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Are International Private Voluntary Organizations Preaching What They Practice?

G. David Miller

ABSTRACT

The concept of community development organizations providing assistance to communities in furthering the goals of community participation and self-help is conflictive. Providing institutionalized assistance often fosters dependency rather than advancing participation and self-help. The author examines goal statements of twenty leading American private voluntary organizations (PVOs) carrying out international community development. Eighteen of the twenty espouse self-help, yet concentrate more on delivering assistance than promoting empowerment. Their idea of self-help consists of supporting community level administration of resources rather than advocating actual community control. Most PVOs are donor-driven and transfer that dependency to the communities they serve. This raises the question of who is the client of the PVO, the donor or the community? An alternative model is proposed in which development organizations compete in a free market. In this way, communities can select services according to their needs.

Participation, or empowerment, is part of the process and definition of development (Bryant and White, 1982:205).

The practice of community development has traditionally maintained a delicate balance between the interests of the practitioner and those of the

community. One side seeks opportunities for intervention and assistance. The other works toward self-help and independence. Often problems arise when the interests of the two sides become less than complementary. This occurs when efforts of intervention and assistance on the part of the practitioner become intrusive and patronizing; or when the desire for self-help and independence of the community becomes rejecting and uncooperative.

Community level "participation" and "self-help," as well as "reaching out" and "helping others" are the warp and woof of the Made-in-America fabric of community development. A brochure recently arrived on my desk advertising a graduate program in community development asks, "Do you *want* to *assist* people develop more *self-reliant* communities . . . ? (italics added). The qualities of assistance and self-reliance are two traditions that are equally ingrained in American society and yet they might not always be compatible. For that reason, "assisting self-reliance" can become problematic. Often the self-reliance side of the equation may be an inadequate match for the onslaught of assistance coming from the other side.

If assisting self-reliance is the interventionist strategy of choice of the community developer, it must be serving a want or need of the interventionist. Yet what, we may ask, is it doing for the client? Theorists agree that "the core of the community development movement and method is to help people help themselves . . ." (Schwartz, 1978:237). But what does this really mean? What kind of services can the community development profession offer a community seeking meaningful participation in its own development?

Goodell (1984:273) points out that "the most common approach to building local capacity for economic development simply takes out to the poor the amenities we know they need." This conveyor belt approach to development merely contributes to the concomitant sense of helplessness in the local people.

Such an approach does more for the empowerment of the local professionals, planners and third world elites than it does for the community. It keeps community development professionals, together with their grassroots surrogates, holding a firm grip on the development process. Some administrative decisions may be relinquished and some responsibility relegated to the local level. Still this is not the same as recognizing that the community holds political power and maintains control over its resources. Participation, once the philosophical cornerstone of the liberal campaign for empowerment of the poor and enfranchisement of the dispossessed, now serves as the rationale for the conservative call for eliminating centralized assistance programs or, at least, reducing their cost.

Decentralization of assistance is supposed to reduce the dependency of the periphery upon the center, thereby fostering independence. Decentralization is also supposed to eliminate the burdensome overlay of top-heavy administration, thereby reducing cost. For this reason, the monolithic development assistance

organizations such as USAID and World Bank are encouraging the growth of local community development initiatives. They look to a growing cadre of expatriate and local private voluntary organizations (PVOs) to support these initiatives. This is carried out in the name of decentralization.

Once these PVOs have been tapped by the donor agencies to be their surrogates, they are donor driven. As Stanton (1970) asserts, there is a motivation to package their product to serve the donor. In order to remain alive and grow, they must continually marshal resources from the donor community. Yet, without greater local control over the use of resources, this process merely shifts the administrative burden from the donor community to the local community with none of the benefits.

Participation can easily turn into a cliché for those administering development; it is all too easy to affirm its value, while doing little to make it a reality. Traditionally those concerned with participation have emphasized the political process. Now there is an increasing tendency to look to administrative processes as the arena within which people can be more effective and more easily involved (Bryant and White, 1982:224).

As the PVOs channel resources down to the lowest level of the dependence chain, they encourage local participation in the administration and distribution of these resources. Although this helps reduce cost and builds an appearance of local control, it does little to build local empowerment and break the client/patron relationship.

Many PVOs portray themselves as community development organizations yet fail to make the distinction between local administrative participation and local empowerment. They would prefer to “. . . conceive of their role as long-term conduits of external resources to mobilized villagers . . . ” (Gran, 1982:146). Local people are given the administrative responsibility of distributing these resources, but little else. It is easier for PVOs to fundraise among their traditional supporters in the United States for the purposes of “helping” and “assisting” local projects rather than for the less tangible and more risky tasks of promoting, advocating, or encouraging local empowerment.

In the former role, the PVO serves as benefactor or donor, perpetuating an unequal relationship. The community remains a beneficiary or recipient. In the latter role, the PVO becomes an intermediary in the sense of a wholesaler or jobber of ideas and services. As intermediaries, the PVOs then become advocates, “. . . defenders against assaults by elites; idea brokers and catalysts on matters of social mobilization; trainers of local group organizers; and advisors on the social implications of technology choices, market information, legal and political empowerment and credit mechanisms” (Gran, 1982:146). The

community then becomes a consumer, with the choice and power of a consumer in a free market economy. With local empowerment, a consultant-consumer relationship evolves where the PVOs and communities become equal players.

I decided to look at a number of leading American-based community development PVOs in order to determine which of these roles they have selected for themselves—benefactor, intermediary, or perhaps some form of hybrid. I wanted to look at how they envision their particular roles by examining how they communicate those roles to their public. Each of these organizations has a mission statement. By studying their mission statements we can gain a sense of how they choose to present themselves. The decision to look at the mission statements is based upon the following assumptions:

1. A mission statement is the product of considerable study, analysis and decision making on the part of the organization's leadership.
2. The language used is selected after careful deliberation with the purpose of communicating to funders, staff and clients what it is that sets them apart, in a highly competitive field, from the other organizations in the business of development.
3. Mission statements must contain an action statement, a descriptor of the object(s) of this action and some indication as to who is carrying out this action.
4. Mission statements are addressing an audience important to the organization.

I selected the PVOs according to the information provided by the TAICH Directory of Development Assistance Abroad (1983) as the most comprehensive listing of American PVOs operating overseas. It was compiled by the Technical Assistance Information Clearing House (TAICH)¹ operated by the American Council of Voluntary Agencies for Foreign Service, Inc. under contract with the United States Agency for International Development. I reviewed the program descriptions of the 189 PVOs among the 497 non-profit organizations listed. Using the following criteria, I identified 20 organizations whose mission statements I examined:

1. The organization fits the TAICH definition of a voluntary agency: "a non-profit organization established by a group of private citizens for a stated philanthropic purpose, and supported by voluntary contributions

¹TAICH no longer exists.

from individuals concerned with the realization of its purposes'' (TAICH:vii).

2. Community development is listed as a major program activity.
3. The PVO operates on an annual budget of over \$1,000,000.
4. There is no stated religious focus.
5. It operates in more than one region of the world.

According to the language in the mission statements, I classified them as either benefactors or intermediaries. In the first (benefactor) category are organizations which provide a direct resource transfer. They deliver goods and services. Although they often make reference to local involvement in the process at some level, involvement is qualified. The second group makes a firm statement about local people playing a decisive role as equal partners in the implementation process.

Goal statements in the first category begin with such phrases as: to assist, to generate, to support, to provide, or to improve. They connote a unidirectional provision of resources from the benefactor to the beneficiary. They suggest less than parity in the relationship.

Goal statements in the second category use the words "encourage," "advocate" or "promote." This suggests an equal partnership as earlier described by Gran (1982) in which the PVO serves as catalyst, advisor, ideas broker, trainer and defender against assaults by elites.

An example of a category one goal statement is:

To assist in the human and economic development of African countries by the development of water resources, increased food production, delivery of basic health services, and emergency assistance to refugees.

This PVO could carry out its mandate even if there were no one home in Africa.

Here is another example of category one:

To improve the quality of life and defend the rights of children; to help needy communities develop the skills and institutions necessary to insure a secure future for their children. Focus is on community self-help through community organization, training and technical assistance.

Even though we all are for the defense of children and helping and organizing needy communities, it might be better if this PVO were less intrusive. At whose behest are they defending the rights of children? Who decides what community is needy? Who decides what skills are needed? And who organizes

the community? It appears that this PVO seeks communities in which to administer a rather set agenda. It might be better if they would be straightforward about offering the training and technical assistance without the rest of the rhetorical baggage.

An example of category two is:

To promote the full participation of women in the social, economic and political life of their countries.

There is little room for equivocation in this statement. It should be noted that, except for its switchboard operator, this PVO is run entirely by women, its constituent group.

Of the twenty PVOs examined, only two were strongly category two. In the other eighteen, the message of category one was predominant. Among these eighteen, three showed some ambiguity as to whether they wanted to promote and encourage development or provide assistance. An example of this type is:

To encourage and assist the development of human productivity; to generate greater income and employment in underdeveloped areas.

Perhaps the cloudiness in the language represents a deeper dilemma as to the purpose of this organization. This organization, in fact, recently underwent a period of reassessing its mission.

Many of the PVOs, particularly the child sponsorship agencies, find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. They are caught between a donor community at home which looks closely at how much of their contribution ends up in the hands of a beneficiary group on the one hand and communities abroad who want to play a greater role in managing those resources on the other. What happens is that program departments of PVOs must follow the lead of their fundraising departments by channeling monies in ways that will assure more future revenue. "As everyone knows, the first rule of organizational behavior is survival" (Lackey, 1987:39).

This often leads to playing it safe by supporting community development activities already underway, contributing to them and then putting the organization's logo on them. It appears that many of the community development PVOs serve as multi-service organizations. Sometimes they provide disaster assistance, reconstruction and rehabilitation when needed. Other times they provide what they call "integrated development."

Integrated development is really a one-stop development supermarket. It offers everything a community will need in the line of development from revolving loan funds to maternal/child health care. Such services are often accompanied by some funding. Access to this outside funding is no small

consideration for village leadership which must make difficult program choices. When Willie Sutton, a notorious American bank robber was asked why he robbed banks, he was reputed to answer, "Why, that's where the money is!" Often programmatic directions lead toward where the money is.

Moreover, PVOs offering this supermarket of services must keep their large technical staffs fully occupied in order to justify their high cost. Therefore, a variety of incentives and subtle pressures are applied to local elites to encourage their cooperation. Such an approach contributes to an ongoing client/patron relationship and an actual disincentive to local communities to take steps necessary for their own empowerment.

Alternative models can be found in the specialist organizations which offer clearly defined, discrete, state-of-the-art technologies. Such organizations advertise their capabilities and compete for the patronage of development communities. Each organization offers a specialization, whether it be skills training in financial management, marketing, or implementing a project such as setting up a desk-top communications network, revolving loan fund, or capital development project. Such an approach requires political participation on the part of the community in making decisions, setting goals, and identifying resources. Skills training is the predominant resource being sought by a community taking control. Having access to state-of-the-art skills is the key to empowerment. If communities in the periphery can have the same level of technology as those in the center, then they can interact as equals; they can compete for resources and they can compete in the marketplace. There are already catalogues of development organizations which offer skills training.² Individuals and community groups can select the training program which best fits their needs. Just like any other educational organization, these training programs can fundraise and seek support according to a track record of how well they are filling the needs of their constituency. These institutions are consumer-driven, rather than donor-driven.

There are a variety of these specialist institutions—management consulting firms, training institutes, communication networks, professional associations, advocacy groups—all ready to market their services in creative ways to an increasingly sophisticated and growing consumer market. One example from a growing literature of consumer guides in this field is the Ford Foundation funded study (Range, 1988) which looked at over five hundred educational and training institutions within the United States. The study identified nine institutions that it recommends for short-term management training programs for women from developing countries.

²Two examples that I draw upon often are Robertson (1987) and Korsmeyer (1989).

If PVOs expect to compete in this marketplace, they have to look closely at their mission statements and ask themselves, "Who is the client, the donor or the community?" They must ask if their statement of purpose accurately reflects the way they see themselves, the way they wish to be seen by others, and, most importantly, the way they actually do business. When it comes time to seek grants or loans to carry out a particular development project, it is the community itself that must apply directly to the funder. As this begins to happen, the PVO will have to change its mission to one of intermediary.

As funding organizations evaluate the current directions of development assistance and reset their development goals, then the Willie Sutton syndrome will put the PVOs into the dilemma of being dynamic or being dinosaurs. One example of such an evolution taking place is among the child sponsorship agencies. Originally functioning as check-to-child programs, they now describe themselves primarily as community development organizations. Although they are now allocating most of their program funds to community development activities, they are faced with the problem of not alienating the thousands of individual sponsors who like to feel that their money goes directly to support a particular child. These organizations are actively trying to change attitudes among their sponsorship from wanting a cash transfer program to one supporting development assistance. Although many of these same organizations are moving from behaving as benefactors to serving as intermediaries, they must constantly look behind them in order not to move too far out front of their funders. As donor organizations reassess the goals of community development, as prevailing attitudes about development assistance change in the general public, and as PVOs are able to demonstrate the usefulness of an intermediary strategy, these organizations will eventually feel more comfortable about preaching what they practice.

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