

Article

Disturbing Practices in Development

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This is an account of a donor funded project which is one of the several that together, supports a comprehensive education reform program in a progressive developing country. The project is substantially funded and is staffed by host country professionals with limited expatriate assistance. Project personnel work for a US contracting firm and a consortium of subcontracting institutions.

To strengthen indigenous capacity, facilitate coordination between projects and insure mutually reinforcing efforts, the overall national reform program is managed by the nation's Ministry of Education. The Ministry is in charge of program policy, goal interpretation and any alterations in overall design. Each donor project was designed to address selected aspects of the overall reform. Each is to be managed in such a way that local capacity will be enhanced. This management arrangement should build indigenous capacity while insuring well aligned initiatives.

As the project got underway, it became clear that project personnel understood the importance of host initiated and managed effort. However, it does not appear that the donor that supported the project was committed to this arrangement or to capacity building goals. Soon after the project started, new efforts were initiated by the donor itself, without consulting project personnel or the organizational consortium behind them – let alone processing through the larger Ministry of Education planning and management framework. Project personnel found themselves committed to carrying out new initiatives which interfered with contracted responsibilities and for which their expertise did not apply. Veteran development professionals were concerned that personnel in the Ministry of Education would be left far behind by interventions rapidly injected from outside. There was also concern about the unwitting cultural distortion that can result from gifts which transform education in a donor's image, especially when the transformation is not indigenously planned and internalized. One wonders how prevalent this sort of thing is now and if it is somehow connected to the political environment that has enveloped parts of the world since the recent turn of the century.

Either the donor was not very dedicated to capacity building or did not have a good grasp of what it takes to build local capacity through development initiatives. There are examples of outstanding donor creations left across the world that cannot be operated and maintained

by local personnel because capacity was not attended to. In this project, donor initiatives were taken unilaterally, seemingly with little thought for long term sustainability. It seemed that the donor agenda was something other than sustainable development of the education system- something other than the meticulous step by step building that is required for a system to take ownership and be able to move forward with intended reforms. It appeared as if the donor purposely ignored government led planning and management machinery. Participating personnel were left with the impression that the donor intended to quickly spend large sums of money through the project. Of course this can be counterproductive if one's agenda is institutional led development that will last, that will not just run off. Some of the other donors wondered if this donor might be using cafeteria style development initiatives for political rather than development objectives.

Professional personnel were expected to embrace, readily and without questioning, additions and changes to the project-including unanticipated purchases. Directives were communicated to them by the donor in emailed memos-sometimes supplemented by copies of unsolicited commitments made directly to the Ministry by the donor. Project personnel were told to add several initiatives which were not related to the Ministry of Education reform and which were not part of the work for which the project consortium had been contracted.

Project management had a problem with the diversion of resources (staff, time, funds and focus) from support of the national reform. However, they acceded to donor directives, albeit with voiced reservations because usual protocol is to insure that proper contract processes are first put into place. Changes were happening too fast for this. It became difficult too, for project management to consider the limits of staff energy and expertise and to be reasonable about the use of people. The project team was cooperative and responsive even though additions and changes made it harder and harder for them to serve reform objectives specified in project design.

In addition to the disturbing situation noted above, there are concerns of a fundamental nature when capricious, arbitrary, unilateral and rapid non laddered actions are employed. For example:

A) For a reform to succeed and be sustained, host country people must be willing, able and organized to

(make the improvements themselves. Some development assistance overlooks this. It attempts to lay on from the top. This removes the opportunity of a people to display initiative and to feel responsible-contributing to an unseen long term psychological dependency. One wonders for example, what debilitating long term dependencies are being created in Iraq.

(B) Perhaps for the most part, administrators in development believe in genuine host participation. However, some are overwhelmed by the momentum of their own organization or their own government. Momentum can be generated by themes that are in vogue in the donor country, by the influence of outside policy research, new techniques or technologies, styles of management, large financial resources that are earmarked by a donor for certain thematic thrusts and political considerations.

(C) People cannot work meaningfully toward a development unless they have time to cope with its complexity, understand the organization it will require and perceive an outcome that is compatible with their values.

(D) Agendas imposed from outside can promote vertical allegiances that divert local attention from the horizontal person to person, institution to institution and community to community collaboration that is critical to local decision making, ownership, self reliance and sustainability.

(E) Laid on bought and paid for development, as opposed to deep roots, shoulder to shoulder development can mislead donors about accomplishment—leading them to severely short circuit the time that true development takes.

(F) The cafeteria style of development can lead to a periodic taking up of new themes, each one raising expectations, only to drop hosts further when the effort is replaced by something else. This is contrary to the syste-

matic laying of foundations and the accomplishment of conditions necessary to being able to take next steps.

(G) People can only work productively in accordance with their readiness and preparation. As in anything, it is necessary to become fully accomplished at a level before being able to go further. Furthermore, if an initiative employs techniques or resources that are not going to be available when a donor has finished, hosts will not be able to make it theirs and sustain it. Working outside the long term capability of one's hosts can create unreal expectations and set them up for failure.

(H) Bringing about meaningful, appropriate and sustained change requires credibility. Credibility in development is generated by true partnerships where the problems and dilemmas of a people are understood and taken on, through close and longstanding association, as if they were problems and dilemmas of the assistance personnel.

(I) Belief in oneself or faith in predictability and the possibility of accomplishment is not the function of an expert's report or the preassembled gift of a donor.

Donovan Russell has worked in many capacities for several development organizations across North American, Africa, Asia and the Middle East.