

11-11-1988

CSM/No. 49

COMMITTEE OF DONOR AGENCIES FOR SMALL ENTERPRISE DEVELOPMENT

World Conference on "Support for Microenterprises"

Washington, D.C. U.S.A.

EA 002913

June 6th - 9th, 1988

Can NGOs, Private Voluntary Organizations and Local Initiatives
for Development of the Poorest Southern Countries Help
Eradicate Famine and Malnutrition?
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Club of Rome, Paris

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CAN NGO'S, PRIVATE VOLUNTARY ORGANIZATIONS AND LOCAL INITIATIVES
FOR DEVELOPMENT OF THE POOREST SOUTHERN COUNTRIES HELP ERADICATE
FAMINE AND MALNUTRITION?

By Bertrand Schneider,
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Since its creation in 1968, the Club of Rome has devoted several of its reports to a discussion of Third World problems, without their having had the political impact we had hoped for.

With this in mind, we decided to change our approach completely which, up until that point, had been highly macroeconomic, and move out into the field to find out what was being accomplished in terms of the development and, more specifically, the rural development of the world's poorest and most remote regions, based on the activities of nongovernmental organizations and local initiatives at the grass roots level.

Our study centered on nineteen Latin American, African and Asian nations and corresponding projects selected through a painstaking sampling procedure, with its findings published in late 1985 under the title "The Barefoot Revolution," first in French and subsequently in Spanish, German, Italian, English, Japanese and Arabic.

To begin with, the study confirmed two facts which are becoming increasingly apparent both to interested governments and to international and nongovernmental organizations, without, however, this new awareness consistently resulting in any real change in attitudes and particularly in political choices, which should, logically, be its most immediate consequences.

The Barefoot Revolution. I.T. Publication, London 1988.

1. The first major finding was as follows:

-- There were too many large-scale industrial projects based on Western models, totally inconsistent with the needs of corresponding target groups;

-- A great deal of money had been invested in such projects, for the benefit of a privileged few;

-- Existing policies were clashing with local structures and cultures and inspiring rejection by the very groups intended to benefit from their introduction.

The example of large-scale dam construction projects is particularly striking. From the Aswân High Dam in Egypt, to the recently completed Itaipu Dam in Brazil, we find the same distorted effects, without anyone comprehending or learning from the bitter lessons of the past -- mass relocations of tens of thousands of people without providing new basic infrastructure, transmission of epidemics through the water supply and the destruction of fragile ecological systems. Everywhere, we find environmental and human disasters turning these large-scale undertakings into occasions for an unprecedented waste of funds.

2. The second finding emerging from the study is that underdevelopment is not merely an absence of or an inadequate level of development, but rather a negative process, a veritable poverty spiral resulting from a combination of different factors -- political unrest, too much idle land and too many landless farmers, uncontrolled population movements due to population growth, the rural exodus and innumerable armed conflicts. Other equally important factors include the abandonment of ancient customs and traditions, corruption and wide-spread injustice, sparing no one, not even rural farmers.

The debt problem is in a class by itself among the various elements involved in the poverty spiral, with its corresponding burden largely a result of measures imposed on low income countries by outsiders and of political choices made without due consideration of the most basic human needs.

In fact, such debt has frequently been created at the instigation of consultant firms, engineering companies and Western industries attempting to open new markets, resulting time and again in the construction of overly expensive large-scale projects and factories lacking a properly trained work force and necessary maintenance and upkeep. Added to the cost of these development luxuries are expenditures on status items and military expenditures which very few countries, including even the poorest of the poor, have been able to resist.

This brings us to the case of poor investments. To fully understand Brazil's debt structure, for example, we must realize that the country's present debt burden is largely a result of projects such as the Itaipu Dam referred to earlier, costing 25 billion dollars to complete and presently producing electricity at a cost 30% higher than before it was built, the nuclear project, which has already devoured 35 billion dollars, and the railroad project, which was to provide rail service linking the States of Minas Gerais, São Paulo and Rio to transport iron ore, but which has yet to lay a single kilometer of track and whose bridges, tunnels and other engineering structures are corroded by rust and overgrown with weeds, swallowing up another 10 billion dollars.

Governments and international organizations often feel overwhelmed by the multitude of factors characterizing the impoverished lives or backwards living conditions of a population of two billion farmers. Their monolithic,

clumsy and oftentimes bureaucratic structures are unable to adapt to the innumerable facets of a complex reality to reach the poorest villages, the most poverty-stricken households and the most remote mountain communities.

It's remarkable how, even in the face of such adversity, the iron will of a handful of men and women is able to cause anything to change, either in the North or in the South. Even in the most desperate circumstances, there's always a small core of people who believe that something can and must be done. In Brazil, you can hear the people singing "When you dream alone, it's only a dream, but when we all dream together, it's the dawn of a new reality." In the Philippines, a barefoot farmer working in his rice field had this to say: "Our experience has clarified certain things. We can no longer afford to maintain the attitude of a people waiting for deliverance by the Messiah or a Saviour. We can rely only on ourselves. Of course, we all know that Christ did the only sane thing. He had faith in the people, so that they, in turn, would have faith in themselves.... Only the well-organized upper classes are in a position to use the government as their own personal instrument. We're so isolated from each other, so disorganized that, for us, the government is not an instrument, but rather a master. We don't have a democracy, only a "demon crazy" (crazy demon).... There's only one thing to do, namely to recognize that we're inferior to the rich in terms of economic and political power, but that, at the same time, we have the advantage of our numbers.... But this is simply not enough. If farmers choose to stand alone, they cannot possibly wage an effective fight for their rights. Only when we succeed in overcoming our isolation and in joining forces will we be strong."

3. The third finding emerging from the study is the existence of tens of thousands of multipurpose development projects in Third World countries

encompassing agriculture, health and sanitation, training and education. Formerly inspired by voluntary and nongovernmental organizations in industrialized countries, these development initiatives are now coming more and more frequently from their Southern partners, the grass roots organizations and farmer associations known among themselves as the NGO's of the South.

There are thousands of these Southern NGO's throughout India, the Philippines and South America, with hundreds more in Africa, Indonesia and Thailand. Rooted in a totally different historical context, they attempt, first and foremost, to satisfy the same, ever-present, basic human needs for food, clean water and sanitation, using the scarce resources at their disposal and relying on support from Northern NGO's.

The second phase of their work focuses on a different set of needs, to enable rural farming communities to rise up and open their eyes to their own problems and place themselves in a position to promote their own development, by organizing, getting themselves into shape and calling on everyone to join in the process, including women, the disabled, and the forgotten. The next step is irrigation, digging wells or building reservoirs to store rainwater, improving their seeds and herds, planting trees, building latrines, educating children....

4. Meaningful Results

According to our calculations, in 1985 there were 100 million farmers world-wide benefiting from a development project operated by one or more NGO's, inspiring the following observations:

Compared with the 500 million farmers identified as living below the absolute poverty line and suffering from hunger and malnutrition, these

estimated 100 million farmers benefiting from development projects represent an enormous amount of progress, especially if we consider that half the projects studied were less than 10 years old and that most have started up less than five short years ago.

But let's not forget that, by the year 2000, our planet will have to feed and house 6 billion human beings and that by 2050, the earth's population will have swollen to approximately 8 billion inhabitants, concentrated in the world's most impoverished areas, with these figures recently adjusted upwards....

The data collected throughout the study process consistently demonstrates the vital, invaluable contribution of activities mounted by NGO's and voluntary organizations, particularly in the poorest areas. Such activities will most likely multiply in coming years, with information on villages "taking off" circulating at the speed of sound, reaching even the most remote desert, jungle or mountain communities.

Farmers who, at one time, were labelled as indifferent, passive, fatalistic and resigned, while the truth of the matter is that they were often too devoid of hope and too malnourished to react, are now learning that things can get better and that they want to improve their lot and make a better future for their children.

5. A global concept of rural development based on new realities and clearly defined priorities

The role and number of these Southern NGO's and grass roots organizations is making it increasingly apparent that the initiative is shifting from the North to the South.

While, from the very beginning of the movement, Northern NGO's have understood that project success depends on community involvement in

development activities, the growing number of Southern NGO's clearly shows that local inhabitants are no longer waiting for a personal invitation to take the initiative in improving their living conditions and forming their own organizations.

-- Rural development is a priority.

Paradoxically, low income countries with large rural populations have still not succeeded in adequately feeding either the local or the general population, creating pockets of poverty throwing these countries completely off balance, both from the economic and the political standpoint.

-- Another priority is small-scale projects mounted within the framework of a global strategy.

To prevent the squandering of funds and the distortions created by most of the large-scale projects referred to earlier in the report and profit from the lessons drawn from an evaluation of such undertakings, it appears we must reverse the process followed thus far by placing greater emphasis on small-scale development projects benefiting the greatest possible number of people at a far lower investment cost.

At a time when sources of financing are becoming increasingly rare, the situation requires an adjustment in the existing financial policies of Northern NGO's and, even more importantly, of financial institutions and international organizations, channeling a portion of the investment funds earmarked for large-scale projects into smaller-scale undertakings, which have the advantage of providing training directly in the field and of establishing dynamic structures, grass roots organizations and farmer associations, in a development process rooted in the needs and choices of target communities, implemented with their participation and under their responsibility. That's

the way NGO's operate.

However, beyond a certain level of development, it eventually becomes necessary to undertake somewhat larger-scale endeavors such as the construction of roads, dams and other public works projects. Thus, from a small group of villages, the development process will extend throughout an entire area. It is at this stage that large-scale projects, or rather major, medium-scale projects, become essential to perpetuate the development process, with local communities and NGO's unable to continue to operate without some form of government collaboration.

-- Redefinition of rural development actors and their respective roles.

The importance of a global concept of rural development based on new realities and priorities and the choices this implies is far from self-evident, both to government and to NGO's, not to mention the international organizations and the media. It should, nevertheless, inspire coherent, effective implementation strategies and requires a special effort from all interested parties to ensure that these new realities are duly considered in making political choices and behavioral changes at the national and local level. The success of rural development depends on the convergence of these efforts.

The Role of Government

The voluntary implementation of a rural development policy will require that the government make certain basic political choices, as applicable, which may include:

- land reform
- a population policy
- the development of small-scale basic infrastructure in the area of health.

According top priority to small-scale projects also requires that the government made certain corresponding macroeconomic choices.

We've seen time and again how the results of small-scale projects can be wiped out by practices and even by policies totally inconsistent with the type of development represented by such undertakings. Farm-gate prices for agricultural products fail to adequately compensate farmers for their efforts and, thus, act as a disincentive rather than as an incentive. Likewise, federal taxes and special levies lay a particularly heavy burden on the shoulders of rural inhabitants, who generally have extremely low incomes. Federal taxes which cut deeply into household savings are likely to obstruct or paralyze small-scale project activities, despite outside financing, through resulting financial suffocation.

Governments determined to support this type of rural development must make adjustments in their political and financial choices and adopt a pricing policy adequately compensating farmers for their efforts while, at the same time, reducing the tax burden.

Rural development based on small-scale projects also requires an official regional planning policy focusing on the establishment of lines of communication and the creation of intermediate towns between small rural villages and major cities.

In examining a number of different projects, we noticed how the absence of lines of communication excluded many rural communities from engaging in trading activities, forcing them to live in isolation. While certain NGO's have built roads and bridges, in general, these organizations are simply not equipped for such a task. These types of projects should be designed at the federal government level according to a systematic policy. We find the same

problem with secondary education, hospitals, certain types of more advanced training and recreation facilities for rural youth. There is simply no middle ground between the village and the big city.

The Role of the Media

The media can play an important role in promoting rural development. Thus, they must be convinced of this fact and given the necessary means to do so. They are still only rarely perceived as partners in a world where communication has, nevertheless, become a major force. Their responsibility is to observe rural development and identify and disseminate corresponding information. Journalists are oftentimes more interested in seeking out sensationalist examples of underdevelopment than in the development process per se. More than likely, they themselves are relatively uninformed in this area and many still have no clear idea of the crucial importance of rural development in low income countries to the entire Western world, as well as to these countries themselves.

The Role of NGO's

NGO's must broaden the role they have shown themselves capable of ably performing and be recognized both by government and by international organizations as full-fledged partners in the rural development process, while preserving their unique characteristics. This would imply that they be regularly consulted in the design and implementation of development strategies on a country-by-country, province-by-province basis.

They must also be provided with additional funding to enable them to expand their coverage to larger numbers of recipients, although it appears, in practice, that the opposite is actually happening.

NGO's must constantly adapt to changing circumstances while, at the same

time, preserving their specificity, their flexibility, without losing their autonomy. They must continue to acquire technical know-how and gather additional information on the surrounding environment -- on the surrounding sociopolitical and cultural environment.

The study underscored the new world-wide movement presently taking shape and gathering momentum with the organization of barefoot farmers determined to improve their living conditions and make a better future for their children.

This movement is set against an environment where factors such as passivity, distrust and ingrained habits obstruct its expansion. And it is precisely in this area where NGO's have demonstrated their singular ability to help minds to evolve and behavioral patterns to change. Without exaggerating, we maintain that, both in this and in other areas, these organizations have performed an historic feat.

The need to become better informed and to better inform others means that NGO's must improve their communications both with government and among themselves. Their wealth of past experiences -- of living triumphs, failures and innovations -- is being hoarded and is not being adequately used or shared. Thus, NGO's must remain abreast of current events and keep their partners and sister organizations better informed of such events.

Since "The Barefoot Revolution" was first published back in 1985, certain trends first brought to light as a result of the study process have been amply confirmed and have taken on new substance.

At this time, I would like to briefly examine some of these trends.

Northern NGO's have not yet adequately sized up the growing force of Southern NGO's. The Western crisis largely reduced the amount of available private financial aid, forcing them to increasingly alter their activities and

concentrate on technical cooperation, on training geared to the satisfaction of immediate needs and on requests from their Southern partners.

While the largest and best organized NGO's are finding it increasingly difficult to escape institutionalization, management and publicity and are inexorably moving towards the entrepreneurial model, at the same time we are witnessing a rebirth of new voluntary organizations seething with new initiatives, a second generation of NGO's inspired by a more global and less narrow view of development, by a solidarity rooted in ties of interdependence between Northern and Southern countries and in a conviction that the survival of the North is intrinsically bound to that of the South and viceversa.

The strong desire observed in 1985 to promote exchanges between Southern partners has given way to an increasingly large number of forums for the sharing of experiences, triumphs, obstacles and failures, giving new life and impetus to this development movement transcending national borders and continents, at the same time homogeneous and highly diversified, gathering force from even the most modest forms of progress.

Lastly, but equally important, is the deep-seated change we've seen at the World Bank. After Robert MacNamara, the first President to prioritize aid to the world's poorest countries, under its current President, Burter Conable, the Bank has committed itself to supporting countries engaged in structural adjustment programs. Thus, in 1987, Nigeria received \$500 million and Ivory Coast \$300 million in the form of direct financing, plus an equal amount of cofinancing. At the same time, the World Bank is also supporting efforts to resolve the Third World debt crisis.

Nowadays, there's a whole new concept of development and corresponding development partners and priorities. It is within this context that, in

concluding my presentation, I would like to say a few words about a Club of Rome initiative taken at the urging of several African leaders during the course of the Yaoundé Conference of 1986.

I am referring to Operation Sahel, a strategy aimed at halting the encroachment or desertification process and at reclaiming desert land.

The project draws on tried and tested technology, utilizes available funding and creates partnerships between governments of interested countries in pursuit of a common political goal, with the support of international organizations, nongovernmental organizations, experts, specialized agencies and, naturally, of local communities.

Pivotal to the project are the operations of nongovernmental organizations, with logistical support from a United Nations peace-keeping force, relying on volunteers from different countries and particularly on the participation of the national armed forces of interested Sahelian countries. The U.N. peace-keeping force would be responsible for setting up bases, building tracks, establishing seed beds, digging wells and providing transportation and communications services.

Headed by a High Commissioner, a general management staff will define and implement an appropriate strategy in conjunction with experts and NGO officials. The strategy would include undertakings in close cooperation with grass roots organizations and local communities, enabling area residents to eventually take responsibility for their own development.

The project is fully supported by the Organization of African Unity and is henceforth being approached as a joint OAU/Club of Rome endeavor.

Mr. Perez de Cuellar has personally approved the project rationale. The OAU will soon be scheduling a meeting of heads of state from all interested

countries to enable us to proceed with project development and implementation.

Allow me to take advantage of this opportunity to issue an appeal for aid to all conferees, for this important project and equally important aspiration. The real task we face is to establish a network of individual microprojects, each adapted to a specific area of the Sahel, which, taken as a whole, allows for the degree of efficiency required to meet one of the greatest challenges of our times, namely to halt the process of desertification and reclaim the Sahel.