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Reframing Financial Independence of NGOs Amid Donor Dependency

Introduction: NGOs and the Illusion of Sustainability

Are NGOs truly building social change, or merely executing donor-driven projects?

This question deserves serious reflection, especially as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continue to play an increasingly prominent role in Indonesia's social development landscape. Over the past two years working in this sector as a Media and Communication Officer, I have witnessed firsthand the complex interplay between idealism, programmatic strategy, and institutional reality. Many NGOs proudly position themselves at the forefront of struggles for social justice, tolerance, and community empowerment. Yet behind the rhetoric of change and empowerment lies a paradox often left unspoken: institutions that advocate for justice frequently fail to embody justice within themselves.

This essay is not meant to generalize or offer absolute truths. I recognize that not all NGOs fall into such patterns. Some have successfully built transparent governance systems, cultivated healthy work environments, and ensured program continuity by empowering local governments or communities to sustain their initiatives. However, many others still grapple with deep-seated internal issues: overwork, underpayment, task assignments beyond job descriptions, and the absence of clear accountability or disciplinary mechanisms for ethical and professional violations.

Such realities reveal that injustice can thrive even in spaces that claim to fight for justice. NGOs—institutions that should ideally model ethical governance—often operate with vulnerable human resources and fragile institutional systems. In this light, the notion of “sustainability” becomes far more complex than simply continuing programs or submitting successful reports. It extends to the sustainability of people and systems that uphold the very values the organization professes to defend.

Much of this problem stems from the project-based funding model that underpins most NGO ecosystems in Indonesia. The cycle is almost formulaic: proposal-approval-implementation-report-closure. During the project term, the organization appears dynamic and productive; once it ends, activities slow down, funding stops, and many contractual staff are forced to move elsewhere. Within this logic, sustainability is often measured through documents, not through enduring social or institutional outcomes.

Moreover, the term *sustainability* itself frequently appears as an administrative buzzword in proposals, rarely evolving into a genuine financial strategy. Many NGOs work tirelessly to empower communities to be self-reliant, while remaining themselves dependent on unpredictable donor cycles. This paradox raises a more fundamental question: how can an organization advocate for social transformation if it lacks the internal capacity and sustainability to sustain itself?

This reflection stems from a conviction that program sustainability is unattainable without organizational sustainability—and that no organization can be sustainable without internal fairness. Hence, NGOs must reorganize on two fronts: building financial independence and ensuring institutional integrity. Financial autonomy and internal justice are not merely ethical imperatives; they are the foundation upon which social movements can endure long after projects end.

II. Root Causes: Donor Dependency and Structural Fragility

Most non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Indonesia operate within a funding system deeply dependent on project-based donor schemes. This model inherently produces an unequal relationship between implementers and funders. On one side, NGOs are constantly required to deliver tangible, measurable outcomes aligned with donor indicators. On the other, the space for strengthening internal institutions is severely constrained, as the majority of funds are allocated to programmatic activities rather than organizational stability.

As a result, many NGOs function in a reactive rather than strategic rhythm. Any shift in donor priorities—say, from democracy to climate change, or from gender equality to digital transformation—immediately triggers a reorientation of programs on the ground. This dynamic creates a chronic dependency in which program sustainability is tied not to institutional resilience but to the continuity of donor projects. Meanwhile, core institutional

expenses—such as internal research, staff capacity development, and governance systems—often receive minimal or no financial support.

This sustainability crisis is exacerbated by the near absence of flexible *core funding* mechanisms. Many grants allow spending only for specific project activities but not for strengthening internal systems. Over time, this produces structurally fragile organizations—entities that appear programmatically active but institutionally hollow. In such an ecosystem, NGOs “survive by reports” rather than by solid institutional foundations.

Yet financial precarity is only one side of a deeper structural weakness. Many NGOs also struggle with internal justice. The pressure to meet project targets frequently results in overwork, underpayment, and unclear divisions of roles and responsibilities. In some cases, weak institutional systems lack effective mechanisms for addressing ethical or professional violations. Consequently, internal disputes are often resolved informally—without transparency, accountability, or adequate protection for those who are harmed.

This situation breeds a painful moral irony: organizations that champion social justice, gender equality, or labor rights externally often fail to uphold those very values within their own walls. Such internal injustices are not merely ethical lapses; they are sustainability failures. An institution that is structurally unhealthy—financially or relationally—cannot sustain its social mission over the long term.

Thus, the root problems facing many NGOs today are twofold: financial dependency on donors and structural fragility within their own institutions. Unless these two issues are understood as interlinked, sustainability will remain a bureaucratic slogan repeated in proposals rather than a living practice within organizations. The challenge for NGOs in the years ahead, therefore, is not merely how to access more funding—but how to build institutional systems capable of sustaining themselves ethically, financially, and humanely.

III. Building Ethical and Independent NGOs

Financial independence for NGOs cannot be achieved merely by submitting more proposals or seeking new donors. It requires a fundamental shift in how organizations think about funding, management, and accountability. In this context, institutional transformation becomes essential—not a change driven solely by programmatic efficiency, but one anchored in financial sustainability and ethical integrity.

Two strategic steps can serve as the foundation for this transformation: establishing an *endowment fund* sourced from management fees and voluntary contributions, and managing low-risk assets as ethical investment instruments to support long-term sustainability. These approaches are not simply technical solutions; they are efforts to reclaim institutional sovereignty—the ability of NGOs to define their own direction and sustain their movements beyond donor cycles.

1. Endowment Fund from Management Fees

In most cases, management fees are understood merely as operational costs charged to projects. Yet, this portion—usually 5 to 10 percent of total funding—could be the starting point for building a permanent endowment. Through deliberate planning, a small fraction of these funds can be allocated to create an *Institutional*

Resilience Fund—a reserve designed to protect the organization’s continuity beyond project lifecycles.

Such a fund is more than just savings; it is a strategy of institutional sovereignty. Managed transparently, it can finance essential activities often neglected by donor budgets: staff training, policy *research*, communications technology development, or experimental initiatives that may not be *bankable* in donor terms. Over time, an endowment allows NGOs to sustain advocacy work independently, without compromising agendas to fit donor priorities.

To ensure legitimacy and sustainability, endowment management must follow strong governance principles: oversight boards, annual public reporting, and external audits. The goal is not capital *accumulation*, but organizational vitality—the ability to serve the public when funding streams end. In this way, management fees cease to be mere administrative costs and become long-term investments in institutional survival.

2. Low-Risk Asset Investment as an Ethical Instrument

Many NGOs remain skeptical toward investment, associating it with profit-driven motives or fearing commercialization. Yet investment need not contradict social values. In a social-institutional context, investment represents an expanded moral responsibility for sustaining one’s mission.

NGOs can allocate a portion of their reserves or project surpluses into low-risk financial instruments such as *sharia-compliant money market funds*, *green bonds*, or *social sukuk (waqf-linked bonds)*. These instruments yield stable returns without violating ethical principles. Globally, several NGOs have already adopted this model of *ethical investing*—directing their portfolios only toward assets aligned with humanitarian and environmental values.

Beyond financial instruments, investment can also take the form of *socially productive assets*: training centers, community coworking spaces, printing units, or data hubs that generate modest income while advancing social goals. These assets embody a principle of *value preservation* rather than *profit maximization*—managing capital to prolong the life of social movements, not to enrich the institution.

This vision can be encapsulated in what might be called **“Peace Capital”**: capital that operates within the moral framework of peace, justice, and social well-being—a form of capital that does not lose its ethics when circulating in economic space. Through such an approach, NGOs not only adapt to modern financial realities but also reaffirm their identity as ethically responsible stewards of social resources.

Financial transformation of this kind is by no means simple. It demands a cultural shift from project orientation to institutional orientation, from short-term management to long-term investment, from mere reporting to strategic accountability. Yet without such a courageous transition, NGOs will remain trapped in a tiring cycle of dependency: constantly saving programs, while slowly losing the very vitality of their institutions.

IV. Reframing Institutional Values

Financial transformation means little without a corresponding transformation of values. Many social organizations are born from idealism, yet fail to translate those ideals into fair and transparent institutional systems. True sustainability is not merely about the continuation of funds or projects; it is about the consistent practice of values within the organization itself.

The issue of internal justice within NGOs remains a rarely discussed irony. Institutions that champion social justice and empowerment often face internal realities that contradict their very missions: overwork without fair compensation, precarious contracts, and ambiguous power relations between management and field staff. In some cases, the absence of sanctions for ethical or professional misconduct exposes weaknesses in institutional governance.

This imbalance is not merely a managerial flaw it is a moral one. NGOs should exemplify the principles of equality, fairness, and participation they promote externally. Yet as long as these values remain unintegrated within their own structures, justice will remain a discourse rather than a lived practice. Simply put, an organization cannot teach democracy if its governance is not democratic; it cannot advocate for workers' welfare while its own employees live in economic uncertainty.

To realign institutional values, NGOs must treat ethics not as a behavioral guide but as an organizational architecture. Ethics should take structural form embedded in work systems, remuneration policies, and decision-making mechanisms. Several concrete reforms can serve as starting points for this transformation:

1. **Proportional and Transparent Remuneration Systems.**

Salary and benefit adjustments should be based on responsibility, performance, and expertise not position or proximity to leadership. Transparency in compensation is a first step toward building internal trust and reducing structural inequality within the organization.

2. **Work-Life Balance.**

An organization advocating social welfare should not neglect the psychological welfare of its own staff. Fair working hours, mental health support, and equitable leave policies are essential acknowledgments of the human beings behind the programs.

3. **Ethical Enforcement and Sanction Mechanisms.**

An ethical institution requires systems capable of consistently upholding its values. Every ethical breach—whether verbal abuse, abuse of power, or data manipulation must be addressed through transparent procedures with clear consequences.

4. **Accountable Leadership.**

Institutional transformation is inseparable from leadership reform. NGO leaders must embody participatory and collective values, create space for dissenting views, and normalize evaluation as a culture rather than a threat.

Reframing institutional values means restoring the moral core of an organization from within. Only then can the financial transformations proposed earlier rest on a foundation of integrity.

Financial independence without ethical integrity risks creating a new form of inequality: an organization rich in resources but poor in values.

Ultimately, NGOs must recognize that social sustainability cannot be built upon internal injustice. A movement that seeks to create a more equitable world must first uphold equity within its own workspace. Reforming values and systems is not merely a moral obligation it is a long-term sustainability strategy that safeguards integrity, public trust, and the vitality of civil society movements.

V. Conclusion

No social program can endure if built upon fragile institutions. As long as NGOs remain fully dependent on donors and ignore justice within their own systems, their empowerment efforts will remain temporary. A movement grounded in humanistic values requires institutions that do not merely survive through projects, but stand upon strong financial and moral foundations.

Financial independence and institutional justice must be seen as two sides of the same coin. Independence without justice risks producing organizations that are technically efficient but spiritually hollow. Conversely, justice without financial independence reduces idealism to a fragile sentiment easily shaken by funding realities. The two must coexist, forming the basis for NGOs that are both resilient and faithful to their values.

To achieve this, NGOs must rethink their understanding of sustainability. Sustainability is not about extending the lifespan of projects—it is about nurturing systems that sustain people, values, and the institutional structures that embody them. This is where endowment funds, ethical investments, and governance reforms become crucial. These are not merely financial tools, but instruments to ensure that social movements can continue beyond the life of a project, and that the values they advocate externally are truly practiced internally.

Such transformation requires courage. It challenges long-held assumptions—that donor dependency is inevitable, or that internal inequality can be excused for a greater cause. Yet it is precisely here that an NGO's integrity is tested: whether it dares to uphold justice without exception, including within its own workspace.

Ultimately, the future of NGOs depends on their ability to uphold two principles simultaneously: financial sovereignty and institutional fairness. Only through this balance can civil society organizations stand firm as pillars of sustainable social change—not merely as project implementers, but as historical actors who preserve human values beyond the limits of time and funding.

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