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GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA:
THE SPECIAL SELF-HELP PROGRAM

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This paper represents the personal views of
the author and does not necessarily
reflect the position of the
Department of State.

In a recent monograph Bruce Stokes writes, "The key to meeting basic human needs is the participation of individuals and communities in local problem solving."¹ He contends that donor governments should play a facilitative role responding to needs of local communities. Although it is doubtful that grassroots participation is "the key" to the problem--a favorable context of national economic policies and government interventions would also seem to be "key"--few would contest the assertion that the mobilization of local energies for problem solving is an essential part of the process of fulfilling basic needs.

Over the past two decades, the U.S. Government has tried several approaches to grassroots development assistance. Peace Corps Volunteers assigned in Third World villages and towns have worked to stimulate small scale improvements at the local level. AID now provides up to about \$70 million in grants annually to support the work in Africa of a variety of U.S. private^{voluntary} organizations, many of which work in close touch with local churches or indigenous local organizations on small scale development projects. The Inter-American Foundation, an autonomous U.S. Government agency, was created in 1969 to provide assistance outside AID and State Department channels to local groups engaged in development efforts. Funding has been proposed for a similar African Development Foundation.

Perhaps least well known of U.S. assistance efforts for grassroots development is the Special Self-Help program for Africa. Over the past 15 years the program has provided more than \$23 million to finance projects to bring economic and social improvement at the local level. In the fiscal year just ended \$1.9 million was provided for projects in 35 African countries.

Origin and Development

In 1964, AID, using as a model a program operating in Latin America, set aside \$700,000 for 20 African countries to meet some of many special requests for funding small projects of a humanitarian or development nature which could not fit into the regular development assistance framework. The program was increased to \$1.2 million in FY 1966 and grew quickly to a peak of \$1.9 million divided among 30 countries in 1968. This level of funding has not been equalled since in real terms, although funding levels, employing a much depreciated dollar, reached the same nominal level in FY 1978 and FY 1979.

Until 1970 all independent African countries (except South Africa), including the North African tier, were eligible for funding. However, the program altered markedly in the wake of changes in overall U.S. assistance policy toward Africa implemented at the end of the 1960's. These

changes resulted from the 1966 Korry Report which, noting declining Congressional aid appropriations, recommended that aid programs be phased out in all but eight "concentration" countries or areas (Nigeria, Ghana, Liberia, Zaire, Ethiopia, the East African Community, Tunisia, Morocco). Technical assistance for non-concentration countries was to be limited to "regional" projects benefiting more than one country. Korry suggested that one way to compensate for the elimination of regular bilateral assistance in "non-concentration" countries was to increase and make more flexible Special Self-Help in those countries. The report recommended that Self-Help be used for strengthening the framework for economic development by developing youth leadership, improving the legislative process, supporting Peace Corps activities, and assisting local private organizations to broaden the base of popular participation in national development.²

As AID missions closed in "non-concentration" countries, SSH was transformed from a supplemental part of the AID program to the only form of direct AID dollar assistance in many African countries. Levels of funding in several of the poorest francophone African countries rose to exceed \$100,000. Conversely, SSH was phased out in "concentration" countries by 1970, and the number of countries participating fell to 20.³

Administrative responsibility for SSH shifted from AID missions to embassies. These changes greatly increased the foreign policy significance of self-help.

Guidelines for the program were made more explicit following the recommendations of a joint State/AID team which studied the program in 1970.⁴ The team concluded that while the Self-Help program was a useful political and public relations instrument for the United States, explicit criteria and guidelines were necessary to provide discipline for the program, to avoid abuses, and to ensure the continuing acceptability of the program to the Congress. The team rebuffed a suggestion that Self-Help be liberalized to permit funding of AID projects being phased out in "non-concentration" countries, holding that such a practice would be incompatible with the self-help concept. It called for a general plan of audit and follow-up.

The modifications introduced into the program by 1970 have largely guided the program since. However, the number of countries covered has recently expanded, reflecting a general shift in development assistance policy away from "concentration" countries toward meeting basic human needs in all countries with low per capita income. The introduction of large assistance programs for the Sahel countries has

not been accompanied by the phasing down of Self-Help. Moreover, former "concentration" countries like Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Liberia, have reentered the program, although funding levels have generally been kept below \$15,000. All independent nations in sub-Saharan Africa, except South Africa and those countries where development assistance is excluded by law (Mozambique, Angola), are presently eligible for Self-Help.

Funding Decisions

The Special Self-Help Program is financed from AID's Development Assistance budget, even though it is administered by U.S. embassies rather than AID missions.⁵ The portion of the development assistance budget for Africa to be allocated to Self-Help is worked out between the African Bureaus of AID and the State Department, and the level agreed upon is included in AID's Congressional budget presentation. There has been relatively little change in the total annual level of SSH funding during the 1970's in spite of a major growth in U.S. assistance to Africa. As a percentage of total U.S. development assistance to Africa, SSH fell from 1.2% in FY 1970 to 0.7% in the fiscal year just ended.

The allocation among countries is largely determined by the African Bureau of the State Department, although the final

allocation is subject to AID concurrence. The major criteria applied in determining country levels are

(i) The availability of other economic assistance mechanisms. Recipients of low levels of economic assistance have received self-help levels at the \$75,000-100,000 level over the past few years (Ivory Coast, Togo, Malawi, Rwanda). However, a number of Sahel countries and Southern African countries have maintained Self-Help levels approaching \$100,000 in spite of greatly expanded development assistance in recent years (Upper Volta, Senegal, Lesotho, Botswana, Swaziland).

(ii) Absorptive Capacity. This criterion applies in a pragmatic sense. Funding tends to remain at earlier year levels, if the embassy has succeeded in obligating that amount for projects in the preceding year. The level may be revised upward if the embassy requests and justifies a higher level or downward if the embassy has been unable to use all the money. Funds which one country cannot use are reallocated before the end of the fiscal year to a country with additional projects ready for funding. Funding levels thus reflect the absorptive capacity of the embassy as well as that of the receiving country.

(iii) Relative Poverty. Although there is not a direct correlation between low per capita income and high SSH

levels (Ivory Coast has been getting more than Benin), relative poverty has a marginal influence. Among countries not otherwise receiving much aid, for example, Malawi and Togo get more than the Ivory Coast and Mauritius.

(iv) Cordiality of Relations. The U.S. is prohibited by law from providing any development assistance to those countries with which it does not have diplomatic relations. SSH levels may also be restricted below levels warranted under the other criteria, where for political reasons U.S. representation is at the level of charge d'affaires, rather than of ambassador (Benin, Madagascar).

Project Guidelines

Regulations governing the program set forth criteria to assist in the selection of activities to be funded.⁶ A project does not have to follow the exact letter of the criteria to qualify, but must observe several specific prohibitions. The guidelines can be summarized as follows:

(i) A project should aim at improving basic economic or social conditions at the local level. Its benefits should not be limited to a small group. It should not be technically overambitious, but within the capacity of the local community to operate and maintain. A U.S. contribution of more than \$25,000 to a single project requires special approval from Washington.

(ii) Projects "should have their impetus in local community action." The local community should make a significant contribution "freely given" in labor or other resources. It is not essential, however, that the sponsoring organization be a local group. Self-Help money is to provide seed money on a one-time basis to enable the sponsoring organization to complete the project.

(iii) A project should have the potential for generating good will toward the U.S. Potentially controversial activities are to be avoided. Purely religious, police or military activities are prohibited, although development or welfare activities undertaken by religious organizations or police or military units which serve community needs are not excluded.

Administration

Special Self-Help procedures are designed to expedite responsiveness to requests, to minimize documentation requirements, and to economize on U.S. government staff time. In-country responsibility for the program lies with the principal U.S. diplomatic officer, but administration is normally delegated to a junior embassy officer, who has other responsibilities as well. Self-help responsibilities may not be assigned to AID personnel without prior authorization from

AID/Washington.⁷ The quality of the program thus depends heavily on the individual ability and initiative of the junior officer and on the importance attached to it by the chief of mission. In embassies where the program is well established, there is often a self-help committee with representatives of several agencies to review and make funding recommendations to the chief of mission. In Liberia, for example, the committee includes representatives of the Embassy, AID, Peace Corps, USICA and the U.S. Educational and Cultural Foundation in Liberia.

A country program is ordinarily carried out within the framework of a standard General Agreement for Special Development Assistance, which authorizes the embassy to make arrangements directly with local groups. In a number of countries, however, government insists on approving all projects. Applicants for assistance file a short form describing the proposed project, the sponsoring organization, the number of beneficiaries, the nature and value of the local contribution and the amount requested. Following embassy approval, a one-page, standard form individual activity agreement is signed by the two parties. Disbursement of funds is usually in the form of embassy purchase orders

executed for construction materials or equipment. Disbursement should be completed within six months of signature.

Problems of Evaluation

An evaluation of SSH is made difficult by its extreme decentralization and light documentation requirements. There has been no official study of the program as a whole since 1970. Each embassy keeps on file project agreements and is supposed to insist on submission of project completion reports by recipients, but these documents do not need to be forwarded to Washington. Aside from fiscal reporting, embassies are responsible for submitting to Washington only a single annual report listing each project funded with the amount, the local contribution, the number of beneficiaries, and a brief description. The report format does not require listing of the sponsoring organization nor any analysis. Although the reports indicate something about the nature of the projects and the sectoral breakdown of the program, most are of limited help in evaluating the degree of conformity with the self-help concept or their impact on local development. Moreover, submission of reports has been spotty. The record has improved recently, but there is not a single embassy for which reports are on file for every year between 1970 and 1979. Several embassies, however, have regularly exceeded reporting requirements to provide a more detailed look at projects, at the operation of the program, and at its impact.

The evaluation which follows relies heavily on 1977 and 1978 reports, on available reports from earlier years, on ad hoc reporting by Washington-based and field-based officials, and on personal observation. It addresses the following development issues:

(i) Project Configuration. Have projects been designed primarily to bring about improvements at the local level or to respond to political pressures from government leaders?

(ii) Self-Help Principle. Have projects basically emerged from local community action and resources or have they more often been externally generated?

(iii) Development Impact. Has there been any perceptible effect on local development?

Project Configuration

In FY 1978 447 projects were reported in 26 countries.

The breakdown by types of projects was as follows:

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage of Total Projects</u>
Schools (e.g. construction of classrooms, libraries, teacher housing, vocational training centers, and equipment supply)	198	44.3
Water (e.g. wells, cisterns, pumping stations)	80	17.9
Health (e.g. construction of medical facilities)	33	7.4

Agriculture (e.g. storage facilities, garden projects, live-stock, fisheries)	32	7.2
Latrines, other sanitation projects	26	5.8
Social improvements (e.g. construction of youth, refugee, and day care centers)	25	5.6
Physical infrastructure (e.g. bridges, dams)	19	4.3
Miscellaneous (including market construction, artisan activity, housing, environmental, athletic, cultural)	34	7.6

This breakdown is generally reflective of the pattern of project selection throughout the history of the program. School construction has been far and away the most popular activity, both because it is relatively straightforward to carry out and because a local community can easily identify it as a development need. Into the miscellaneous category, in addition to such worthwhile activities as construction of covered village market stalls or assistance for a housing cooperative, fall also a handful of projects of dubious self-help relevance, including lighting for basketball courts in a capital city and "financing of materials to promote a theatrical performance of a work by Mark Twain."

There are wide variations in program configuration among countries. School construction has accounted for more than 80 percent of funds spent on self-help in Malawi, Togo, Lesotho,

and Swaziland, where governments have placed special emphasis on educational expansion. The Cameroon program has devoted the bulk of its funds to agriculture, water, and physical infrastructure. Projects in Mauritania have been almost exclusively agricultural. In Senegal latrines and wells have been heavily emphasized, and in the Central African Republic health projects.

There is evidence of occasional intervention in the selection process by top levels of governments. In Upper Volta \$17,000 was provided in 1978, the largest project that year, to help construct a three-room school house and director's residence in the home village of the President, who paid for the skilled labor. In Gabon in 1972 two of the three projects approved were requested by the President, one for inoculation supplies and \$25,000 for construction of an exhibition facility for local arts. In the Central African Republic the President's intervention helped secure financing for a health facility for the people of his home village. There are a few other examples. Only in the case of the Gabonese facility, however, is there prima facie doubt whether the projects were designed to bring about economic and social improvement for local communities. Considering the vast array of projects funded over the years, intervention from the apex of government appears to be highly exceptional.

Moreover common is the case of a prominent political or civil servant sponsoring a project sited in a local community. There is insufficient information available to gauge the balance of benefits between the community and the sponsor. However, if the project seems likely to benefit the local community, the fact that the sponsor gains a political bonus appears irrelevant to the development objectives of the program. Moreover, the sponsoring notable may be playing an important intermediary role between embassy and the local community which may find direct communication difficult.

The conclusion to be drawn, I believe, on the basis of available evidence, is that the SSH program has financed a wide variety of projects dealing with important problems closely related to basic human needs in education, health, clean water, and food production.

Conformity With the Self-Help Principle

The extent to which projects have resulted from grassroots community action can be examined from two different angles:

(i) To what extent have local communities been a source of resources needed for projects (self-help as grassroots resource investment)?

(ii) To what extent have self-help projects grown out of a local impetus toward community improvement (self-help

as local assumption of responsibility for development initiatives)?

The SSH guidelines provide that the local community should make a significant contribution in kind or money to each project funded. SSH is subject to the general legal requirement that 25 percent of the resources for all development assistance projects be put up by the recipient. On the whole, judging from available reports, the requirements seem to have been conscientiously observed. A check of 13 programs in FY 1978 accounting for over \$900,000 (47 percent of total funds obligated) indicated a reported self-help contribution of \$1.28 million. Of these 7 had self-help contributions exceeding the total U.S. contribution, while 2 fell slightly below 25 percent of the U.S. contribution. The major local resources contributed are labor, such as that provided by villagers in the construction of a school, and locally available building materials.

In some country programs there has been a tendency to equate the self-help resource contribution with any contribution from the recipient country or even by another donor, rather than that solely provided the local community. For example, land provided by the government for a school, school equipment furnished by a ministry of education for a secondary school, and maintenance of a sport facility by a

ministry of youth and sports have been cited as the "self-help contribution" to projects, with no contribution attributed to the community. In these cases the concept of the self-help contribution has been so adulterated as to make it indistinguishable from recipient government financing of local costs, a common feature of ordinary technical assistance projects.

Some insight into the extent to which projects have emerged from a local impetus to community improvement can be gathered by looking at project sponsorship. The task is complicated by the fact that self-help reporting does not require identification of sponsoring organizations. The information is supplied by a number of embassies voluntarily but only rarely with details about the sponsor. Project animation seems to come from three general sources: foreign facilitators, national governments or persons of influence in national government, and, in a minority of cases, local indigenous organizations. It should be noted that program guidelines, while stating that a project should have its impetus in local community action, do not require that a local group be the sponsoring organization. The sponsor can be the government or others outside the community. The author has found no evidence of sponsorship of projects by military or police units.

Foreign facilitators are resident in or have close ties to local communities and therefore are aware of specific development needs. European and American missionaries involved in educational or health projects have sponsored a considerable number of self-help projects, especially in Rwanda and Burundi. In the early days of the Gambian program several projects were initiated by a Dutch community development specialist employed by the UNDP. By far the most frequent foreign facilitators have been Peace Corps Volunteers. Programs which have made heavy use of PCV's include Togo, Sierra Leone, Senegal, Niger, and CAR. There is a synergistic effect from the combination of SSH and Peace Corps resources. The access of the volunteers to SSH resources enhances their effectiveness in local development activities. Embassies tend to feel that the project is strengthened when responsibility for its implementation is in the hands of an American intermediary. The disadvantage is that since the PCV undertakes to see a project through to its conclusion, the community has less incentive to assume ultimate responsibility unless local leadership is closely involved in planning and implementation from the beginning. Projects generated by foreign facilitators tend to be strong in self-help resource investment, because the facilitator can arrange for the local contribution of labor or money, but may be weaker in stimulating local responsibility.

In many cases the impetus for self-help projects comes from the host government. The most striking example is Malawi, where the Development Division in the President's Office is charged with responsibility for self-help activities financed by several donors. The development committees in each district forward applications to the Division through the District Commissioner. If the project is approved, the District Commissioner is held personally accountable by the Malawi Government. The result has been an increasingly efficient program. However, there has been relatively little variety in projects, over 90 percent of which have involved classroom construction. The process stimulates development activity at the local level and insures self-help resource contributions, but the extent to which it encourages local responsibility is unclear. The system can be characterized as "guided self-help." Sierra Leone is a similar but less extreme case. Government approves each project and initiates applications for many locally based projects. However, local leadership is able to approach the embassy directly for assistance, and PCV's are frequently associated with projects.

In other cases of heavy government involvement, the linkage with grassroots development is unclear. In Guinea, where outside contact with local communities is very difficult,

emphasis has been on relatively large projects with uncertain connection to local communities. A deaf-mute school in Conakry, public health filmmaking, and sports equipment are recent examples. In newly established programs the embassy may have difficulty identifying "true" self-help projects and may turn to government for proposals.

Indigenous organizations are a significant source of projects. The most common appear to be agricultural cooperatives. In Mauritania in 1977 25 of 27 projects involved financing of motor pumps and irrigation equipment for agricultural cooperatives. In recent years the Gambian program appears to have given special attention to the nurture of indigenous local development organizations. Examples include

Bangally Garden Cooperative North Bank Division, established 1974	funds to improve fencing and wells & purchase tools (1977)
Gambian Artisans Marketing Cooperative, 300 members, Banjul	equip store, stock office, provide raw materials (1977)
Pirang Cooperation Society, Western Division (100 families) to supply produce to Banjul	funds for fencing materials (1978)
Kafuta Gardeners and Orchard Growers Society, Western Division	fencing material & gardening tools (1977)

A number of similar projects are reported for Sierra Leone.

Support for projects generated by indigenous grassroots self-help organizations would appear to be the ideal approach to self-help funding. That is not to say, however, that self-help financing should be exclusively channeled through local development organizations. The SSH program must take into consideration country-specific conditions. Where governments are highly xenophobic or authoritarian, there may be relatively little opportunity for embassies to identify such organizations to participate in the program. Newly established programs also have difficulty identifying organizations in need of help. In some countries local development organizations are scarce or weak. To provide funds to organizations that are not organized to use them effectively can encourage waste. However, in countries where political conditions permit working with local groups and where the self-help program is well-established and well-publicized, there appear to be important opportunities to support local development through grassroots organizations. In the past such an approach has not received sufficient encouragement from Washington.

Impact on Development

Observations on the impact of the SSH program on local development must necessarily be impressionistic and tentative since systematic in-country studies have not been undertaken. Moreover, it would be easy to exaggerate the effect on national

development of a modest \$23 million spread over 30-35 countries during a 15 year period. A few words on the lasting effect of projects and on the impact of educational activities are warranted, however.

SSH guidelines provide that projects should not be selected which will be of an ephemeral nature. Edwin Segall, a State Department officer who was responsible for Washington monitoring of the program for several years, reported in 1977 that of 52 projects he had visited in 17 countries, only three were not functioning. Even if it is assumed that he was guided in the direction of successful projects--and he reported dropping in on several projects without advance notice--his experience is encouraging. His reports indicate that water, health, and educational projects, particularly those which were simply conceived, have demonstrated significant durability. In Lesotho between 1970 and 1973 the program financed pipes, cement, catchment tanks and spigots for gravitational water-supply systems in four villages. These wells were all reported to be functioning in 1977. In another Lesotho village a diesel-powered pump system has been operating for 7 years. Two major repairs on the motor were successfully arranged by the village.

Health projects have also had a lasting impact, even when the SSH contribution included the purchase of initial medical

supplies, thereby raising the question whether the local community would later assume recurrent expenditures for replenishment. A number of such projects have been successfully operating in Southern Africa for more than 10 years. In Senegal in 1973 SSH provided \$1000 for medicines to support the erection of a one-room pharmacy. The village provided bricks, sand and unskilled labor. Peace Corps Volunteers provided six months of technical assistance to train Senegalese managers on the handling of the medicines, distribution procedures, and inventory maintenance. The success of the projects induced the Senegalese Government to use it as a model for construction of 20 more village pharmacies using government and UNICEF funds. Where there is significant local involvement in the project selection and investment of local resources, the local community seems to consider that it has an important stake in the continued functioning of the project and will continue to nurture it.

Of all the activities supported by Special Self-Help, school construction has probably had the most significant impact on national development. Most of the schools built in Lesotho, Swaziland and Malawi between 1967 and 1977 were built with SSH help. Education ministers in these countries have acknowledged that self-help classroom construction has met

a need which national governments have not had the financial resources to fulfill. The completed classrooms have often provided village leadership with leverage to extract teachers and educational materials from governments. Without the classrooms villages are disadvantaged in making claims on the government education budget. Continued heavy emphasis on classroom construction may no longer be appropriate for some country programs, however. School construction may outstrip the capacity of the government to provide trained teachers. Such a point has apparently been reached in Swaziland. The most recent annual report, noting that some new classrooms may have no qualified teachers to fill them, recommends that school construction be cut to 35 percent of the SSH budget from 63 percent in the year just ended.

Conclusion

At its fifteenth anniversary, the Special Self-Help program deserves closer study as a model for local economic development. This preliminary review reached the following conclusions:

(1) The program has spawned a great variety of projects, a large majority of which have aimed at basic local needs in education, health, and rural development. Projects with little relevance to development have been rare.

(2) The self-help principle has generally been observed faithfully with respect to the resource contribution of the local community. Despite successful models in a few country programs, however, insufficient support has been provided in the program as a whole for indigenous groups which initiate local development activities.

(3) Sponsorship of projects by indigenous organizations, national governments, or foreign facilitators is appropriate to the varied political and development context in different African countries.

(4) Simply designed projects to construct schools and health facilities and to improve water systems have demonstrated considerable durability. The major development impact has been in education, but some country programs should now deemphasize classroom construction.

(5) Despite the relative success of the program, the SSH share of the economic aid budget for Africa declined in the seventies, as the regular aid program has increased.

(6) The existing minimal documentation requirements should be retained. However, guidelines should be clarified to encourage annual reports which are more useful for evaluating project selection, sponsorship, conformity with the self-help principle, and development impact.

Notes

1. Bruce Stokes, Local Responses to Global Problems. A Key to Meeting Basic Human Needs (Worldwatch Paper 17, 1978).
2. Review of African Development Policies and Programs as Directed by the President (The Korry Report), August, 1966.
3. SSH was eliminated in North Africa, since Morocco and Tunisia were "concentration" countries and the program had already been dropped in Libya and Algeria by FY 1968.
4. Report on the Self-Help Program in Africa; A Staff Report Prepared for the Assistant Administrator Africa Bureau, by the Self-Help Team, September 1970.
5. Sec. 106 (Selected Development Activities) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended.
6. See AID Manual Order 1323.1.2, February 17, 1972.
7. AID retains an accounting responsibility because of its overall accountability to Congress for economic assistance.
8. The question of whether the poorest benefit most from the program relative to village leadership groups is not possible to assess without much further study.