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"The VSA Experience" is a somewhat large topic to squeeze into less than an hour. Rather than talk generally about a number of aspects of VSA's involvement and experiences in Africa, I would like to look specifically at grassroots development in Africa and ask the question, is it effective, and if it is, who is best placed to help in its facilitation.

My contribution to this discussion will be a somewhat theoretical overview. I will then hand over to Margaret Lenniston, who will discuss her experiences as a volunteer in Tanzania, one of the world's Least Developed countries. VSA also has volunteers in Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, and is currently investigating the prospects of establishing a programme in South Africa.

The short answer to the question posed is, - I imagine, rather obvious: grassroots development can be, but is not always, effective. More positively and perhaps not so obviously, it has the potential to be effective because of its ability to recognise and work within the concepts of the adage that development is done by people, not to people.

I would like to start by asking a couple of basic questions: what is the object of development and how have the major Governmental development agencies fared in meeting these objectives?

What is the Object of Development?

In its broadest sense, the object of development is the eradication of poverty and its underlying causes. By poverty, I don't just mean income and assets, but also health, life expectancy, diet, shelter, education and security.

What causes poverty? According to Robert Chambers (Rural Development, Putting the Last First) five interlocking factors can be isolated.

- * Poverty itself
- * Physical weakness

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- * Isolation. This can include isolation through living in remote areas, or in the social sense, through ostracism or illiteracy.
- * Vulnerability. This can be due to natural disasters, exploitation or social conventions.
- * Powerlessness. This can include powerlessness to negotiate, powerlessness to prevent robbery or violence, or powerlessness to prevent the elite trapping the benefits of development.

John Clark in Democratising Development adds a further two:

- * Environmental damage, and
- * Gender discrimination.

If we are to attack poverty, we therefore need to act on all of the interlocking and underlying causes of poverty. To attack one or two, and fail to address the others, will not eradicate poverty.

Before proceeding any further, a word here about Clark. I am indebted to Democratising Development, not so much for the ideas, but for the organised framework it provides.

How the major development agencies fared in meeting these objectives.

In broad terms, how have major development agencies such as the World Bank, the United Nations and USAID fared in eradicating poverty and its underlying causes in Africa and elsewhere. The short answer is not well. The once popular theory of the "trickle down of wealth" has been largely discredited. On the other hand, the trickle down of poverty is a surprisingly effective mechanism.

One of the major failures of development has been its inability

to remedy the problem of hunger. In 1974 at the World Food Conference, US Secretary of State Kissinger made "a common commitment to a new approach" which would mean that in a decade hunger would be abolished. Ten years on, Africa is experiencing its worst ever recorded famine. Over the intervening decade, those who globally faced the threat of starvation, rose to 700 million.

What's gone wrong? Billions of dollars have been poured into development assistance, but this has failed to stop mounting problems of poverty. Add to this the debt burden, and many countries, especially those in Africa, are in a worse position today than they were ten years' ago.

The orthodox approach is orientated to the technical fix for technical problems. Advanced agricultural know-how, equipment and training is the response to food problems. Immunisation and health services are offered to tackle problems of sickness, and "structural adjustment" is the response to economic problems. As Clark notes, none of these address the reasons why people cannot afford to eat, why the poor are exposed to disease, or why international forces are causing third-world economies to collapse.

The principal development actors since the second world war, notably the World Bank and the United Nations Organisation, and the northern Governments own aid agencies such as the US Agency for International Development (USAID), have promoted a style of development that has often been insensitive to the needs of ordinary people and to the environment. Indeed, as Clark observes, the focus on wealth production rather than wealth distribution, production for export rather than for the needs of local populations, the extraction of natural resources rather than environmental protection and western style technologies, for example in agriculture, have often compounded the problems we now regard as critical.

One of the major problems facing the south has been the World Bank and its structural adjustment policies forced on a number of heavily indebted countries.

The World Bank argues that countries of the south use resources wastefully, that they hand out too many subsidies, that they have too many civil servants, that there is too much social expenditure, and generally, too much fat in the budget. (I wonder where we've heard all that before?) How fair is this view?

Many of the changes northern governments level against third world debtors could be applied with more justification to themselves. Low income countries have a more prudent track record than industrialised countries in many respects. Clark's research shows that they spend a lower portion of their GDP on subsidies (6% as compared with 18%); a lower proportion of their GDP on public sector wages; a higher proportion of their government's budget on capital spending (16% as compared with 6% - though much of this would be accounted for by the repayment of principal on their debts); a lower proportion of their budgets on social sectors (8% compared with 56%); a lower proportion of their GDP is accounted for by government spending; and a higher proportion of their GDP is directed to investments and savings. Budget and current account deficits, indeed, may be large, but they are dwarfed by those of the United States.

Further, the northern criticisms imply by omission that virtually all the blame lies "over there", on third world profligacy. They gloss over the fact that their own economic policies have been the real factor causing interest rates to rise to such dizzy heights. Real interest rates in 1980's have been the highest they have been in 200 years. Rather than receiving aid from the north, the south is seeing its financial resources extracted at a far higher rate than did Germany through reparations after the first World War.

Not surprisingly, NGO's involved in development politics, have

been particularly critical of World Bank structural adjustment programmes. These criticisms are widely based:

- * Major changes in government policy or government spending practices are introduced with scant reference to their impact on the poor.
- * Little or no attempt is made to consult organisations (or sometimes even ministries) which are best equipped to predict the social impact of those changes. For example, experience shows that women are likely to be particularly affected by certain adjustment measures, but there is no effort made to consult women's organisations.
- * Where reference is made to social impact, the poor are generally regarded as an homogenous group, at best differentiated between urban and rural poor. Experience shows that different categories of poor people are affected in profoundly different ways.
- * Little or no effort is made to assess long-term environmental consequences of the reforms.
- * Conventional adjustment programmes favour a particular type of development model whose overriding objective is economic growth. NGO's would argue that, while growth is an important condition for sustainable poverty alleviation, it is not a sufficient condition. The style of growth is a vitally important consideration. In particular, a development model which places excessive emphasis on export led growth may encourage production for the export market at the expense of production for the internal market.
- * Many of the reforms appear to relate more to an ideological mission than to concern to create conditions which foster sustainable development. The IMF/World Bank message is generally hostile to State intervention and enthusiastic about the private sector, irrespective of the efficiency of

the parastatals in that country, or of the sophistication and trustworthiness of the private sector.

Reforms when introduced are usually sudden and sweeping. Unless such measures are explicitly pro-poor, they're likely to be socially damaging.

At a different level there is much cynical self-interest behind official aid. In foreign relations, it is an old adage that Governments don't have friends, only interests, and aid is very much an extension of that concept.

Frequently for reasons of national self interest, official aid all too often strengthens governments whose policies and practices oppress the poor. It may support projects that provide the wrong service, or that serve the wrong people, and may strengthen the development model to which equity and social justice are alien.

However, the blame for the failure of much development assistance doesn't lie solely with the governments of the north and the large development/aid agencies. Countries of the south are at times willing partners in policies of this type. Southern governments have pursued policies that serve the elite at the expense of the poor, neglect the politically disconnected or those living in remote areas, and reflect short-term expediency rather than long-term survival. Unfortunately, for a large number of people in the north, it is the personal fortunes of Mobutu, Marcos, Emperor Bokassa, Baby Doc and others which are seen as constituting the sole problem.

There is now probably near universal recognition, that poverty alleviation, eradication of hunger, protecting the environment, grassroots development and safeguarding the poor from the debt crisis are the priorities, but these are areas in which the official agencies have limited experience or discover tremendous operational difficulties.

But, how effective/successful is grassroots development and who can best help deliver it? NGO's such as VSA are involved in a wide range of survival strategies, a number at grassroots level. These include:

- * Working in the urban informal sector, helping those who have been become impoverished supplement their incomes through small scale trading or production activities.
- * Helping to maintain nutritional levels as food prices soar through urban and rural vegetables gardens.
- * Helping newly unemployed people make a new start through training programmes.

There are many other strategies in which NGO's are involved, but I mention those three, because VSA volunteers in Africa over the past three or four years have been involved in these particular types of programmes.

Why should grassroots development succeed in the midst of failure of so much more substantially backed development assistance?

- * Voluntary organisations often work in the areas of greatest poverty, have direct relationship with the communities of poor people and have considerable experience of tackling environmental problems.
- * Whilst governments and aid agencies juggle with the wide range of target groups, a grassroots development project, often implemented by a local or foreign NGO, is able to concentrate on just a few activities relating to the needs of the poor.
- * The Bruntland Commission concluded that one of the main prerequisites of sustainable development is "securing effective citizens participation in decision making" . In other words, development is done by people, not to people.

That summarises the central tenet of so many progressive NGO's working at a grassroots level.

- * Those NGO's working at a grassroots level are less subject to the straightjacket of prevailing development orthodoxy in our big developments and governments. An NGO is more likely to seek political rather than technical remedies. Organising the poor to stand up for their rights, demanding access to the clean water supply from the landlord's well, and campaigning internationally for debt cancellations might be its approach.

- * Small scale/participatory programmes become highly problematic when they become larger. Decision making becomes complex. The majority of NGO's grassroots programmes avoid these problems by remaining small. It is, therefore, in large part, a question of size and philosophy. But having said that, there are also weaknesses. Often NGO rhetoric about working with the poorest of the poor is overstated - programmes may reach the poor but does it benefit the poorest of them? Some would argue this is not a problem; that there is evidence that helping the poor will enrich communities in which the poorest live, and they will benefit from this. The fourth quintile - not the poorest 20% but the next band up - may be easier to help and more prepared to experiment with new ideas.

We have noted the virtues of innovation, but this can also be amateurism. NGO's can also foster idiosyncratic behaviour through lack of continuity. Some NGO's may consider themselves to be innovative, but in effect, be nothing but ineffective amateurs.

Sheldon Annis, an analyst of NGO performance, notes that "in the face of pervasive poverty, small scale can mean insignificant; politically independent can mean powerless or disconnected; low cost can mean under-financed or poor quality, and innovative can

mean temporary or unsustainable."

So whilst NGO's may for important reasons relating to philosophy and size, be in a better position to help facilitate sustainable, long-term development, it certainly does not follow that all NGO's are able to do this. VSA is no less prone to the wrong end of Annis's comments than any other NGO. We are, however, aware of the problems, both from our own experience, and that of other volunteer sending agencies, and are adopting an approach which we believe have the capacity to at least minimise if not eradicate some of Annis's noted shortcomings. In particular, VSA is increasingly in a position to give undertakings to selected countries that it is there for the long haul, and will not be jumping from country to country according to whichever country is seen to be fashionable or trendy to be in. Within each country, we are also increasingly concentrating our programme geographically, and where appropriate, professionally. Taking a long term view, therefore, we believe that ultra small scale need not mean insignificant.

VSA is also seeking to work increasingly at a community level, and where possible, with local NGO's. For example, of the eight volunteers we will be sending to Zimbabwe this year, four will be in NGO assignments. The difficulty we face here of course is funding. Community based NGO assignments are expensive.

We are therefore spending more time seeking private sector funds. We recognise that the grant from Government is unlikely in the immediate future to rise significantly. We are, however, aware of the many calls for assistance which we would very much like to be able to support, but can't through lack of funds. Over the medium term, VSA hopes to be able to significantly increase its private sector funding base. This will help to ensure that low cost does not necessary mean under-financed or of poor quality.

At the end of the day, however, many are left with a general feeling of helplessness, overwhelmed by what needs to be done, and the relatively small resources the NGO community has with

which to do it.

Clark writes that: "NGO's are generally seen as worthy and efficient but negligible on the scale of development needs." This may be true individually, but collectively NGO's now constitute one of the major channels of finance from north and south.

In 1989 they shifted US\$6.4 billion to the south, about 12% of all western aid, public and private. In terms of nett transfers - and in the age of debt crisis, when the cash-flow of developing countries is all important, this is perhaps the most important measure - NGO's collectively contribute more than the World Bank. (The Bank invests more each year in the third world, but when the debt service for the past loans is deducted from the gross figure, the resulting nett transfer is smaller.

