

WORLD AFFAIRS '89

INCO AND THE REPLICATION TRAP

By Frank W. Dichter

Thinking about
International
Development

TECHNOSERVE

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Technoserve is a private, non-sectarian, non-profit organization founded in 1968. Its funding comes from foundations, corporations, religious organizations, individuals, host-country institutions, international private voluntary organizations, various multilateral organizations, and the U.S. Agency for International Development.

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NGOs AND THE REPLICATION TRAP

SUMMARY:

The NGO community seems to have accepted “Replicability” as a legitimate development objective. This paper questions that legitimacy. First, it discusses the background of replication, and it suggests that NGOs are attracted to replication because it putatively solves an NGO deficiency—limited impact. The paper also offers a typology of replication, and argues that replication does not need to be built into projects. Rather, it suggests that if the organization’s overall approach to development is strategic, focused, and systemic, wider impact will result. Finally, the paper lists the hidden traps of replication (such as cost-consciousness) that NGOs should approach with caution.

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NGOs AND THE REPLICATION TRAP

Thomas W. Dichter

INTRODUCTION

Practitioners of "grassroots" development among poor people in the Third World face a new frustration. In a field requiring a high tolerance for failure, and where few projects are unequivocally successful, it is no longer good enough to manage a good project or program. We are regularly asked a new and painful question about our work: "Yes it's good," say our donors, "but is it replicable?"

It is no longer good enough to manage a good project. We are regularly asked a new and painful question about our work: "Yes it's good," say our donors, "but is it replicable?"

For thousands of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that are thus challenged, and for the many bilateral development agencies, private funding organizations, and multilateral development agencies who pose it, this question is largely accepted as appropriate. But is it?

An odd-sounding, slightly pretentious term, "replication" generally means the spread of a particular project or program's positive results. The goals of replication are often complex—and include long-term impact, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness—so that the large amounts of money spent developing a successful approach will be reduced when it is replicated.

One of the antecedents of replication is manufacturing; the repetition of a process to reduce costs and increase impact (or "profit" in the manufacturing world). When international development practitioners talk about models or transferring a methodology, and they suggest repeating a successful intervention or translating an approach to create a "cookbook" for others, they reflect this mechanistic view.

For NGOs, this adaptation of industrial and labor economics has both a positive and a negative side.

On the positive side, thinking "industrially" gets us used to relating impact to the extension of project benefits and acquaints us with cost-effectiveness (the efficiency of mechanized production).

On the negative side, "replicationists" tend to accept that while difficult, one can ultimately reach high levels of efficiency and achieve significant multiplier effects in fundamental social goals and social processes. There are good reasons to question this.

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The replication urge leads to a paradox. The presumed advantages of NGOs (their flexibility, small size, and emphasis on the grass-roots) mitigate strongly against NGOs achieving significant impact. Simply, NGOs cannot easily move mountains using tools meant to move molehills.

Political economist and thoughtful NGO critic Judith Tendler says there are structural limitations to NGO efficiency and impact, and that they may be insurmountable. In "Livelihood, Employment and Income Generating Activities," a report Tendler prepared for the Ford Foundation in 1987, she states:

"The nongovernmental sector, where much of the Foundation's LEIG [Livelihood, Employment and Income Generation] program is concentrated, has a certain structural inability to expand or to have its experiments replicated. This is why the impact of NGO projects is usually quite limited, a disturbing finding for donors interested in having an impact on poverty.

The constraints on NGO expansion and replication by others have to do with the fact that: 1) NGO strength and effectiveness often derive from smallness and social homogeneity, which get lost when NGOs try to expand; 2) NGOs see each other and the public sector as competitors for scarce donor funding, rather than as cooperators, in the quest to alleviate poverty, which makes it inherently difficult for them

*to cooperate with each other or imitate each others successes; 3) foreign funding accounts for a large share of NGO funding in some countries, which places the NGO sector somewhat at odds with the state, thereby blocking the path to replication of NGO experiments by the public sector; 4) though NGO projects may have small budgets in comparison to the public sector, their costs per beneficiary are often high, which means that even their successful projects are not necessarily feasible as models for serving larger populations; and 5) NGOs themselves often do not strive to serve large numbers of clients, nor are they under pressure to do so, which means they are often content to accomplish programs that work well in a handful of communities."*¹

There are managerial limitations resulting from NGOs' origins as voluntary organizations. Many NGOs still have cultural predispositions to non-hierarchical structures, and are often anti-management. Even managerially strong NGOs sometimes have a major flaw related to their success—they do not manage their own growth well.

In the debate about NGO impact, replicability enters as the great peace maker; it is here that the great hope lies. If NGOs can maintain their small size and at the same time have greater impact, they will have achieved the best of both worlds. They will satisfy their inner culture of smallness and custom-made projects, and satisfy the demand of the

¹ Judith Tendler, "Livelihood, Employment and Income Generating Activities," (The Ford Foundation, 1987), p.v.

larger development actors who want to see greater impact.

But there is both a sensible and a fantastical element in such a hope. The sensible element is familiar—the search for ways to improve performance and impact. The fantasy is the expectation that we can achieve a geometric extension of benefits so that 1 becomes 100 and 100 becomes 10,000. More and more, NGOs want to graduate to the big time.

Several programs study ways to accomplish these goals. In the U.S., one NGO, Technoserve, began a department in 1984 whose sole mandate is Replication (Replication and Dissemination). We have been humbled by the task and wish to share with others the insights and lessons we have gained so far. The long and short of our experience is: replication is not what it's cracked up to be. There is both more and less to replication than meets the eye.

Finding a means to extend without expanding—to grow in impact without growing in bureaucracy—fulfills the NGO fantasy of being able to have a big impact and retain a culture grounded in smallness. Again, replication holds that promise.

WHY THE GROUND SWELL OF INTEREST IN REPLICATION AND THE SUDDEN WIDESPREAD USE OF THE TERM?

We are responding to pressures in the marketplace of the development industry. Development is under increasing scrutiny—and for good reason. More actors are involved in development, and many jobs and organizations have a stake in it.

NGOs are at a critical juncture. The NGO sector (including “Northern” NGOs—those of the OECD nations, and “Southern” NGOs—those of the Third World) is the fastest growing sector in development. The number of Northern NGOs listed by the

OECD has almost doubled since 1980 (from 2500 to over 4000). Expectations about NGOs have grown too. Funding is more difficult to find, and a shake-out has begun, part of the maturation process that occurs in the evolution of any industry. NGOs are aware, some dimly, others acutely, that they must prove more to their donors about their value. They also want to enter into more equal relationship with the major players and this means having an impact worthy of consideration. These changes are part of the muscle-flexing of this newest part of a young industry, and goes along with the professionalization of what was once a “calling.”

The dilemma facing NGOs stems from a common bias against organizational traits that could result in larger impact. NGOs like their smallness, flexibility, and focus on the grassroots and the community level. To have greater impact in an old-fashioned mechanistic way means expanding—thus threatening the internal culture. But by finding a means to extend without expanding—to grow in impact without growing in bureaucracy—fulfills the NGO fantasy of having significant impact while retaining a culture grounded in smallness. Again, replication holds that promise.

Because the pressure is on, NGOs want to learn the art of replication quickly. But we tend to ignore a lesson from history—few changes occur instantly—especially when they concern changes among entire classes of people. European peasants did not become mechanized agriculturalists overnight, and when they did, it was part of a larger set of changes. Part of what is driving the replication movement now is our own impatient desire for concrete change.

The impulse to replicate, to the extent that it is based on impatience, may be counter-productive. It can distract our attention from consolidating what we have learned, and causes us to undertake shortcuts where none may be possible.

This impatience is morally justified. Poverty and its accompanying evils are unacceptable. But in many other respects, impatience is not justified. The world does not solve all its problems at once. Poverty and injustice cannot be reduced to simple theories ("free market," Marxian, or otherwise) and there is little good historical evidence (except perhaps in case of plague or major war) suggesting that fundamental changes occur quickly in the human realm.

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LEARNING THE LIMITS OF PROJECT REPLICATION

Technoserve is an NGO with 20 years of experience in enterprise development in rural agriculture. The technical assistance we offer to groups of low-income people enables farmers and agriculturally related workers to transform their farms into viable small and medium enterprises. These farmers, who may come together as shareholders in a limited liability company, a cooperative, an informal association, or other legal entity with shared ownership, receive training in agronomy, marketing, accounting, business planning, analysis of future markets, and administration and management. We work with farmers at the low end of the income scale. In Zaire, Kenya, Rwanda, and Ghana, these farmers are classic small-holders. In places such as western Panama, El Salvador, and coastal Peru, these farmers tend to

be cooperative members, often former peasant workers on large farms which were turned over to them in agrarian reform programs.

SOME EXAMPLES OF REPLICATION ATTEMPTS:

Because Technoserve limits its activity to one sector of development—rural agricultural enterprise development—we would seem to be in a good position to have many possibilities for replication. The chronology is interesting:

In Central America in the early 1970s, Technoserve worked with a number of cooperatively owned feedlots. Our approach was based on the belief that the best way to help low-income farmers was to help them run their operations as viable, profit-making businesses. We concentrated so hard on the end product—seeing these farms become viable—that we saw little else but the enterprise itself. We thought business acumen was the sole missing ingredient, and opted to use retired businessmen as volunteers to go to Central America to help put these businesses in the black.

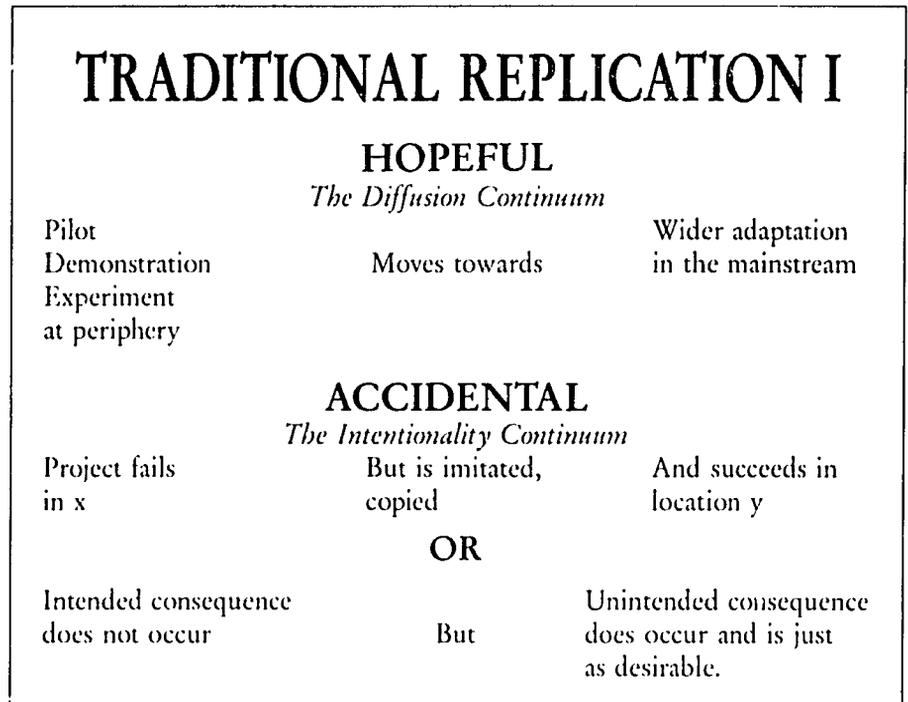
We then began to catch on to one aspect of replication—the repetition of projects. Since we had acquired experience in feedlots, we naturally went on to work with other feedlots. This is replication in its primitive, mechanistic, one-dimensional form: do it once well, then do it again. Replication, however, can and should occur in other ways too.

The typology of replication we suggest has two categories, "Traditional" and "Non-traditional."

TRADITIONAL REPLICATION

Traditional replication is what we

FIGURE 1



did in Central America in the 1970s and what many NGOs have practiced for many years.

Traditional replication comes in two forms. The first could be called **HOPEFUL** or **ACCIDENTAL**, that is, one hopes impact will spread to be copied elsewhere. **HOPEFUL** replication has limits (*See Figure 1*).

The second type within the Category of Traditional Replication, we could call **STRICT CONSTRUCTION**—where the elemental (mechanistic) sense of replication is used (*See Figure 2*).

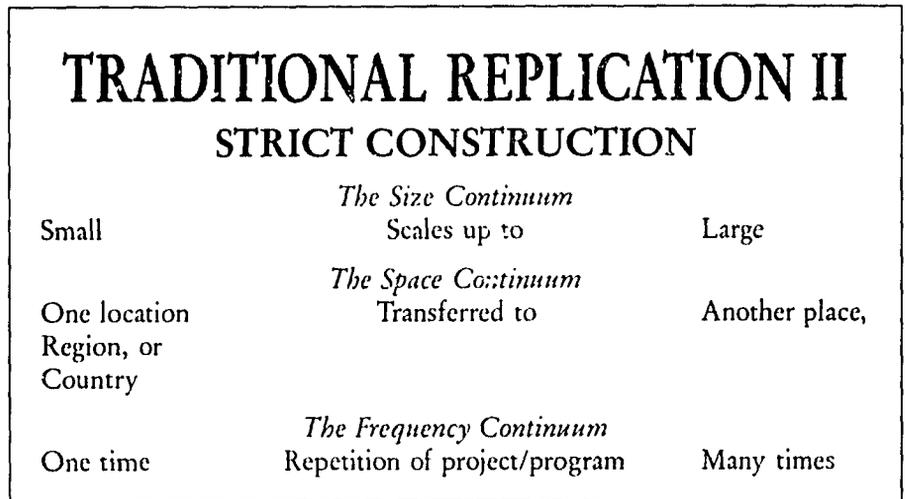
Replicating our feedlot experience was at this level—embodying all three examples of the **STRICT CONSTRUCTION** type.

But the enterprise development process is, as we learned, multi-dimensional. Later we realized several key aspects of programs were missing, which in the end limited the impact of replication. We neglected the fact that the agricultural

enterprise is made up of its owners. To the extent that we understood the enterprise to consist of land, equipment, and livestock, we successfully replicated the business aspects. But we had neglected the people who were to keep it going. Not only did we not pay enough attention to training for the long-term, we did not pay attention to community participation in the work—we were too impatient. As a result of our attempt to replicate projects in this way, not much lasted very long.

We also learned that by using volunteers for one and two year assignments, supposedly to make projects more replicable by reducing costs, we undermined our efforts to learn from experience and make future projects more successful. The rate of staff turnover began to contribute to a lack of organizational memory, reducing the opportunities to learn. Ultimately, the possibilities of a quantum leap—from mere repeti-

FIGURE 2



tion of projects in the same commodity sector to cumulative learning leading to a true multiplier effect—were drastically eliminated before they could be realized. A simple principle was discovered: an accumulation of experience residing in the heads and hearts of long-term committed staff (preferably local) can lead to replication of a more indirect, and more sophisticated sort.

By 1979, we believed we had incorporated the lessons learned above and had developed a methodology of enterprise development including another principle—the reliance on careful, comprehensive, and systematic feasibility studies. Before beginning a given project, our staff would examine the availability of inputs, capital, labor, and markets and potential markets for the commodity involved. Many projects started to yield significant success after this kind of careful homework. But we began to think that the methodology was so important that we forgot that it has no life of its own beyond the persons implementing it. This led to new mistakes and we again had to relearn the basic principle of the “right” people.

For example, having had success in Kenya with the kind of comprehensive analytic approach above, we transferred it to a commercial rabbitry project in Ghana. Technoserve conducted a feasibility study, got the involvement of the small farmers, looked at the market and the availability of inputs, put together a business plan based on our analysis, and decided to launch the project. The result was a disaster. The project showed initial promise, but at no time did it show any significant positive results. The original assessment of the market, as well as the availability of inputs and technical skills needed, was wrong. In brief, the form of the analytic framework was adhered to properly, but the content was erroneous because our staff did not fully understand it.

The methodology proved to be a hollow core. Because we had been so convinced that our methodology worked, we felt we could transfer the form from Kenya to Ghana and see it work too. Obviously we realized the importance of people in this process, but we were so impressed by the success of the method that we tended not to look critically at the

We discovered that with patience, continuity, and focus, replication could be achieved by sticking to what we knew how to do best, thus creating comparative advantage over time to ensure that learning was systematically monitored and recorded. This helped us to influence macro policy. Evaluation of why a project works, and analyzing lessons learned, was the key to being able to replicate success in a different environment.

The ambitious goals of replication are achievable, but not as a function of designing something called "replicability" into the project. Rather, those goals function as elemental principles embodied in the organization undertaking the development task.

skill level of the people managing the project in Ghana.

By the early 1980s, in three countries where Technoserve had about eight to ten years of experience, we had built substantial local staff, had kept records of our projects in key commodity areas, and knew what we had learned. For the first time, we found we were in a position to influence policy at the macro level. In effect, we had already done what David Korten calls "Micro policy reform" at the grassroots: we successfully trained communities to run their own agricultural enterprises. We now found a link between the micro and the macro. We used accumulated knowledge from grassroots projects in selected commodity sectors to influence policy at government ministerial levels. We were in a position to influence government policies in Savings & Credit legislation, milk and cattle pricing, synthetic fiber importation, and agricultural lending.

We discovered that with patience, continuity, and focus, replication could be achieved by sticking to what we knew how to do best, thus creating comparative advantage over time to ensure that learning was systematically monitored and recorded. This helped us to influence macro policy. *Evaluation of why a project worked, and analyzing lessons learned, was the key to being able to replicate success in a different environment.*

NON-TRADITIONAL REPLICATION

This last example leads us to the second, non-traditional category of replication. It is more exponential than linear in nature. This broad category is far less direct and is less a

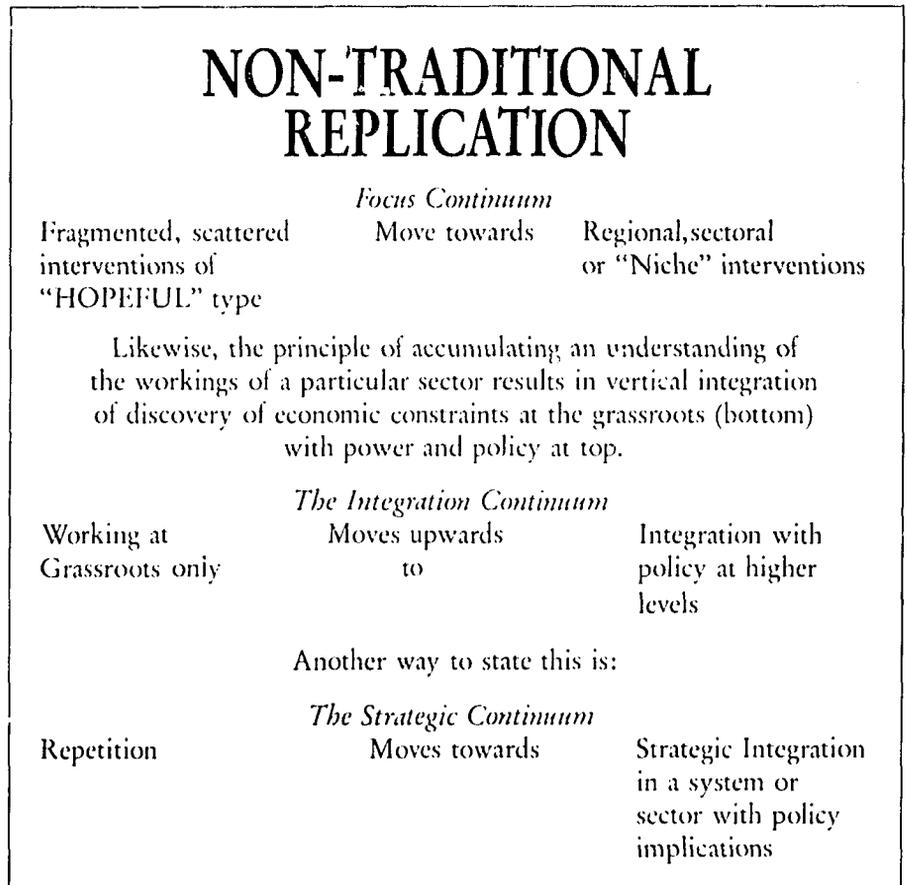
matter of transferring project models than of transferring underlying principles, such as the value of concentrating or focusing on a region or sector (*See figure 3*).

Ironically, as Technoserve moved from the traditional to the non-traditional means of replication, a key lesson we learned was that since fostering viable sustainable small enterprises involves many factors, *replication is a gratuitous term*. That is to say, it has always been possible to increase impact (traditional replication) in limited ways with limited multiplier effects. But when an organization wants to significantly increase impact in complex projects, it needs to engage in Non-Traditional replication. And since those forms of replication (as illustrated above) are really applications of basic principles of effective organizations in general, attention may be diverted from this fact by using a term such as "replication."

In other words, the ambitious goals of replication are achievable, but *not as a function of designing something called "replicability" into the project*. Rather, those goals function as elemental principles embodied in the organization undertaking the development task. An organization must consider what makes a good project work; this means having a solid system of monitoring and evaluation. An organization needs to look rigorously at project costs, which will always be a key factor if others are to imitate (replicate) the project. An organization also needs to consider the use of rare assets in a program (assets which others might not have access to) to see whether others might be able to imitate it. These concerns enhance organizational effectiveness in any field.

In Technoserve's case, accumulat-

FIGURE 3



ed commodity sector knowledge can influence policy for the wider good of small farmers or small entrepreneurs. This makes the role of internal information dissemination critical. We have had many instances of failure to transfer knowledge learned in one country program to another simply because no one knew about it. Even with knowledge that has generic qualities (such as an understanding of the technical and business aspects of storing certain tropical produce), when we did achieve a better organized system of internal dissemination, we found that this was only the first step. Once sent, nobody can guarantee it will be used. People on staff elsewhere often suffer from the

"not-invented-here" syndrome. They cannot be forced to use information well. Exchanging staff may be one way to overcome this problem. In short, to make advances in replication, an organization needs to first make advances in its internal functions in general.

When Technoserve started its Replication department in 1984, an important first assumption was that we could extend impact if we transferred our method and our organizational traits to other organizations—especially indigenous organizations in the Third World.

We searched for partners already philosophically predisposed to our organizational traits and our participatory development method-

ology. Even with such partners, we found the process time consuming and uncomfortable because it involved compromises, adjustments, and issues of "ownership" residing in the organizational ego. Finally, these lessons learned are not easily taught to others who haven't had the same experiences.

The first successful experiment of organizational transfer began in 1984 when we helped The Katalysis Foundation of California launch the Belize Enterprise for Sustained Technology (B.E.S.T.) an indigenous Belizean NGO specializing in agricultural enterprise development.

Naturally, B.E.S.T. has its own ideas about goals and methods, and it wants to learn things in its own way, not ours. Still, they have adapted what we have learned, and the repetition of our mistakes is being avoided. The important thing, of course, is whether there is local impact to improve people's lives in significant ways. If that can be shown to be the case, then we have achieved our goal.

According to a report from the OECD Development Assistance Committee, this "partnership" approach to replication is fairly new:

*"It is only recently, and mainly through evaluations, that inquiry into the potential for replicability has shifted to factors such as the adequacy of local leadership training or a deliberate search for contact with governmental services and other potential partners, in order to tap and replicate a particular "model". . . ."*²

We can sum up with a simple typol-

ogy of replication:

- Programmatic/Operational (repeating project successes in various ways, along various spectra).
- Communication/Informational (informing others about project successes and failures).
- Training/Educational (teaching others to do it).
- Collaboration (working with other, partnership organizations so that more groups take similar approaches).

PRECONDITIONS FOR REPLICATION

We have so far talked about ways and means of replicating. There must also be something worth replicating, and knowing what to replicate is not always clear. For replication to have potential, a project must:

- Have something that works well enough to warrant replication.
- Have recognizable and unambiguous reasons for project success.
- Have sufficient resources, including the necessary management skills to reproduce the conditions for success.
- Be applied by an organization which is effective, i.e., can learn, apply its learning internally, remember its learning, focus, establish a niche, use comparative advantage, be efficient, say no, etc.

OBSTACLES TO REPLICATION

Besides the internal "cultural" obstacles mentioned earlier which block the NGO community's path in its efforts to improve the record on rep-

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² Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Voluntary Aid for Development: The Role of Non Governmental Organizations" (Paris, 1987), p. 49.

There may be thresholds in the community, or in individual organizations, where the difficulty of jumping towards exponential type of replication is considerably greater than mechanistically repeating a "model" several times in different regions. These thresholds need to be better understood.

lication, there are additional obstacles to be aware of:

1. Organizational obstacles—We generally have not spent enough time rigorously analyzing what we do and whether it works for the reasons we say. Thus we are not yet ready to meet some of the preconditions for successful replication.
2. Also, we may not have the organizational maturity or sophistication (including the appropriate internal management skills) to undertake the more exponential types of replication.
3. There may be thresholds in the community, or in individual organizations, where the difficulty of jumping towards exponential replication is considerably greater than mechanistically repeating a "model" several times in different regions. These thresholds need to be better understood. Attempting to jump over and beyond them before realizing that one is at such a threshold, could result in high costs, project failure, organizational over-extension, and internally destructive tensions.

QUESTIONABLE PRESSURES TO REPLICATE PROJECTS

Today there are some interesting currents in the development community pushing us towards replication that are worth questioning. We refer here to five of them:

THE "STAR" TENDENCY

The "star" tendency arises out of our need to find project "models" for success. There is a sense of urgency in development circles which is re-

flected in unreasonably short project time frames of two to five years—the "star" tendency often prematurely pushes us to declare isolated successes as models.

Behind this is the idea that something good, a project such as the Grameen Bank credit program in Bangladesh, is too good not to try elsewhere. Thus we raise it to the level of a model—something which can be transferred by taking its basic elements and setting them up again somewhere else (just as in a model house the floor-plan and structure are displayed so that people can choose the model they like and build it in a different place).

As in the model house, elements of the floor-plan can be fairly easily adapted to new sites and to the tastes of the new owners. We recognize that elements of the Grameen Bank may have to be adapted to other environments with different politics, cultures, and economies.

The problem lies in our not being perfectly sure why the Grameen case works the way it does. While the construction techniques in a model house are perfectly understood and tested, those of a project like Grameen are not. By raising the model to "star" status, we may prematurely encourage its replication, in a whole-sale cookbook manner rather than in a limited experimental way which would further our learning about the subtleties of what made it work in the first place.

THE PILOT PROJECT EMBARRASSMENT

The concept of the pilot project has become a trap in our thinking about replication. Because of growing impatience with our limitations, and because of outside pressure for more

Given the still new nature of development, it is not at all unreasonable to continue to experiment and perfect a pilot program in sectors where our experience is only a few years old. We need to learn to be less defensive of our pilot projects with donors.

impact, NGOs seem to feel increasingly uncomfortable with pilot projects. We implicitly compare ourselves to industry, where we know there is little tolerance for continuing to indulge in pilot projects or experiments. At some point, the demands of the marketplace put pressure on producers to move from drawing board to product, to go from prototype to mass-production.

Thus, we are embarrassed by pilot projects after awhile. In our fast-paced culture, saying that we development practitioners are still (after all these years) building pilot projects and experimenting, seems legitimate cause for self-consciousness. The pressure to replicate ties into this self-consciousness. We often endure pilot project embarrassments. But, given the still new nature of development, it is not at all unreasonable to continue to experiment and perfect a pilot program in sectors where our experience is only a few years old. We need to learn to be less defensive of our pilot projects with donors.

THE "SCIENCE" TENDENCY

The element of social "engineering" which permeates our development professionalism often gets in the way of a full recognition that we are dealing with human beings, not mechanical systems. The push to replicate reinforces the development practitioner's tendency to think we can tinker with models and furthers our forgetfulness about the human factor. Since thinkers have been analyzing human systems, there has as yet been no satisfactory comprehensive explanatory framework accounting for all the complexity and unpredictability of human behavior and social systems. If thousands of social scientists, economists, anthropologists,

and psychologists have failed to reduce humankind to succinct axioms, how can we?

In the Grameen Bank's case, we must ask questions about key variables in the "model." What is unique about the Bank? Is it the personnel doing the work? Is it the Bank's founder? Is it the extent to which the founder was connected to the Bangladeshi power structure? Is it that the activities funded are ones already engaged in by the borrowers?

Our tendency to apply scientific method to complex human system is understandable given the pressure to replicate. But again, we need to remember that despite the advances in economic and psychological theory, human behavior cannot be reduced purely to scientific formulae. Greater learning about the development process would seem to take place in a condition of some humility about the process. That stance would allow a very open-ended view of what makes the difference in a "success." By becoming increasingly enamored of development as "science" rather than as art, we risk losing vital links in the development process.

THE COST-EFFECTIVENESS TENDENCY

A fourth pressure in our thinking about replication is cost. We are under increasing pressure to reduce costs. But we do not use the connections between replication and costs as well as we might in addressing those pressures. Calculators that cost \$100.00 in the early 70s now cost under \$10.00. Similarly, certain apparently high costs of some kinds of development projects, are justifiable given either the expected stream of benefits later on, or lower project costs once replicated.

Donors and practitioners alike have become obsessed with costs: cost-effectiveness, cost-benefit analysis, cost recovery, recurrent costs, and so on. Donors such as USAID can criticize even the best of projects with, "it's good, but it costs too much." Of course, we are products of our time and culture—cost and efficiency obsess us. Nonetheless we should not forget other strains in our culture (as reflected in old wisdoms such as "you get what you pay for," or "penny-wise and pound-foolish"), suggesting that costs may have a more intricate and ambiguous relationship to quality than that expressed in standard cost-benefit analysis. Development is still in an experimental stage, and we should not unconditionally fear high costs. If NGOs can avoid constant short-run price considerations, we can resist questionable pressures to replicate.

THE LESSONS LEARNED TENDENCY

There is also a flip side to the replication tendency: we may incorporate too much orthodoxy from lessons learned. When a project is deemed not to have worked, we should not automatically conclude that something like it should not be tried again. Just as there are accidental successes, there may be accidental failures. A re-appraisal of the project may reveal a foundation for a successful application of the goals and techniques elsewhere.

CONCLUSIONS

Replication is a laudable goal for NGOs, but it needs to be kept in the perspective of where we are in development praxis. If NGOs concentrate

on doing good development work, and if we foster high quality sustainable projects, then worrying about replication may be gratuitous. Development programs need sophisticated analysis and dissemination of lessons learned. Too many projects are replicated, not because they are uncommonly good, but because they are commonly cited by academic researchers who often choose the same countries to work in.

If we can adjust our beliefs to see that an experimental mode is not an inappropriate one for us to remain in for some time, and if we recognize the nature of our tasks, it is difficult to say that pilot projects are *ipso facto* too expensive. It "pays" to make quality work an objective.

Most grassroots development work undertaken by NGOs is a craft and an art. It is not something which can be easily mass-produced.

We contradict ourselves when we call for replication in advance of project success. This is where we carry replication past what we understand to be true about projects. We tend to think that because replication is a good thing, we can ask that it be built-in to the plans for a project, as if by adding some special ingredient to the plans, we can make it replicable. In fact, what makes our efforts replicable are the underlying principles of good development work applicable to any project.

By giving the term replication special status as a major goal, we have given it a life of its own. This is inappropriate, and contrary to the sophisticated understanding of the development process that NGOs have established in recent years.

What is replicable in development is not a project "model," but the principles that define development models. We are not likely to succeed

There is also a flip side to the replication tendency: we may incorporate too much orthodoxy from lessons learned. When a project is deemed not to have worked, we should not automatically conclude that something like it should not be tried again. Just as there are accidental successes, there may be accidental failures.

We contradict ourselves when we call for replication in advance of project success. This is where we carry the notion of replication past what we understand to be true about projects. We tend to think that because replication is a good thing, we can ask that it be built-in to the plans for a project, as if by adding some special ingredient to the plans, we can make it replicable. In fact, what makes our efforts replicable, are the underlying principles of good development work applicable to any project.

in isolating the key variables of particular projects because too many of them are embedded in different social, cultural, linguistic, political, and economic structures. Such differences will always compel grassroots development projects to be custom-built.

The underlying principles of good development work are the keys to replicability:

- Invest in finding and training competent, professional personnel with appropriate skills including the capacity to transfer skills to others, particularly in such basic areas as management, accounting, and planning, which are part of the sustainability of all organizations.
- Acknowledge the realities of the development process, which means planning for longer time frames for projects and programs.
- Remain flexible. The dynamics of development need acknowledgment—projects ebb and flow, there are false starts, some aspects of a project lead others, and adjustment often necessitates change.
- Pay attention to participation and ways to insure that participants have a significant stake in their project (for example, by having to pay something for it) to insure that they

are motivated.

- Be “systems” minded—recognize linkages between parts in a system. This leads to making impact a function of strategy rather than size or money. This implies seeing systems vertically and horizontally, and a concomitant capacity to build bridges across sector barriers (e.g. linking micro development activities with macro policy).
- Guard integrity in the assisting organization. The values of the people who form these organizations are critical.

We have tried to suggest that replication, like many development buzzwords, needs a closer look. There are hidden traps in the concept, implications we may want to resist, and costs (especially in learning) we may not want to pay. Nor can we assume that the impulse behind replication, unlike another current term—sustainability—is clearly a good one. The push for project efficiency, one of the elements in the complex political economy of the development industry, is a good one. But let's remember that NGOs risk adopting not just the word replication, but many of the impulses behind it. This paper simply raises the familiar warning: *Caveat Emptor*.

TECHNOSERVE'S MISSION STATEMENT:

Approved by the Board of Directors, May 15, 1985

“It is Technoserve’s aim to improve the economic and social well-being of low-income people in developing countries through a process of enterprise development which increases productivity, jobs, and income. Technoserve accomplishes this by providing management, technical assistance, and training to enterprises and institutions primarily related to the agricultural sector.”

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