Learning On Our Feet

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Learning on our feet
Today's development catechism says aid through small but sensitive agencies is most effective. But good intentions and clear analysis of the problems of poor communities are not enough to avoid
all the pitfalls. Brian Murphy explores the cultural gap that divides the Western donor from the Third World recipient.

I am bumping along with several campesino leaders in an old Toyota 4-wheel drive through the Salvadoran countryside. The gutted path which serves as a road jars our teeth as we wind our way deeper into the dry countryside. The road is but one small reminder of the struggle and toil of rural people in a country that stirs the emotions. We are on our way to visit an agricultural cooperative that receives support from Inter Pares, the Canadian NGO with whom I work.

We are greeted with enthusiasm and warmth as we make our way through the fields of dried maize stalks to the recently-completed communal building - a source of co-op pride. Business can wail. First we are treated to songs accompanied by a make-shift band: hand-made guitars, a fiddle and a big bass. Then it's time to eat a hearty meal of rice, stew and tortillas. Finally, it's business and the co-op members eagerly bring us up to date on their progress and problems. They are very excited about the new cattle-fattening project they have begun with our help and they want us to trek out to the pasture.

But Inter Pares had not originally agreed to fund a cattle-fattening project.

We examined and agreed to support a project for raising *poultry*. It had looked good on paper: a community-based project that would generate some income and improve nutrition and food self-sufficiency for co-op members. The local co-op developed the poultry project, after consulting with the overall Salvadoran co-op federation, because they thought that project dollars were tied to the idea of poultry. When the cheque arrived, the members held a meeting and some objected to wasting the money on chickens.

They had some good reasons. No one in the co-op had any experience with large-scale poultry farming. The markets were far away. And since they had written the project proposal the cost of imported feed and medicine for the chickens had risen sharply and the price of poultry and eggs was tumbling. Everyone seemed to be promoting chicken projects. But most important, members had experience in raising cattle and this is what they wanted to do. The price was stable. People understood the cost factors better. The main feed was natural pasture near the co-op. The nearest large town was a well-established livestock marketplace.

The campesino leaders explained to the co-op federation that the poultry project, in part a loan, would only put them more in debt. If no one had any objections they would rather go ahead with their own plans. And they were right. The co-op earned $1000 on their first sale of cattle while poultry

projects all around them were going bust. This experience caused us to re-examine with other co-ops whether the original plans had perhaps been made without sufficient guidance from the experts in the co-ops themselves. Similar revisions were made in other projects.

This story has a happy ending. But it is all too common that when government aid agencies and NGOs stumble in their efforts to help, the results are unhappy and often quite destructive. The Salvadoran experience brought home again an important truth: although development agencies organize their work and funding in terms of 'projects' this is not the way Third World people live their lives. The essence of a project is the isolation of a specific activity - a garden, a kindergarten, a health clinic - from the ongoing life of the community. For the funder, 'projects' are an essential administrative and fund-raising device. But projects are artificial to the lives of the poor.

The gap between formulating a project and the actual arrival of the funds can be a matter of dark humour. Funds for seeds may arrive too late for planting season. Materials for a community housing project may not arrive until the middle of the rainy season. What happens when a flood washes away fields and homes in a village where you have just approved funds for an irrigation system? At the same time, funders often demand from grassroots groups an efficiency and quality in reporting that we rarely achieve ourselves.

Communities are not static. Project descriptions and budgets can quickly become outdated: development in the raw rarely follows a timetable. The life of a peasant can change dramatically in the several months needed for bureaucratic approval. Earthquakes, disease, a coup in the capital, or simply a drop in the price of sorghum can disrupt carefully laid plans and change priorities over night. Even in the best of circumstances, it is difficult for those of us in the world of 'professional development' to remember that we have entered into a process of change that must be creative and inventive if it is to have a positive outcome. Better for our partners to make *their* own successes

and failures than so acquiesce in our mistakes in order to meet *our* idea of success.

Projects should not be ends in themselves. They are also a means to help challenge the economic and political structures which keep many in the Third World poor and powerless. For example, a community clinic can be a way of empowering people to take control over the forces that destroy health. But it can also be a small step toward confronting the local political and economic forces which cause the poverty that makes people and communities vulnerable to disease in the first place. This carries development into the realm of politics, a realm that tends to make some donors quite uncomfortable. But if we are to be more than technocrats and poverty bureaucrats, we must have the flexibility and insight to go beyond charity to a more profound definition of development that empowers the poor.

To do this, our support must be more than just a cheque. Western NGOs are, in fact, more dependent on raising funds than many of our Third World partners. Projects are the lifeblood of non-government organizations and their main reason for existence. In Canada alone this type of activity supports some 5000 workers doing project management, education and fund-raising. If you take into account those employed by government aid bureaucracies and related institutions (universities, professional associations) you can more

than double this figure.

Our partners *do* need financial support, but they need much more. They need international partners who will stand by them when their rights and even their lives are threatened by those whose wealth and power are endangered by demands for safe working conditions or land to grow food. Canadian agencies such as Inter Pares recently intervened on behalf of members of the Salvadoran agricultural co-operative movement who were rounded up by the police in 1986. We are also putting pressure on our own government to restrict large-scale bilateral aid to Central American governments who refuse to allow the political space for grassroots development.

The popular church has shown that genuine help for the poor means Christians must 'accompany' the poor in their lives and in their struggle. This means taking responsibility for the consequences of projects' which can often spark confrontation and sometimes violent repression of our Third World partners. We are there when assistance is safe and non-controversial. We should also be there when the road is dangerous, as it is now in the villages of El Salvador and Guatemala, in the shantytowns of Chile, or in war-torn Mozambique and Eritrea. This commitment to 'accompany' will allow us to grapple with the problems of providing support to faraway grassroots organizations across barriers of culture and politics, to say nothing of the barriers of our own ignorance.

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