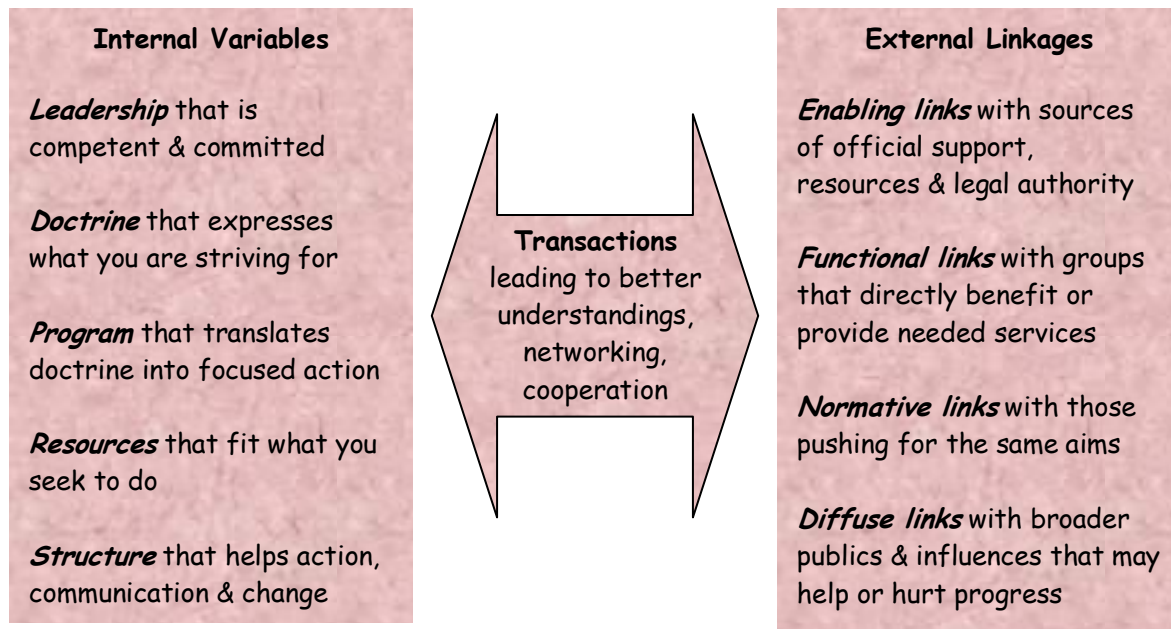


Institution building *When to let go?*

So here you are—an organizer from an environmental NGO (non-government organization) who has been helping people in a community to mobilize efforts to slow down urban sprawl and protect open space. In the past three years you’ve stimulated them to form a partnership of local civic groups, community-minded business leaders, neighborhoods and government officials. The partnership has completed a public information campaign to make local people aware of the problem and some ways to tackle it. It has made plans to establish a land trust as well as to lobby for better land zoning.

You want to help this partnership long enough to give it good odds of being able to flourish on its own two feet. At the same time, you are under pressure to let go as soon as possible, in order to launch similar efforts in other communities. *What considerations should you take into account for deciding when to phase out your assistance?*

In years past, foreign assistance programs faced similar choices. They were helping to build stronger institutions in developing countries related to agricultural research and extension, agrarian reform, watershed management and other needs. So studies were conducted to identify traits of institutions that could be regarded as self-sustainable. This led to a framework (which I’ve modernized a bit) for assessing when institutions could continue on their own, without needing more assistance from outsiders:*



What do you think? Does this “institution building” framework fit your situation? Or are other variables important for self-sustainability of the groups that you are working with?

* This framework was articulated in the 1960s and 70s by Milton J. Esman, professor at the University of Pittsburgh, then at Cornell University. It reflects findings of a team of social science researchers who surveyed U.S. development-assistance projects in a number of countries. Later refinements gave more attention to human dynamics, as well as needs to adapt, but not over-react, to changing circumstances.