

Action at the Grassroots: Fighting Poverty and Environmental Decline

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Reforming Development Assistance

The paradox of the relationship between Third World community movements and international development institutions is that both subscribe to the same goals and both need what the other has, yet only rarely have they worked together effectively. Despite some recent accommodations on each side, many community organizations continue to have deep misgivings about what they perceive as heavy-handed interventionism on the part of multilateral and bilateral bodies such as the World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID). Development agencies, for their part, generally continue to view community organizations as unstable amateurs, junior partners in the serious business of development.

An important distinction untangles the issues that bind foreign assistance---the distinction between aid and development. Much that passes as aid does not foster development, while much development has nothing to do with aid. Real development is the process whereby individuals and societies build the capacity to meet their own needs and improve the quality of their own lives. Physically, it means finding solutions to the basic necessities of nutritious food, clean water, adequate clothing and shelter, and access to basic health care. Socially, it means developing the institutions that can promote the public good and restrain individual excess. Individually, it means self-respect, for without personal dignity economic progress is a charade.

Two fundamental and interrelated questions arise in evaluating development assistance: quantity and quality. The U.S. foreign assistance budget for fiscal year 1988 amounted to \$14 billion, but subtracting military aid and economic support to strategic countries leaves only \$6 billion for development assistance. This remainder is distributed based on criteria more political than humanitarian. Development assistance per capita to El Salvador is three times that to Bolivia, for instance, though Bolivia is a poorer nation by far.

Aid quality is determined by the degree to which development dollars are distributed based on the needs and priorities of the world's poor. Donors' records vary, but few are outstanding. Japanese assistance, which in part because of shifting exchange rates now surpasses American development aid, has traditionally been a slightly disguised form of export promotion, and many nations tie the bulk of their aid to the purchase of equipment produced within their borders. Scandinavian countries' development assistance, while small in absolute terms, sets a high standard for its nonpolitical distribution and its consistent focus on helping the poor. In almost all cases, however, more than half of each aid dollar is spent in the donor nation itself---on machinery, supplies, and salaries for consultants.

Total aid flowing from wealthy to poor nations totaled \$49 billion in 1986. (See Table 2.) International charities such as Oxfam and Save the Children contributed \$3.3 billion, and the remainder came from national governments directly or through multilateral institutions. The World Bank is the centerpiece of the international assistance system, channeling almost \$15 billion in fiscal 1988, of which approximately one-third was lent at low interest rates. An ever growing portion of these funds go not to particular projects but to governments in lump sums in exchange for agreements to change domestic economic policies---known as "structural adjustment." The size of international debt payments puts aid figures in context. In 1988, poor nations gave rich nations \$43 billion more in interest and principal payments than they received in new loans.

Table 2: International Development Assistance, 1986

| Source | Quantity (billion dollars) |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Western Europe | 19.0 |
| United States | 9.6 |
| Japan | 5.6 |
| Soviet Union, Eastern Europe | 4.6 |
| Oil Exporting Nations (OPEC) | 4.6 |
| International Charities | 3.3 |
| | |
| Total * | 49.2 |

*Includes \$2.5 billion from Canada and other sources.

Source: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, *Development Cooperation, 1987 Report* (Paris: 1988).

International development institutions began singing the praises of popular participation in the fifties, but real reform has been slow in coming. For most governments and development agencies, “grassroots participation” means asking peasants and slum dwellers to build their own roads and schools---things those same authorities would never dream of demanding that the rich do. Some European agencies and many charitable donors go further toward putting participation into practice, but still, development assistance that is truly responsive to the initiatives of the poor is rare. Oxfam-UK and its namesakes in Belgium, Canada, and the United States are notable exceptions, having been committed to supporting local initiatives for perhaps longer than any other major charitable donor.

This cautionary note notwithstanding, many development assistance institutions do seem to be in the midst of a period of re-evaluation. Decades of a track record that can at best be termed disappointing has prompted them to look for more people-centered approaches. Real progress has been made in the last year at both the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program in establishing the groundwork for collaborating with the grassroots. A growing fraction of bilateral assistance, meanwhile, is already channeled through northern charities such as CARE, seen by development agencies as a cost-effective alternative to weak or corrupt government ministries. This practice could be a mixed blessing, however, if it jeopardizes the charities’ greatest advantage---autonomy.

Grassroots development seems to have proved its effectiveness to such an extent that large aid donors want to jump on the bandwagon. The problem is, they may jump on with all their weight, without first undergoing the necessary restructuring and reorientation. They could simply try to enlist grassroots groups as new implementation arms for their own plans, rather than going through the process---often a painfully slow one---of learning to plan projects and policies in consultation with the grassroots groups. The gap between aid and development will close only when aid is made accountable to its intended beneficiaries. Institutionalizing accountability to the poor in development agencies requires allowing, even encouraging, the dispossessed to participate in planning and decision making.

Even when development agencies want to work with the grassroots, it is not easy. The basic problem is an intense clash of organizational cultures between the bureaucracy of aid agencies and what could be called the “visionary ad hoc-racy” of community groups. Operating in the context of destitute villages and slums, local groups confront constant change, unstable priorities,

and short-lived opportunities; their working relations are founded not on contractual obligations but on mutual trust. The resulting clash of cultures leaves both sides resentful and discontent. The creative energy and commitment of community workers is wasted filing reports and stifled by arbitrary planning periods. Aid administrators' technical training, meanwhile, is useless in the face of the unpredictability of the grassroots process.

As mentioned above, multilateral development banks pay a growing share of their aid directly into national treasuries to ease the transition to policies aimed at promoting economic growth by attacking inefficiency. These structural adjustment loans, long practiced by the International Monetary Fund but also increasingly by the World Bank, commonly include provisions for currency devaluation, export promotion, privatization of state industries, and drastic reductions in government spending (which generally translates into disproportionate cuts in "soft" budget areas such as health and education). Some of the measures, such as ending state food price controls that discourage peasants from producing surpluses, directly benefit the impoverished, but overall the poor have borne the brunt of structural adjustment.

The development banks could use the same leverage that lets them impose structural adjustments to create an institutional environment supportive of grassroots action. Scores of obstacles to grassroots action are buried in national legal codes and regulatory procedures, and many of them could be taken up in policy-lending negotiations. These include the lack of full legal rights for women and indigenous peoples; insecure legal status for squatters associations, independent development groups, and labor unions; credit rules that exclude those without assets; land titling procedures biased against the illiterate; and development planning procedures that do not allow citizens free access to information. Because policy-based lending experience to date suggests that only a short list of conditions can be included with a single loan, changes in the process of policy formulation might be the top priority. Development donors might, for example, request that grassroots representatives be included in policy discussions between the donor and the government, as the Inter-American Development Bank did in negotiations about a giant development scheme in the Brazilian Amazon.

If participation in policy formulation is to become a reality, however, both grassroots and independent groups will have to do their homework. Many understand local realities well, but do not understand the complexities of things like tax and trade policy. Independent groups, perhaps in federations, could begin forming their own policy research arms to serve as a conduit for the knowledge of the poor, which is often hidden from officials. Development donors could further this process of institution building by hiring local independent groups to monitor and evaluate large development projects and programs.

Most development assistance is given as aid to discrete projects, making reforms in this area crucial. The bulk of this aid comes from bilateral donors, such as AID and the Japanese Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund. Because of the institutional structures of the donors, aid is held accountable primarily to donor country political and commercial interests. Washington, D.C.-based development critics Doug and Steve Hellinger write: "An aid institution that is unshielded from outside influences will organize itself internally to respond to those influences rather than to the intended beneficiaries of the aid." A first priority for reforming project aid, therefore, is to insulate it from such forces. In the case of AID, this could be done by separating true development assistance from military and political aid and vesting it in a streamlined institution that has a clear mandate and considerable autonomy.

In the United States, the government-funded Inter-American Foundation provides a model of such an autonomous development institution. Granting sums generally under \$100,000 to grassroots groups and independent development organizations through an experienced field staff, IAF reports to a board of directors rather than to Congress or the White House, and is thus protected from foreign policy priorities. In 1980, Congress created a parallel body called the African Development Foundation, which is just now getting off the ground. The Swedish International Development Authority is similarly shielded from political pressures so it can concentrate on responding to the needs of its constituency.

Constructing an institutional defense is only half the task of making aid accountable to those it is intended to benefit. The second half is drastically shortening the distance between project funders and poor people. As the Hellingers put it, "It is not difficult to see the absurdity of people thousands of miles away continually shaping new solutions to problems they have never experienced . . . for the purpose of assisting people whom they have never consulted." Bilateral agencies would be better in tune with local needs, opportunities, and institutions if the vast majority of their employees lived among the poor in the Third World, both in capital cities and in remote regions. This step in itself would turn top-down institutions into bottom-up ones and lower costs simultaneously.

Local aid representatives could provide funding, advice, and information to grassroots groups, local governments, and other institutions that proved their capacity and commitment to furthering the interests of the poor. Funding could go either for specific projects or, preferably, for general institutional support. For many development agencies, the concept of development translates in practice into a series of discrete, defined projects: elaborately planned and budgeted undertakings with limited schedules and long lists of prescribed procedural steps. For community groups, by contrast, development is a process that at various points may involve particular efforts such as digging wells or planting trees, but that has neither a beginning nor an end, nor a final evaluation or project document. Shifting emphasis to the support of institutions would better mesh aid with local needs. General support for independent community organizers could promote grassroots organizations in the areas of the world like north Africa where few currently exist.

Two smaller problems also reduce the quality of project aid. Within assistance agencies, administrators are often rewarded for the number of dollars they move across their desks rather than their sensitive support of the local process of change. It is no surprise that they choose large, capital-intensive endeavors. Most development projects are, in this sense, "funding-led", development, by contrast, is people-led. Those closest to the process of grassroots development rightfully warn that overfunding can subvert local control, distort community priorities, promote capital-intensive technologies over effective local ones, and fuel jealousy between organizations that should be allies. Conversely, lack of funds for necessary purchases of outside supplies causes the failure of myriad community efforts. If funding matches and grows with an institution's capacity to employ those funds effectively, development will be fostered.

The second problem is the burden of paperwork that paralyzes many agencies. An institutionalized fear of misappropriation and graft creates what one AID employee terms an "ambience of pre-emptive cowardice" in large development organizations. Required to account for every cent distributed and tabulate very benefit delivered, assistance agencies demand reams of accounts and reports, prior approval of all decisions, and elaborate planning that extends to minutiae. A British researcher reports that the quarterly accounts a German agency required of a tiny Bengali independent group "weighed over two kilograms and included . . . a line item and supporting vouchers for the food supplied to the dog that guards the stores."

Ironically, despite the paperwork mountains, useful evaluations of grassroots development experiences---as opposed to government projects---are rare, making learning from the past difficult. Finding fruitful but streamlined ways of evaluating and auditing grassroots organizations is therefore a priority. The case of CEDEAGRO, a committed independent group from the central Bolivian valley of Misque, shows how donors and independent development organizations can learn together. Since 1984, CEDEAGRO has gone through annual participatory self-evaluations with a community-development specialist supported by the Belgian charity SOS Faim. The process takes a week and gives everyone a chance to discuss flaws in the group's work. The specialist then writes a report for the funders and CEDEAGRO summarizing the findings.

Of all development funders, international charities have the greatest flexibility, which gives them the opportunity to show multilateral and bilateral donors the way to carry out truly participatory development. Already, at international conferences, the outlines of a new assistance compact between charities and grassroots groups are beginning to take shape. Under the emerging consensus Third World independent and grassroots groups would shoulder more of the responsibility for direct work, as their industrial-country partners gradually retreat to a funding and support role. Simultaneously, international charities would work harder to educate the public in industrial nations about the reality of life in the developing world and encourage their governments to think of the poor as they debate policies on international debt, finance, trade, and foreign affairs. Charities in the industrial world can be a voice for the planet's poor that the wealthy will hear.

Deep down, working with the grassroots is a philosophical attitude, an allegiance. "Grassroots development is a way of traveling, more than a goal," writes Pierre Pradervand, a French collaborator with Naam. "It means being ready to travel in a mammie wagon *with* people---with all the delays, punctures, breakdown, and sweat that implies---rather than driving along in one's air conditioned Range Rover with two spare wheels, cool Coke in the icebox, and a fixed timetable."

From the Bottom and the Top

Despite the heartening rise of grassroots action, humanity is losing the struggle for sustainable development. For every peasant league that stanches the hemorrhage of topsoil from a watershed, dozens more fail. For each neighborhood that rallies to replace a planned waste incinerator with a recycling program, scores remain mired in inaction. Spreading today's grassroots mobilization to a larger share of the world's communities is an indispensable step toward putting an end to the global scourges of poverty and environmental degradation. Indeed, while national development in the orthodox model places primacy on accumulating capital and improving technology, sustainable development is built first on the mobilization of people.

All local groups eventually collide with forces they cannot control. Peasant associations cannot enact supportive agricultural policies or build roads to distant markets. Women's groups cannot develop and test modern contraceptive technologies or rewrite bank lending rules. Neighborhood committees cannot implement city-wide recycling programs or give themselves a seat at the table in national energy planning. Thus, perhaps the greatest irony of community action for sustainability is that communities cannot do it alone. Small may be beautiful, but it can also be insignificant.

The prospects for grassroots progress against poverty are further limited in a world economy in which vested interests are deeply entrenched and power is concentrated in a few nations. Tight monetary policies and federal budget deficits in the United States drive up interest rates worldwide, and protectionism in Europe and Japan curtails markets for many Third World exports. The combination of international debt payments and industrial-country trade barriers costs developing

nations close to three times what they receive in development assistance each year. Thus reforms at the international level are as important as those in the village.

The largest challenge in reversing global deterioration is to forge an alliance between local groups and national governments. Only governments have the resources and authority to create the conditions for full-scale grassroots mobilization. As grassroots development theorist Sheldon Annis writes: "It may well be that wildflowers grow by themselves. But grassroots organizations do not. They are cultivated, in large measure, by just policies and competent government agencies that do their job."

In the rare cases where national-local alliances have been forged, extraordinary gains have followed. South Korea and China have used village-level organizations to plant enormous expanses of trees, implement national population policies, and boost agricultural production. Zimbabwe has trained over 500 community-selected family planners to improve maternal and child health and control population growth. After the 1979 Nicaraguan revolution, a massive literacy campaign sent 90,000 volunteers into the countryside; in one year, they raised literacy from 50 to 87 percent.

In 1984, Burkina Faso immunized three-fourths of its children against measles, meningitis, and yellow fever in the space of three months. Kenya is waging war on soil erosion, as several thousand women's groups terrace mountainsides with crude shovels and hoes. And during World War II, millions of Soviet, American, Asian, and European civilians recycled materials, conserved energy, and planted victory gardens to boost food production. Today, the threat to global security from environmental degradation merits a similar mobilization.

The mechanisms governments have employed to form these partnerships with grassroots groups vary enormously. In China and South Korea, local organizations are virtually an extension of the state, allowing ready mobilization. In Burkina Faso, the government coordinated the logistics of the immunization campaign linking international agencies to village committees. In Kenya, authorities develop appropriate soil conservation techniques by improving on farmers' traditional methods through a process of consultation. The techniques are disseminated by mobilizing extension officers and local officials to work with Kenya's thousands of women's groups and people's organizations. What seems universal among these cases is that government agencies have treated local groups respectfully and as true partners.

A number of intermediate levels exist between government-grassroots mistrust and full-fledged partnership, and the goal of both sides should be to climb to progressively higher levels. After all, many things can be accomplished short of a wholesale government-grassroots mobilization. No state is monolithic; even in President Ferdinand Marcos's Philippines, the National Irrigation Administration transformed itself into a people-centered institution, cooperating with peasant associations. Such changes are already promoted by grassroots groups and could be supported by multilateral institutions like the World Bank. Indeed, international development agencies might look on their role broadly as building the groundwork for grassroots-government partnerships.

Full-scale community-state alliances can only come about when a motivated and organized populace joins forces with responsive leadership. But herein lies the greatest obstacle to mobilizing for sustainability: few leaders are committed to promoting popular organizations. Because government's first concern is almost always to retain power, independent-minded grassroots movements generally seem more of a threat than an ally. Unrepresentative elites rule many nations and all too often they crush popular movements rather than yield their prerogatives;

elsewhere, powerful interests vehemently defend the status quo. Inevitably, self-help will clash with these forces, because like all development, self-help is inherently political: it is the struggle to control the future. Environmental movements, meanwhile, make no bones about the political nature of their methods.

Grassroots-government alliances cannot be formed where governments do not want them. But that does not lessen the importance of grassroots organizations. To the contrary, the best hope for pressing governments to work with local groups is local groups themselves. Indeed, over the long run, community groups could fundamentally alter the world's political landscape. Self-help organizations formed in Philippine slums in the seventies, for example, played an important role in the "people's power" revolution that toppled the Marcos dictatorship in 1986.

The motto of grassroots development that emerged from the seventies was "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, teach him to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." That aphorism turned out, however, to be triply flawed. First, women---even more than men---were the ones who needed fish; second, the rich controlled the fishing rights; and third, fish stocks were dwindling. Because self-reliant localism cannot tackle the broader issues of resource distribution, legal rights, and ecological decline, many self-help movements have turned increasingly to political struggle, bringing them more into line with industrial-country environmental groups that have long operated by political means.

Where governance is undemocratic, however, political struggle holds the potential to erupt into conflict and confrontation, and to end in repression. In 1987, East German police raided an environmental group's library in an East Berlin church, and the same year, a number of prominent Malaysian environmental and consumer advocates were jailed in a broad crackdown. Human rights organizations are as important to building a sustainable world as are environmental and hunger groups.

At base, grassroots action on poverty and the environment comes down to a question of the rights of people to shape their own destiny. The United Nations-sponsored World Commission on Environment and Development is unequivocal on this question. In the landmark report Our Common Future the commissioners write, "The pursuit of sustainable development requires a political system that secures effective citizen participation in decision making," and they outline the components of an approach to governance that promotes citizen action. Enforcing the common interest requires

greater public participation in the decisions that affect the environment. This is best secured by decentralizing the management of resources upon which local communities depend, and giving these communities an effective say over the use of these resources. It will also require promoting citizens' initiatives, empowering people's organizations, and strengthening local democracy.

Some large-scale projects, however, require participation on a different basis. Public inquiries and hearings on the development and environment impacts can help greatly. . . . Free access to relevant information and the availability of alternative sources of technical expertise can provide an informed basis for public discussion. When the environmental impact of a proposed project is particularly high, public scrutiny of the case should be mandatory and

wherever feasible, the decision should be subject to prior public approval, perhaps by referendum.

Around the world, community organizations are doing their best to put this participatory vision into practice, and they are simultaneously posing a yet deeper question. In the world's impoverished South it is phrased, "What is development?" In the industrial North it is, "What is progress?" Behind the words, however, is the same profoundly democratic refrain---What kind of society shall our nation be? What kind of lives shall our people lead? What kind of world shall we leave to our children? The rethinking that the world's grassroots movements are doing brings fresh hope: Who, if not these millions of local organizations, can build the institutional foundations and define the guiding values for sustainable societies?

At the grassroots, campaigns are underway on every continent: In the war-ravaged south of Zimbabwe, villagers assemble at dusk to plan the wells and ditches they will dig to combat drought. In a Brazilian favela, young doctors work with a team of neighborhood women to teach preventive health care. In a Romanian city, an underground environmental movement gathers data on the pollution that laces their air and water.

Whether these scattered beginnings rise in a global groundswell depends only on how many more individuals commit their creativity and energy to the challenge. The inescapable lesson for each of us is distilled in the words of Angeles Serrano, a grandmother and community activist from Manila's Leveriza slum. "Act, act, act. You can't just watch."