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Graham B. Kerr

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INDIGENOUS DEVELOPMENT GROUPS AND THEIR POTENTIAL
ROLES IN ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

by

Graham B. Kerr*

"Seldom have either donor or recipient governments consulted people at the village level in order to involve them as active participants in their own health care. Instead, the common practice is to impose upon the people a program which they do not understand, and therefore lack the motivation to obey."

Harry Nelson, February 15, 1981

Introduction: The Need for Alternative Development Strategies

Nelson's conclusion after studying health projects, while travelling for four months in ten African and Asian countries, can probably be generalized to most other development projects in 1981 --especially those in rural areas involving the delivery of social services. It is a sad commentary on thirty years of international development efforts and points out the need for serious thought about alternative development strategies. Alternative strategies are those which stress the motivation, organization and involvement of rural people for self-reliant, participatory development which is essential for the satisfaction of basic human needs (ICLD, 1980, p. 2).

There are several other circumstances which suggest an alternative development strategy. The basic needs philosophy was articulated in the early '70s, following closely on the heels of "integrated development," which itself was preceded by the "infrastructure" and "institution-building" era of the '60s. Basic needs strategy stresses the satisfaction of the most elementary physical and psychological requirements of the majority of the poor in the LDCs. Alternative strategy indicates that this can be accomplished through participation, in the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects by those who will be affected by the projects. Note that in agency jargon these people are labelled "beneficiaries" rather than "participants." The best that they can usually hope to do is "...cooperate with, but never participate in, the (project)" (Sheppard, 1981, p. 8).

*The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and should not be attributed to the Agency for International Development.

The rhetoric of basic needs increasingly exhorts us to obtain the participation of local people in our projects as early as possible. There are, however, few real guidelines and fewer mechanisms available to us (Morss and Gow, 1981, p. 8). The pressure to develop projects and oblige money precludes time-consuming consultations with host country residents, especially rural people living far from our "capital city" offices. I suggest that appropriate indigenous development groups may provide one mechanism that will help us to turn the rhetoric into meaningful involvement.

Another changing circumstance which suggests an opportunity for alternative strategies is the decentralization taking place in many countries. In countries, such as Senegal, Egypt and Morocco, there are serious legislated attempts to move development decisions regarding design, implementation and budgets, closer to the people who will be affected by the programs and out of the corridors of central ministries. As more decisions are made at village, district and regional meetings there should be more opportunities for meaningful local participation. Indigenous development associations are an existing resource which should be able to play a role in development decentralization.

The rising price of oil can also be linked to the use of development associations. An increasing number of governments are finding their exchequers emptied as their import earnings and local revenues are used to pay for oil to keep their industries and cities moving. In many LDCs there is less money available from the central government for local, rural development projects as each year passes. Most of the human and monetary capital required to satisfy basic needs for rural parts of the world (by the year 2000??) will have to come from the rural people themselves. Voluntary associations, where they exist, are a resource, through which local information, management and money can be channeled into development.

In this paper I will define indigenous development groups and describe examples of their activities. I will further indicate why they should be involved in development, drawing upon small groups and social change theory and describe how they can be identified so they can be involved in development.

Indigenous Development Groups

Development groups or associations are groups organized for the pursuit of a common objective of the members; in this case the objective is the development and modernization of the members and their community. They come with a variety of names. In a study of 17 development associations in Eastern Nigeria I found names, such as "...improvement union,"

"...age grade," "...General Meeting," "...Village Council," "Progressive Union," "...People's Committee," and so on.²

The objectives of development associations were succinctly summarized by the Vice-Chairman of one who said:

"It was formed with a view to facing strongly the modern ways of life and receiving the village's full share of the government amenities. To see to the progress of the villate and its gradual development" (Kerr, 1970, p. 20).

Another group concluded its list of objectives --perhaps a little too realistically--as follows:

"To do any other things that may tend to increase the living standard of the members" (Kerr, 1970, p. 21).

The 1056 members of the 17 groups, which I studied, had been involved in about 50 development projects in the years between 1960 and 1966. These projects included: seven agricultural schemes, four village halls, two health dispensary/maternity centers, ten school assistance schemes (building classrooms, teachers' houses, etc.), five scholarship programs (including one grant of money to a "son abroad" studying in the United States), four water projects, five loans-to-members schemes, and so on.

The reader may ask, "Why stress the involvement of indigenous (existing), rather than new groups, in alternative strategies?" Unfortunately, new groups, such as cooperatives established by central agencies, have not done a good job of meeting the basic needs of villagers. My interest in this topic was rekindled by an article by Apthorpe concerning the failure of many cooperatives in LDCs (Apthorpe, 1977). His conclusions coincide with my own experiences in rural Nigeria and also with a UN study which said that:

"...rural cooperatives in developing areas today bring little benefit to the masses of poorer inhabitants of those areas and cannot be generally regarded as agents of change and development for such groups" (UNRISD, 1975, p. ix).

My own research indicates that existing groups and development go together, and there is a significant payoff from identifying groups and using them to enhance development.

Groups and Change

Research regarding small groups indicates that they can play an important part in social change. Summarizing the results, which I have described more fully in another paper (Kerr, 1978), we can say that:

- socially active group members tend to adopt ideas earlier than other members of their communities;
- group members working together achieve more than most superior members achieve alone;
- better solutions to problems result from members sharing ideas;
- productivity is higher in groups than when members work alone;
- the group is a major social mechanism for motivating people;
- attitudes and subsequent behavior are changed more readily in group sessions;
- changes brought about by participation in decisions is more permanent than changes imposed on members;
- if a group's objective is change, then those who identify closely with the group will be change oriented;
- change is more likely to occur when information is shared among relevant members of the group; and
- groups tend to take riskier decisions than do their members when working alone.

Thus, there is good theoretical and empirical justification for involving indigenous groups in alternative strategies for development. The "benefits" of using groups accrue immediately if you decide to use an existing group,³ rather than develop a new one. In any new group it will be some time before group process can yield the advantages discussed above.

The Development Roles of Indigenous Groups

An indigenous development association is a unique resource for the community and the change agency which is trying to assist with development. It is:

- an existing social institution with modern development norms in which it is appropriate for locals to participate--it is a ready-made mechanism for participation, which research indicates will predispose people to change;
- a group of innovative and change oriented people from the community;
- a group able to sustain itself and hence maintain the benefits of development projects;
- a group that may assume some recurrent costs of a project when the agency pulls out;
- a forum in which roles for making decisions have already been established;
- a group that has worked out ways of introducing, sanctioning, and implementing projects. The sanctioning role--where a project is approved by the community--is so essential for new projects, and is so often overlooked by agencies working for the first time in a community;
- an established mechanism for collecting local information for planning the project and later reactions to the project;
- a method of organizing labor, collecting money, and assembling other resources required by the project;
- an existing link between the community and the outside world. I found in my study in Eastern Nigeria that about a quarter of the members of the 17 groups lived outside the village, but usually visited the community about once a year. They brought back money and new ideas from the urban areas in which many of them lived.
- a mechanism for sharing risk, and enabling members to participate in more innovative decisions;

- an institution in the community that can maintain contacts with several uncoordinated government agencies and integrate them to fit the needs of the community--perhaps these groups are the only ones able to take a wholistic approach to community development;
- an institutional mechanism for evaluating the recommendations of the 'agency "experts,"; and
- a mechanism for providing impetus for change from within the community.

Identifying Indigenous Development Groups

Hopefully, as development agencies employ more social scientists we will become more aware of the social environments in which we place projects--as I wrote in 1978:

"An agency concerned about rural development in West Africa would, presumably, study the rural communities before embarking upon projects. I would suggest that even the briefest study of almost any community would reveal the presence of the pervasive voluntary associations which are already developing their communities" (Kerr, 1978, p. 93).

During our study of 17 communities we identified one group in each community which 10 randomly selected villagers thought was doing the most for village development. During an earlier study of some 70 villages we had, through open-ended questioning, identified several areas of group activity. These were:

- "1. Traditional groups concerned with village affairs and the maintenance of law and order.
2. Modern groups concerned with village affairs and village administration.
3. Labor groups--community work groups, market work groups, labor exchange groups, etc.
4. Entertainment groups--dancing, wrestling, drinking, football, singing, etc.

5. Religious groups --any groups connected in any way with a church.
6. Educational groups --any concerned with educating the people of the village.
7. Title groups of the village (groups to which outstanding people are elected by the members).
8. Development groups --any concerned with the progress and development of the village.
9. Monetary groups --any concerned with money, such as esusu.⁴
10. Any other groups which do not fit into the above categories."

(Kerr, 1970, p. 124)

We asked each respondent to suggest groups for each category. This produced an inventory of salient groups for that person. A penultimate question ascertained which group was, in the opinion of the respondent, doing the most for the progress and development of the village. Finally, the villager was asked to list the major, recent development activities of the group. In all villages the association chosen had either more votes (6.2 average) than any other, or in the case of a tie, the selection was made after the activities of the association had been studied carefully. Thus, the association involved in most development activities was chosen. In this way we were able to identify useful groups for development strategies, and also inventory recent development projects in the village. This could be done quite easily in two days in each community.

A more time-consuming method of identifying appropriate groups is to study recent projects and identify the groups and actors who played important roles in their design and execution. It would probably take more time to develop adequate case studies of development projects, than to identify groups via the reputational method described above. The case study, however, will yield more specific information about the ways decisions are made and projects implemented in the community. Thus both methods have advantages, and a combination of methods would be ideal if one has the time.

Conclusion

We have suggested that alternative development strategies are an essential part of development. Their proponents should explore the use of indigenous development groups as a resource for the strategy as it involves the people who will be affected most. For, after all, development depends on THEM, not US. Perhaps all we can do, with the very limited (and decreasing) resources available to us, is to nudge the process along a little, without causing too much chaos. The indigenous development groups can help to cushion the stress and tensions that our projects create in small communities.

FOOTNOTES

1. Development and modernization are processes by which we purposively gain control over changes in the environment which affect and are essential to our welfare.
2. Examples of names taken from the literature about similar groups in West Africa are: traditionalist associations, improvement associations, village meetings, voluntary associations, non-kinship associations, ethnic associations (Kerr, 1970, p, 17).
3. Methods of identifying appropriate development groups are discussed later in the paper.
4. The Yoruba name for a savings club. It is widely used throughout Nigeria.

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