



HUNGER NOTES

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*"Murder by hunger cannot be set right by any other means except with food."
— Ramalingam*

DEFEATING POVERTY AND HUNGER: GRASSROOTS ACTION IN SOUTH INDIA

by
Elizabeth Mathiot (Moen)

with

Ramalingam — *Jeevakarunyam Olukkam: The Yoga of Compassion (excerpts)*

A.C. Prabakaran & K. Christie — *Development Activities for Rural People*

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THE EXPERIENCES OF RIGHT SHARING OF WORLD RESOURCES

Johan Maurer

Editor's Note: Born in Oslo, Norway and educated in Evanston, Illinois and Ottawa, Ontario, Johan Maurer served from 1986 to 1993 as staff for the Right Sharing of World Resources program of the Friends World Committee for Consultation, Section of the Americas, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA. He wrote this account for Hunger Notes in the final year of this service. For more information, to send donations, or to receive Right Sharing News, write or call Roland Kreager, Program Secretary, FWCC/RSWR, 3960 Winding Way, Cincinnati OH 45229-1250; telephone 513/281-8831.

A letter from the P.T.T. District, Tamilnadu, India:

Dear Sir:

We come to know about your benign agency and the immense services for the cause of the poor and the backward Rural masses. We are a non-profitable voluntary organisation functioning in 10 villages of S-block working with the target people for their total development. A brief write up of our organisation is enclosed herewith.

As we like to have your guidance, co-ordination and support in our endeavour. We request you to send your brochure and application form to us.

Thanking you,

Yours sincerely,

M.R. —, Secretary

I am the coordinator and single paid staff for a grassroots development funding program and development education program affiliated with the Religious Society of Friends (sometimes known as the Friends Church or the Quakers). Letters like the one above come to me nearly every day. Such letters are answered with a brief and courteous description of our program and a frank caution that the odds are against receiving funding from us.

In common with some other grassroots development funders, the Right Sharing program provides "seed grants" of \$5,000 or less to local initiatives in

economically poor countries. Right Sharing has relied upon volunteers for most visitation and referrals of projects, sometimes building relationships between a recipient community and a donor congregation. Grants are intended to go to groups with significant grassroots participation and to increase their access to local resources so that sustainability is a reasonable expectation. The funded work is expected to have educational and demonstration value and to be consistent with "Quaker values," which usually are defined as including nonviolence, equality of men and women, and care for animals and the environment. Although we welcome dialogue on topics of religion and spirituality, we have no expectation that grant recipients will become Quakers and do not want them to impose religious tests on the ultimate beneficiaries.

Most of the initiatives to which we have contributed have involved a combination of vocational training and income generating projects. In a small number of cases, probably about 10 percent, a revolving loan fund has been used as the mechanism to disburse the grant to the participating individuals or households. More frequently, the participants are organized as cooperatives. We have also assisted a small number of educational and health outreaches. A common thread through nearly all the projects is the community-organizing aspect, so that experience in creating and running local institutions is a primary product of the project, whatever

the particular income-generating, training or service model might be.

Some initiatives come to us with the recommendation of Quakers or others known to us who are already well acquainted with the group requesting funding. However, in any area where we have sent money, other groups get wind of it, especially in places like south India where the grassroots development grapevine is in full operation. With only \$55-65,000 of grant money to go around, inquiries coming in almost daily, and several dozen projects surviving a typical year's screening through the guidelines and volunteer visits, most of the groups applying for grants are bound to be disappointed.

From twenty-five years of experience, Right Sharing can begin to sort out some of the dilemmas and cross-purposes which make an outwardly appealing program so complicated in real life. I will outline some of these questions under three main categories: the funder's viewpoint (ours), the applicant's viewpoint (or what we have learned so far!), and the special problems of fund raising.

THE FUNDER'S VIEWPOINT

Our basic motivation is to implement the sponsoring church's mandate to shift resources out of wealthy countries into the hands of economically poor people in order to assist their own initiatives, and to use their experiences to

widen our own perspectives on issues of hunger and poverty. Aside from budgetary limitations, we could start by sending a grant to everyone who writes to us with a request — so why don't we? How do we set ourselves up to make a selection? What are our conscious and unconscious assumptions as we do so? (And for readers of this article, which of these queries apply to other funding organizations?)

Selection by guidelines. Until a few years ago we sent a detailed set of guidelines to all inquirers until we realized, seeing how their responses basically echoed what we sent out, that we were in effect writing the inquirers' applications for them. Since then, we have sent a very simple description of Right Sharing, relying on subsequent correspondence and the mandatory visit to fill in the gaps.

An enormous number of proposals are deemed to be unqualified because they don't fit our "self-help" doctrine. We receive many requests to contribute toward the budgets of social welfare institutions such as schools, clinics and orphanages. If we cannot find any evidence that these ministries are arising from the initiatives of the people being served, then we send a polite "no." We keep hoping that we can save our few thousands of dollars to assist genuine instances of empowerment and institution-building among poor people themselves. This focus is a strength of our program, but it can also become a doctrinaire blinder. After a while, it becomes tempting to feel that the semi-mythical "self-help" scheme is obviously superior to any social service, regardless of the possibility that real people are being helped on a daily basis by the existing service while the new development initiative might be a gleam in the eye of a would-be bureaucrat who failed to obtain a government post.

Evaluation by volunteer visitors. Given the size of our budget, sending

trained staff to visit potential grantees would be impossible. Volunteers, however, offer their own puzzles. Some of them have been staff people of other agencies or academics or missionaries, well acquainted with the places they visit and with the good or harm that can be caused by outside resources. Others have had the innocence and the joy of discovery that have made possible truly wonderful people-to-people relationships of a kind that makes development theory almost superfluous. Still others have had a hard time discerning reality through the fog of ceremonial welcomes and their own romanticization of poverty. It is our hope that the spiritually-based attitudes of humility and equality in our volunteers will help overcome the frequent stereotypes of wealth and arrogance associated with "Western" visitors. We have experimented with recruiting local evaluators within the area of the grantees but have not found a way to avoid the phenomenon (not surprising to me, having grown up in the political context of Cook County, Illinois) that such contacts often become development patronage bosses.

Whether expert or relatively naïve, volunteer visitors often do not have enough time to evaluate the larger context of grassroots development efforts. For example, they may be able to assess the rapport between leadership and participants and test the mathematics of a business plan, but not have opportunities to see how the proposed work fits in with other agencies' work in the area, government planning, and the development of regional infrastructure. Another example: in one visit which I made, a few rank-and-file members of a cooperative made some complaints about favoritism among the co-op's executive committee. How do you sort out fact from gossip? Most importantly, without adequate time, visitors may be forced to fall back on formula assessments rather

than staying long enough to ask the real questions which the situation calls for.

Reports from the field. Perhaps no part of the relationship between funder and grassroots development group is as subject to cross-cultural ambiguities as the notorious requirement of reports. Our experiences range from innocent expressions of desire to please and gratify the funder, all the way to elaborate deceptions covering up the total lack of any actual work. We are working on ways to convey our expectation that we learn as much from accurately reported failures as we do from apparent success. Most of all, useful reports are most likely to happen when they are generated from within an established relationship of trust and frequent communication.

THE APPLICANT'S VIEWPOINT

We need to acknowledge that most applicants are focused on obtaining the needed money. They are not usually preoccupied by our development doctrines or philosophical dilemmas, except insofar as these factors might loosen up the money. Our own need to give advice, our inhibitions about whether our money might do more harm than good, our application forms, visitors, and reporting requirements, are frequently hurdles to jump over (with the compensation that applicants do frequently enjoy the outside contacts). Sometimes the advice and requirements imposed by funders can lead to genuine benefits for the applicant (I remember a few cases where referrals I made to other local organizations led to good alliances), but often these impositions serve to reveal our ignorance about the local situation.

Applications. Applicants who are experienced in submitting proposals already know the language and

expectations of funders. In our case, they may submit an application which mirrors previous submissions to OXFAM or Misereor or someone else, often including far more detail than we want or can absorb in an initial contact and costing a fortune in postage to send to us. I worry more about the applicants who have not, in this sense, "learned the ropes." English is often not their native language. They do not know how to relate to us in any way other than to a distant, impersonal bureaucracy rather than to a tiny expression of goodwill. Sometimes they feel forced to buy a copy of a successful application from another group so they can have a chance to get our attention. Trying to cope with the shifting fashions of development, they sometimes learn (whether in a spirit of desperation or from sheer cynicism) that they must focus on women's issues, or empowerment, or environmental concerns. We try to signal that we will honor simple and unsophisticated proposals and will translate non-English documents, but it is clear that we are often operating in a development culture already set by experience with larger funders on the one hand, and sometimes marked by information-hoarding by successful grantees on the other.

Applicants also try to cope with funders' bias toward discrete "projects" rather than the improvisational and evolutionary style of development which often characterizes the real-world struggle against poverty. Many groups would much rather be judged on the soundness and integrity of their organization and then be allowed to set and change their own priorities for the ways they spend funds. Their first priority is often to pay their field workers and administrators enough to ensure some continuity. However, despite the language of equality and local planning, funders often seem to want bricks and mortar, or capital improvements, or specific tools, ani-

mals, wells, schoolrooms linked with specific donations, all accomplished within specified fiscal periods. These same funders may not allow money to go to salaries (one of our own former allergies, I confess). If the group is dealing with more than one funder and more than one set of restrictions, the complications multiply, increasing the administrative load even as funders restrict the amount to be spent on administration.

Many of the mixed signals which funders send concerning applications also apply to the reports which they require. Again, applicants may well ask themselves, "Do I write what I want to, or do I write what it takes to keep the funding coming?"

Visitors. After all these years of experience, the development funding community should know better than to allow their visitors to conduct evaluations by interviewing grantees in hotel rooms or during automotive hit-and-run visits, but we are told by our own project partners that these still happen too often. Our amateur visitors have earned a good reputation for being different and far more humble than the hotel-interview variety. The most frequent request made of us is to let the visitor stay for at least a week. At the same time, some groups express doubts about their ability to house a visitor adequately. (What have we implied about the level of comfort which we must have?)

One applicant in the Madras area worried about what happens when a visitor comes and then the application is turned down. In such cases, he said, the community may suspect that the grant really did come through and is being misappropriated by the project leadership. A visitor who is able to be a humble researcher, embodying the funder's desire to be in a real human relationship with the applicant group, may be able to defuse some of the loaded expectations that he or she is the key to the treasure chest, or that ceremonial gifts and hos-

pitality for the visitor are bound to pay off in a grant.

FUND RAISING WITH INTEGRITY

We believe that raising the money for the grants and education we do requires modest and accurate reporting on the use of funds. First of all, this reporting should reveal the realities of grassroots development rather than reinforcing a heroic image of the funder or a romantic view of the work. Secondly, any material sent to our donors should also be acceptable to the people whose work we claim to support. Based on observations of other organizations, we suspect that we are paying a price in reduced income for choosing the low-key approach to self-promotion.

Most of our contact with donors is through our quarterly newsletter [*Right Sharing News*] which primarily consists of letters and reports from the development workers themselves. This same newsletter is sent to past and present grantees. We edit their letters for brevity, but we don't edit out the difficulties and awkward parts. Still, most projects are presented so briefly that the true complications of real-life development are not adequately presented. It is hard to say whether the typical donor, even in our program of small and economical grants, has any idea of how much imprecision (some might say "waste") there is in the process of sending and spending money for grassroots development, overcoming false starts, replacing wood that rots because it wasn't used soon enough, paying for multiple visits to government offices for one needed form, writing off "bad" loans to microentrepreneurs who spent the money on medicine rather than merchandise (and then the spouse died anyway), and

(Right Sharing, continued on page 48)

(Right Sharing, continued from page 47)

unlimited other examples. I continue to wonder whether many donors are purchasing a sense of participation in a clean and simple way of development, not realizing what it costs to identify, monitor, encourage and honor the shifting priorities

of our partners who must themselves put "our" money in their own larger perspective.

In this brief summary of our experiences, I have not even touched on larger issues of cultural and economic imperialism, guilt and redemption, temptations to institutional self-perpetuation on both sides of the relationship, etc. I've barely mentioned the distortions and suspicions caused by corruption in the development industry. I have not dealt with the basic challenge of

some development critics that any outside assistance reduces sustainability. I have left many blanks, knowing that most of them could be filled in by readers from their own experiences with other organizations large and small. Despite all the cautions we have collected over the years, our experience at its best is that genuine human relationships, including a mutual willingness to learn, are a far more important element in development assistance than theory, and are indeed precious purely on their own merits. ♦

(Mathiot, continued from page 44)

When conditions are right, however, and when there is awareness and genuine involvement in the credit system, defaults are rare. The Grameem Bank of Bangladesh, the credit societies organized by the Working Women's Forum in Madras, and other participant-run thrift and credit systems have excellent repayment rates on what conventional banks would consider extremely high-risk loans. "Institutions like these," said one development worker, "not banks, should be the vehicles for government capital transfers."

Development as an Occupation

WORKING CONDITIONS

NGO development workers describe their work as meaningful, honest, and dif-

ficult. For most it means low wages (around Rs 500 for rank and file workers and Rs 1500 for NGO leaders), no benefits, long hours, job and personal insecurity, and often, family problems.

There is a real tension between the desire to maintain identification with and compassion for participants, and the desire not to share their abysmally low standard of living. These are confusing issues involving integrity, guilt, and the search for a simple but adequate way of living. This search is made more difficult by funding agencies and critics of NGOs who seem to confuse employment in the voluntary sector with volunteer (free) work. Thus, funders tend to allow only very low wages or even refuse to allocate wages at all as if NGO staff have no personal needs or children to take care of. But NGOs point out, "Then only the rich can do voluntarism—as a hobby." "We have to live," they add, "[NGO] workers need to take care of their children and their own health; you can't teach others about looking after children if your own are uneducated and malnourished."

CORRUPTION

Most NGO workers are honest and hard working, but difficult working conditions, economic insecurity, and easy opportunities or demands for corruption do sometimes lead to questionable practices and

outright corruption. NGO directors and field workers mix household and organization funds, sometimes "borrowing" from one, sometimes from the other, depending on need. They may dip into the organization's travel allowance or other fuzzy budget categories. They may falsify accounts, listing professional fees for training programs or forcing workers to sign pay receipts for more than they actually get. "It is easy to swindle," one development worker explained, "Collaboration with an accountant is common." "If a NGO gets cash, some may be taken off the top," I was told. "Some European funding agencies and visitors will give cash; no accountability is required."

Whether getting approval for a grant, getting an audit of the books, or just getting a parade permit, there are temptations, opportunities, and demands to give or take bribes. "Some groups have developed by giving bribes; it is the system," said another worker, reflecting on the difficulty of changing or evading the system. "Materialism, extravagant life style, and bribery go together" is a common theme in NGO discussions.

OBSTACLES TO WORK

A well respected, very active, but increasingly discouraged development worker complains: