

## IV DEVELOPMENT AND THE VOLUNTARY AGENCY

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Development is concerned with changing situations for the better, whether it be a major dam project to modify the agricultural possibilities of a whole river basin, or a modest training programme to turn an unskilled youth into a village tailor or shoemaker. It embraces the big scheme and the small. So long as the end benefit is greater than the cost of achieving it, development aid (even when inefficient and wasteful) makes a positive contribution - although at times determining who benefits, and who loses, and to what extent is less easy than it seems.

Nevertheless, this general rule of thumb applies to voluntary agencies in their development activities just as it does to the World Bank and the other giants of the world-embracing development industry. By their fruits shall they be known; not by the pictures on the seed packets. Not by the intentions expressed; but by what the given resources have sparked off in the situation to which they were committed.<sup>2</sup>

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2 The annual aid contributions of the voluntary and missionary societies of Great Britain has been guessed as possibly totaling around £15 million. Even against the total of British Government aid, it is a small sum; but not insignificant. Collected in bits and pieces, it represents a lot of people who don't want to shut the door on the clamant, importunate, and increasingly irritating countries of the Third World

As is well known nowadays, development aid is only one part of the development process. It is the catalytic effect of outside aid in stimulating local effort that really matters, its use in encouraging the desire and the will to make the changes that add up to development and progress. The main effort must come at local level in the developing country.

No mention of the role of the voluntary agency would be complete without alluding to this catalytic function. "Helping people to help themselves" is in: doling out relief is out - except, of course, in those emergency situations which have unhappily - from Bihar to Biafra, from the Middle East to Tunisia - become all too numerous. Yet the implication of this is not always kept in mind when projects are funded, for these are not infrequently decided upon without much reference to the people whose willing participation at the far end will determine just how much genuine development occurs. The very nature of the voluntary agency's own fund-raising process may lead it to determine in advance the kind of aid that is desirable or most expedient for it to give. The Freedom from Hunger Campaign saw many town and village committees raising money for tractors with the help of farmers' clubs and so on: tractors which, in many cases, far from stimulating agricultural production, began to gather rust in jungle clearings within a few weeks of their arrival.

Because voluntary agencies are dependent on the money they raise, they have to keep one eye constantly on the public. This can lead to over-support of projects that are photogenic; field workers born with more than a fair share of charisma or those with descriptive pens may be able to extract from agencies that are not too plentifully endowed with field investigators

rather more resources than a dispassionate evaluation of their efforts would consider appropriate. Tibetan resettlement schemes in India at one time received a disproportionate amount of aid from a plethora of agencies whose representatives had met the Dalai Lama, and had subsequently realised the fund-raising possibilities afforded by those colourful exiles from the roof of the world. The costs of several of the Tibetan projects were high for the numbers benefitting, and there was a good deal of concern because the per capita aid to the Tibetans was so much higher than that received by their Indian village neighbours.

Earmarked funds, set aside to meet the wishes of the donors, can lead to problems, since the original situations for which the funds were raised do not remain static. Voluntary agencies do what they can to educate their constituencies to support general programmes so that they can respond relevantly both to new needs and to existing programmes for which support is still required. It is this relevant response to the development situation - the trained volunteer with the right equipment; making the seed and fertilizer available to a group of progressively motivated farmers; the well-boring rig that will increase the irrigable land area for a land-hungry peasantry - that is the true catalyst. And if one believes that the value of aid is not so much in the quantity of resources transferred to the poor country as in the energies and resources unleashed by the granting of that aid, then a truly catalytic or pump-priming contribution of the small voluntary agency will have a multiplier effect that may be far from insignificant. But among the voluntary agencies' younger generation of supporters there has grown up a lack of interest about what the agencies can achieve by the multiplier effect of their own properly planned schemes. This is dismissed as

insignificant in terms of the need. In its place an attempt has been made to concentrate agency resources on pressurising the governments of the developed countries to commit more resources to the multilateral and bilateral aid programmes.

Oxfam, after a long period of pulling-both-ways coupled with the inevitable loss of direction, has belatedly taken the stand that it regards its own programme of aid as of prime importance per se. Public concern and political action to implement it remain important; but not more important than what can be done now to solve some of the problems of some of the world's dispossessed. The canalising of donors' concern into specific remedial action is the top priority.

Voluntary agencies often pride themselves on their freedom from red tape. Clearly they can act more quickly than the U.N. and bilateral Government aid bodies, even though one or two of the bigger voluntary agencies are acquiring in their turn some of the trappings of bureaucracy. Yet in taking up development projects speed is less essential than careful investigation of the scheme both on the ground and at committee level. What the voluntary agencies are in a position to do is to accept for funding many of those small mission or one-man requests which the big agencies would find it uneconomic and impractical to look at. Some of these small schemes are easily multiplied and require only the simplest technology. Occasionally they become genuine pilot schemes, demonstrating inherent possibilities in the development field that would otherwise have been overlooked.

Such a project is the Okavango Fisheries Scheme in northern Botswana. Oxfam began this with a small grant enabling a one-man survey of the fishing potential to be made. Today there is a thriving fishing industry in the area

engaging the energies of some 400 fishermen with a busy local fish market which may soon be linked with the still bigger markets of Johannesburg. Moreover, Government funds cover the recurrent expenses of the fishing stations.

Development aid, like other forms of entrepreneurial activity, involves risk taking. The voluntary agencies, who get their funds substantially from people anxious to make a practical contribution, must in my view be modest in their risk-taking. The alternative cost of an unsuccessful development project financed over three years is after all the down-to-earth help that could have been given more directly with the same expenditure.

Regrettably, the voluntary agencies have no magic touch to ensure that the publicised objectives of a development project are achieved. There is no guaranteed successful formula. Field staff change; harvests are ruined by weather; counterpart funds are suddenly not available. In Mexico an agricultural and community development scheme run by the American Quakers and Oxfam-funded is producing around Cuauhtenco maize yields over five times the normal; in Bihar I saw "model hybrid seed plots" which produced less than the local varieties' yearly average. Hopefully one gains more on the swings than one loses on the roundabouts.

Miscalculations are unavoidable in planning development inputs. One advantage the voluntary agency has over the giant concentrated development effort is that its inputs are smaller, and more widely scattered. "The sprinkler approach" is not entirely devoid of merit; one hopes that the failures will be outweighed by the successes, while the end results may be less traumatic for the local inhabitants. It is right that voluntary agency projects should be planned

carefully in the light of local resources and the expected benefits; but in the end the consequences of a project cannot all be foreseen. Sometimes the unexpected by products are unexpected boons; sometimes they are quite alarming. Take the case of drilling rigs put into Maharashtra by Oxfam to bring more irrigated land into cultivation. One unintended consequence, since the rigs had to cover their operating costs, was that only the better-off farmers were able to hire the rigs and (because the drilling teams were both more efficient and charging less than alternative drillers) they were getting water at a subsidised rate. Oxfam the charity found itself encouraging the imbalance that the Green Revolution has fostered, and contributing to widening the gap between rich and poor in India.

In the final analysis voluntary agencies are justified less by what they have in common with all aid agencies than by their small-scale people-to-people approach. Their programmes are launched less with a view to definitively solving problems - the eradication of T.B., over-population, etc. - than with helping people. Oxfam's family planning aid in India is an example. Looked at dispassionately, its impact on the figures is miniscule. But anyone who has seen, as I have, the families who have been helped - the mothers who have been finally released from the wheel of hunger, unwanted pregnancy, abortion; the fathers who can now share their poverty with five instead of eight or ten; the infants who can at last be fed because their mother's tubectomy has finally made them the youngest mouths in a limited family - has no doubt that some of the specific problems of particular people have been solved, and that for them new possibilities for living have emerged.

And that, for the voluntary agency, is what development is all about.