

The Alchemy of Success by Roland Bunch

More than half the projects helped by big and small Third World agencies fail. Why? Roland Bunch comes clean and argues from the experiences of bitter mistakes for the ingredients that will make or break a community development program.

The principal cash crop along the lower Cauca River was rice, so the program at El Naranjo¹, Columbia, bought the village a thresher and a huller along with a motor to run them, and organized a cooperative to market the rice downriver. It also bought a tractor to help increase rice production and a generator to light the village. The first year, dug-out canoes brought tons of rice to the El Naranjo cooperative, which hulled it and sold it at the highest price the farmers had ever received.

I visited El Naranjo about six years after the program closed down to see how the work had continued. In short, it hadn't. El Naranjo had become a virtual graveyard of rusting equipment and abandoned hopes. The motor had broken down and had never been repaired, so the huller could not be used either. The thresher had never been used because farmers preferred to thresh their rice in the field. The tractor had broken down and no one had cleaned up the generator since the year a flood had covered it with mud. The cooperative had disbanded completely; its building, by far the largest in El Naranjo, was full of cobwebs. Yet, as I made my way through the village, half a dozen different people pleaded with me. "But if World Neighbors would just come help us again, we could do so much!"

The outcome at El Naranjo was shocking, but hardly surprising. The rusting hulks of well-intentioned but long-forgotten give-aways are scattered all over the Third World. I have personally seen tractors by the dozens, not to mention ploughs, cultivators, generators, threshers, pumps, scythes, lanterns and grain mills that were never repaired after the first time they broke down. There are donated granaries that were never used, free high-yield seed that was eaten, give-away breeding animals that were sold or slaughtered for meat and forest and fruit tree seedlings that died while sitting in their plastic bags.

More and more organizations are also becoming convinced that give-aways are not only ineffective but, in fact, are detrimental. Why? The reasons are numerous. First of all, when the only progress villagers see is accompanied by give-aways, villagers can easily become convinced that they are incapable of making progress by themselves. Typical is the feeling of the people in El Naranjo that they cannot do anything without more outside "help." This feeling of

¹ El Naranjo is a fictitious name, but the program's story is a true account of the first program World Neighbors supported in Latin America.

inadequacy in turn creates dependency and subservience, robbing people of their self-respect. Furthermore, when people feel incapable of doing anything for themselves, self-help projects become more difficult than ever. Another problem arises because charitable agencies normally do not give things away to everyone, rich and poor alike. They give only to the poorest. Bitter divisions have thus been created in community after community by the jealousy that erupted when one family received seeds, fertilizers or food and another did not (who is poor, and who is really poor?).

People often become accustomed to give-aways and even come to expect them. World Neighbors found it nearly impossible to work in northeast Honduras after the Hurricane Fifi relief effort because many villagers refused to work with anyone not dispensing charity. In Togo, half the women in a group attending nutrition classes quit because they felt cheated; they had heard that a similar group ten kilometers away was receiving free milk during its classes.

Hand-outs can also blind people to the need of working at their own problems. In the terms of one well-worn metaphor, you can give people so many fish that they lose all interest in learning to fish. Hand-outs can also divert people's attention from the under-lying demographic, institutional or political problems that, sooner or later, they must face if permanent progress is to be made.

Give-aways can be as detrimental to programs as to people. First of all, they are monstrously expensive. Supplying a family with half its wheat for thirty years can easily cost fifty times as much as does teaching a family to double its own wheat production. Secondly, give-aways can cover up people's indifference to program efforts. Villagers anticipating an occasional hand-out may faithfully attend classes for years without intending to adopt a single innovation. A non-paternalistic program will know at once if families lost interest in what is being taught because attendance drops immediately. Months of useless, expensive training can be avoided.

Justice demands not that outside agencies give things away, but rather that people be taught to help themselves, with their dignity and self-respect intact, and that these efforts cost as little as possible so that the maximum number of people can be reached with the funds available.

Two top quality South African agronomists were asked to help the community of Yanimilla raise its milk production. By culling the herd, improving the irrigation system and planting new pastures, they showed the people how to raise production from twenty-five to over one hundred liters a day. Six months after they had left Yanimilla production had plummeted back to thirty liters a day.

Once again, although the results were disappointing, they were not surprising. For the paternalism at Yanimilla is a close cousin to that of El Naranjo. It is that of doing for the people as opposed to giving to them. Although this second kind of

paternalism is admittedly more subtle than the first, it can do just as much damage. And because of its subtlety, it is even more widespread than the first and less often recognized as being harmful. First of all, doing things for people seldom achieves permanence. The rusting hulks of abandoned development efforts done for the people are as common as those of abandoned give-away machinery. Once there are no outsiders to make trips to town, do the accounting, make decisions, pay the bills, or keep people working together, the work halts as abruptly as when the hand-outs end.

Secondly, doing things for people creates a sense of dependency and inadequacy. The "Please, won't you give us something?" changes to the equally obsequious "Please, won't you do something for us?" but the helplessness and dependency are the same. The people of El Naranjo were as dependent on expatriates to run their cooperatives as they were for expatriates to buy them a tractor. As a result, neither the tractor nor the cooperative provided them any sense of accomplishment or self-worth.

If we are to avoid paternalism, either giving to people or doing for them, our only course of action is to motivate the people to do for themselves. But how? How can these people who so often seem to be conservative, traditionalist and non-innovative become motivated? Somehow the people must acquire enthusiasm.

Enthusiasm is known by a good many other names: determination, drive, commitment, motivation, inspiration, even love of one's work. It is the desire or willingness to work, to step into the unknown, to experiment, study, make decisions, co-operate with others toward a common end.

When enthusiasm is plentiful, farmers walk two full days to attend classes, innovations spread spontaneously from one farmer to another and many former problems seem to solve themselves. In extreme cases, hundreds of farmers in Guatemala and El Salvador have put in thirty to thirty-five days of backbreaking labor to conserve each hectare of their soil.

Instilling enthusiasm is the only plausible way of avoiding paternalism. The question, then, is the same one Jawaharlal Nehru asked years ago: "How to bestow on the villagers that sense of partnership, that sense of purpose, that eagerness to do things?" Each of the following can be crucial in stimulating enthusiasm:

- The people must want the problem to be solved.
- The solution must be within their means.
- The people must have faith in the program personnel.

- The challenge must be simple enough at first so they can participate, yet become increasingly complex so they can grow in their ability to deal with problems and feel an increasing sense of accomplishment.

None of these conditions, however, will inspire much enthusiasm if early recognizable success is lacking. Villagers skeptical of the program's competence or benevolence will change their minds only when they recognize that the program has benefited them. Identifying with or participating in efforts that never succeed will produce not enthusiasm, but pessimism, shame and disappointment.

While enthusiasm is the driving force, increasing participation is the direction programs must take. Involvement of local villagers helps ensure that the program will respect local cultural values and local needs. Obviously no one can provide more understanding than villagers who work in the program. Salaries and transportation for small farmer employees are much less expensive than for professionals. Furthermore, the involvement in management by villagers helps them to appreciate the program's obstacles and dispels suspicions about its motives.

More important, small farmer participation may be essential to the permanence of a program's work. During five or six years of studying by candlelight, slogging through the mud and teaching classes late into the night, villager extensionists can become tremendously committed to the success and continuity of their work. This commitment, plus their know-how and teaching ability, will remain in the villages after the program leaves.

Definitions of development abound, but most people would now agree that development is a process whereby people learn to take charge of their own lives and solve their own problems. Two corollaries immediately follow. First of all, giving to and doing things for people have nothing to do with development. On the contrary, they are the very opposite. Secondly, the development process, whereby people learn, grow, become organized and serve each other, is much more important than the greener rice fields and fatter coin purses that result. The "how it is done" matters more than the "what is accomplished."

Roland Bunch has been the Central American and Mexico's area representative for the US agency World Neighbors/or many years.

This material is extracted from Chapter 3 of "Two Ears of Corn " by Roland Bunch. World Neighbors, 2nd edition 1985, 251pp