on providing girls with quality secondary education, but none supports younger girls. So the mission of Knowledge for All Girls Now might be to ensure that all girls in a particular city or region attend and complete primary school.

When an NGO has a powerful vision for change and a clearly defined mission, it is much more likely to be successful. Without vision, others will not be inspired to join your cause. Without a clear mission, your NGO will lack focus and may pursue projects that have little connection to each other. This dilutes the organization's impact. Establishing a shared vision and a clear mission statement is one of the most important things the founding leaders of an NGO can do because it sets the tone for all your other work.



A boy reads in an NGO-run school in India's Himalayas.

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Prioritize and Plan Your NGO

Now that you have a clear vision and mission, you must decide how your NGO will carry them out. It is good to start small. Rather than trying to do everything at once, choose a few projects or activities and do them well. For example, Knowledge for All Girls Now could carry out its mission by educating the community about the importance of sending girls to school, by providing resources so poor families can send their daughters to school and by building schools for girls in rural areas. Your NGO could start with an awareness campaign, using street theater skits to educate the community. Or it could start by getting donations to help families in a particular neighborhood buy books and uniforms for their daughters.

Start by identifying the resources you already have—the people, skills, expertise, and relationships you can tap into. Then think about what you will need to carry out your first projects and activities. Keep in mind that many NGOs start without any formal grants or long-term sources of funding. They get volunteers and start-up donations for projects and seek funding from foundations, government agencies, and the general public once they have results to show for their efforts.



Widows in Afghanistan learn about ways to prevent the spread of waterborne diseases from an aid worker in Kabul. The instructional session was held at a food distribution center run by the international NGO CARE. *AP Images/Karel Prinsloo*

Assign Responsibilities

With the plan for your NGO in place, you will need to develop a structure for getting the work done. Define roles and responsibilities for each member of your organization and set up a reporting structure to keep people working on mission and on schedule. For example, Knowledge for All Girls Now could create an awareness committee to coordinate the street theater project and a donations committee to raise funds for books and uniforms. One of the founders might agree to serve as the volunteer executive director,

providing guidance and support to the committees and building relationships with more supporters. Then they would need to set up the formal board of directors, write the rules to govern the organization, and register the NGO with the relevant government agency in their country.

A Long Journey

Launching an NGO is a powerful way to turn your passion for an issue into lasting change for your community. It is a way to mobilize others to get involved and build something bigger than just one

person. It is also a long journey and a lot of work. It may take many years and many different kinds of skills, resources, and relationships to build an effective and professional NGO. If you begin with a committed team, establish a clear vision and mission, and successfully carry out a small number of projects and activities that make a difference, you will have a strong foundation on which to grow.