

The Non-Governmental Organization



A trip and analysis by
Shannan Balzer

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Background

Amidst the various cyclones, earthquakes, natural disasters, wars, famines, corrupt governments, poverty, and countless other atrocities that plague cities and countries around the world, hope is found in the good will of others bannin together to give a helping hand. Perhaps those hit worse are those in the developing world, those who live with poverty and face hunger and hardships daily. For them and others in need, one of the biggest forces that's risen up in the past century are the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Of the 37,000 international NGOs, 20% were formed in the 1990s. There are over 1 million domestic NGOs in the US and India alone (McGann, Johnstone). In general, these organizations are exempt from paying taxes, independent of government control, and free to perform their services their way.

In addition to immediate disaster relief, NGOs worldwide have provided clean water, light, empowerment, shelter, education, and a variety of other services, aiding millions worldwide. However, among their praise and "Good Samaritan" appeal, many criticisms have emerged recently about NGOs and their intentions, government involvement, and tactics. When meddling in the lives of others and surviving as an NGO, it's becoming increasingly evident that having good intentions isn't always enough.

The Problem

As defined by the World Bank, a NGO is a "private organization that pursues activities to relieve suffering, promote the interests of the poor, protect the environment, provide basic social services, or undertake community development." There is a wide range of NGOs that strive for a variety of things, focusing on a range of issues from human rights to environmental conservation, domestic and international affairs, and providing relief. They come in all shapes and sizes, from Greenpeace and Engineers Without Borders, to Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and al-Qaeda. As discussed in the 8th International Anti-Corruption Conference, NGOs tend to separate into two general groups, those for mutual benefit, and those for public benefit. The first strive for the improvement of the lives and conditions of its members, primarily seen as professional organizations, self-help, coops, and organizations focusing on minority groups. The second focuses on improving the lives of the greater majority, helping the world's poor and powerless. While both are voluntary, independently formed, and govern themselves, they have very different reasons for functioning. Problems arise in their different purposes, their lack of accountability, and pressures they face from both home and abroad. Many NGOs overstep their boundaries and pose more a problem than greater good; rather than representing the interest of the people they wind up representing their personal interests. Some, with a genuine heart and pure objectives, find the reality of running a private business centered around

charity and good will much harder than originally planned. The politics and cultures vary in each country and region, difficulties and differences in cross-cultural communication and understanding is grossly underestimated, and the best intentions often end in attempts to change a culture or custom, imposing one way or philosophy as better or more superior than another (offending groups in the process).

In the NGO realm (also called third sector, civil society, and non-profit organizations), there are numerous types of organizations that fit the non-governmental criteria, from large international organizations with branches in a variety of countries, to small local business located in a single region. Every NGO is individual in its design and purpose; some focus on goals for the long term, while others provide immediate relief. Some function solely for the selfish ambition and benefit of those running them, their purpose being criminal and devious. The stories change, but every NGO must face certain barriers and hurdles to overcome if it wishes to fulfill its mission.

My objective and ambition was to examine the NGO process first hand and to expand on the enigma of whether the effort, problems, corruption, and pitfalls that often plague NGOs are worth the support and services they bring. I would be spending six weeks in Guatemala working at Maya Pedal, a local Non Profit situated in San Andreas Itzapa. At Maya Pedal they design, repair, and create multi-functional bicycles that utilize "pedal power" to run various mechanisms. The machines operate as an appropriate technology, providing an alternative to electricity, and greatly increasing the speed and efficiency that common daily tasks are performed, often cutting it down by hours. In the past year the organization has expanded to act as a community bike shop as well, offering bike repair services, parts, and bikes for sale.

Prior to the trip I assumed my greatest challenge would be the language barrier, as my Spanish abilities are minimal and the primary language in Guatemala is Spanish. I expected to learn a lot about how NGOs run in developing countries (the standards different in every country), and expand my technical, welding, and brazing skills while repairing and building various bikes and machines.

Initial Guatemalan Experience

My first communication and involvement with Maya Pedal was interesting to say the least. I've been fortunate over the years to experience working with a variety of NGOs, volunteering both with large groups and independently. I've been to Mexico with my church to build houses through Amor Ministries, went to Thailand with Cal Poly's chapter of Engineers Without Borders (EWB) to implement a slow sand filter water tank, lived in New Zealand for three months working at an elementary school through Travelers Worldwide, and I was about to spend six weeks in Guatemala. With every organization I had very different experiences, largely due to the diverse cultures and purpose for going. In Guatemala, I would be getting a behind-the-scenes look at all the components and difficulties that are faced by a small non-profit in a developing country. Arguably the most unique part about this experience compared to my other experiences was that Maya Pedal was solely in Guatemala; every other organization I've been involved with was much larger, most having contacts and/or branches all over the world, and I would soon find out that the others were much more structured, organized, and regulated.

I first learned about Maya Pedal in an Appropriate Technology course I took at Cal Poly. We were introduced to it as a sustainable, appropriate technology; the people at Maya Pedal were essentially taking pedal-power and using it to power an array of apparatuses essential for daily life, from water pumps for the home to blenders at smoothie stands. I've always been a fan of biking and building different machines, so I thought it would be an incredible experience and a great place to learn. I sent an email to Maya Pedal telling them that I was interested in working there for a few months over the summer. I never heard back.

It wasn't until I sent another more detailed email, including a volunteer application, that I got a response consisting of a few sentences saying "of course I could come;" I would be "penciled into the schedule" until I had my specific dates. I would proceed in the coming weeks to send a number of other emails including my flight information and details of my arrival and not hear back again until the night before I left. After sending an email saying I would be a few days late, I got a reply saying that it "would not be an issue," they were "hiking fuego that weekend."



The outside of Maya Pedal



Volcan Fuego (erupting)

To say that working at Maya Pedal is relatively an independent placement is an understatement. Along with their mission and work, one quality I like about Maya Pedal is that volunteers only have to pay for their food and contribute about \$4 a week for gas, Internet, etc. Most organizations cost hundreds of dollars to volunteer with them, paying for the fully employed staff at the organization, insurances, transportation from the airport, tools/equipment when necessary, and countless other expenses. I would be arranging my own flight and finding my own transportation to San Andreas Itzapa. This had the potential for being difficult for someone that spoke minimal Spanish and knew little about Guatemala- for all I knew San Andreas Itzapa was a small, remote town far from the city. I ended up traveling with a friend that spoke Spanish, and we eventually found our way.



Farming land just outside Itzapa



San Andreas, Itzapa

Upon entering we were greeted by two other volunteers in the shop. It wasn't long until I discovered that majority of the functions of Maya Pedal are carried out by volunteers. Volunteer applications, responses, and

the website are all reviewed and created by volunteers. Volunteers deal with customers, make sales, and ensure the rent, electricity, garbage, and water (which they pump from the city every morning) is paid on time. If the volunteers at the time don't know Spanish, they work with what they know and find a way to learn fast. For the most part, the organization is run and dependent on the good will of others to volunteer and support it- and it works. When volunteers leave, coincidentally other volunteers come and fill their spot. The people who've been there the longest pass on what they know, and while I was there people were in the process of writing down the valuable information for future volunteers. There's even a volunteer handbook with important information, instructions on how to get to Maya Pedal from the airport, what to bring, and useful information to know before coming that gets emailed to future volunteers before they come (most volunteers at least).

The main person in charge is Carlos Marroquin. He's Guatemalan, lives in San Andreas Itzapa, cofounder of Maya Pedal, and the designer of majority of the bike machines. He is an absolute genius when it comes to bikes and bike machines. Having a background in Mechanical Engineering, he's an incredible welder, mechanic, extremely creative, has unbelievable ingenuity, and is all together a really friendly, enthusiastic guy. Unfortunately, he only speaks Spanish, which can be a bit difficult when many of the volunteers, both short and long term, are from the States and only familiar with English. The difficulty came in part through the language barrier, but mostly in that Carlos was incredibly busy and not there a ton. He often had business in Chimaltenango, a nearby city, and while I was there had a conference in Mexico for two weeks (during which his son "filled his spot" and worked in the shop). Things can get complicated when there is primarily one person who is actually employed through the organization, acting as the manager, and everybody else is a volunteer. It's my understanding that there were a couple other local people affiliated with Maya Pedal, one who dealt with the financial end, but I would consider Carlos "el jefe."

The biggest challenges I came across with this system is the long term volunteers often had a lot more responsibility than they wanted, and had many more obligations than they thought was reasonable for a volunteer. With Carlos not around all the time, many of the large and important decisions were left up to volunteers. Because the volunteers weren't from Guatemala, majority didn't have the best understanding of the Guatemalan culture (which is very different from the typical Western culture). Volunteers would occasionally come through thinking they knew what was best, having "better" methods and doctrines for running Maya Pedal, but what's good for one group isn't necessarily the right answer for another group. The type of machines that should be designed and what kinds of projects we should undertake are hard choices to make, especially when people there live very different lives than those in the United States. Pricing was one

of the biggest challenges for us, because we don't know what's reasonable for a bike or bike parts in Guatemala, and there's a fine line between making something affordable for people who need it but don't have much money, and still making enough of a profit that the organization can continue to run and stay around for longer.

From a management point of view there are many issues with having primarily one person running an organization. It's an unreasonable amount of responsibility for one person to have; there's nobody there to hold the individual accountable, share the workload, or give the person a break from the commitment. For Maya Pedal this is why the volunteers had so much liability; there was nobody else to take it. I don't believe that this was necessarily Carlos's choice either- he would love someone else employed full time with Maya Pedal to share the workload and responsibility. The difficulty lies in finding someone, preferably from Guatemala, who's willing to make hardly any money working for an NGO. Volunteering and making less money for the benefit of those less fortunate isn't a popular way to live in Guatemala (or elsewhere in the world)- people scrape by to simply provide for their families. Until someone comes along willing to commit to Maya Pedal for the long haul, Carlos will continue to run Maya Pedal on his own, with the help of the generosity of volunteers that continue to come throughout the year.

Managerial Problems with NGOs

Holloway touches on some of the biggest difficulties faced by NGOs as discussed at the 8th International Anti-Corruption Conference, including pressures for raising funds, distributing/using them appropriately, and maintaining general accountability. On one end, if the organization can't get the funds it needs to run, it will go under. However, on the opposite end, sometimes donors give too much too fast, leaving the NGOs in over their heads with more than they know what to do with. Global needs for NGOs included a public advocacy organization to clear up corruption and misrepresentation, checks and balances, international standards, and better relationships and communication with their donors. Along with the obvious corruption and pocketing of charity money, third sector organizations functioning in different countries have different ideas and interpretations of what is considered right and wrong, lawful and unlawful; with different codes of conduct worldwide, a public advocacy organization could do a great deal in clearing up distortions and fabrications found in civil society groups. Similarly, having a set of basic, NGO standards would do a great deal for those who have few requirements to abide by from their respective governments. While there is a structured set of laws for NGOs registered in the United States, other countries may require nothing more than simply registering with their home governments, allowing the organizations to run as they wish. Checks and Balances is a basic system in ensuring that power doesn't get out of hand with management; as long as each

group and branch in the organization is keeping the others accountable the power is much less likely to get abused/corrupted, as is common with dictatorships and giving one primary person the majority of control. Finally, improved communications with the NGOs and their respective donors would clear up a substantial amount of misunderstandings on both ends; the donors would know what the NGOs needed and what projects they had in mind- what direction they intended to go, and the NGOs would know what they were receiving, along with any expectations coming from the donors. This alone has the potential of reducing corruption found in many non profits, as donors would be in much closer contact and community with the organizations, holding their respective recipients accountable for their actions, and true to their word.

An article by Aksel and Baran goes in depth on the organizational problems faced by NGOs. “Governance of the organization” was an issue, along with the corresponding “. . . recruitment [of staff], assignment and layoff, human resources development and administration, and. . . everyday management of staff.” In addition, “paid staff members typically received lower pay than in the commercial private sector,” which was evident in Maya Pedal’s case, Carlos receiving a mere 2200 Quetzales a month (about \$280). For staff with less experience or training complications arise with their “limited financial expertise, institutional capacity, low levels of self-sustainability. . . , lack of understanding of the broader social or economic context.”

Issues such as these, especially the latter mentioned, are going to be much more common and relevant in NGOs from developing nations, simply because the opportunities and feasibility of proper training and education are harder to come by for those living in poorer countries. Civil society organizations have the biggest need in the developing countries, and it’s important that staff is from the area, if for no other reason than to bridge the cultural gap, for communication differences, to relate and connect with the community, and for sustainability purposes. Unfortunately, if the person is from a poorer area, it’s less likely they will be equipped and experienced to run and manage an NGO.

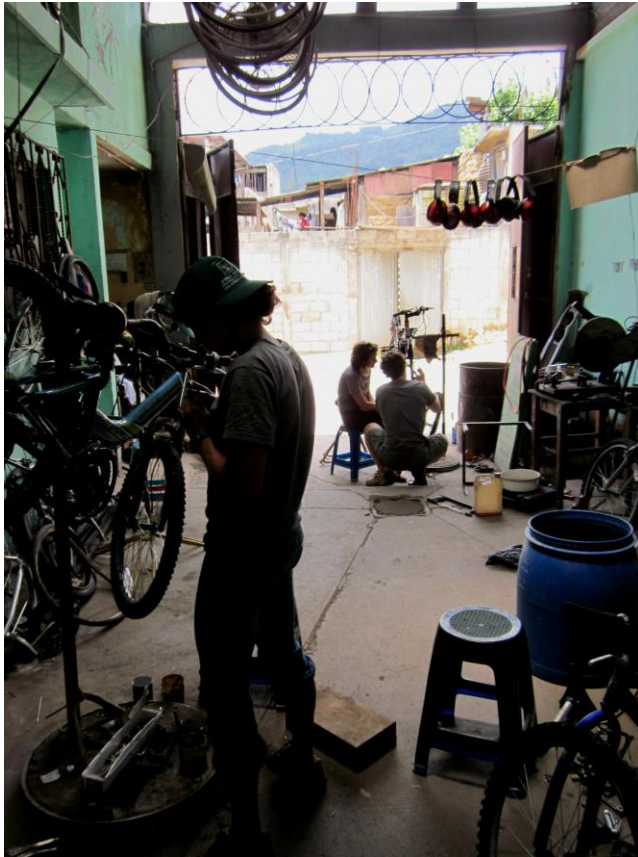
Aksel and Baran proceed to touch on three primary problems faced by most of these organizations once they are up and running. The first is the “structural growth problem;” the bigger they get and the longer they last, staff/management eventually need to be replaced. Organizations that start off small often find they need to replace the “family management” and single staff to a more “institutional structure.” Having an organization run solely by a family isn’t sustainable or reasonable for the long term, and as the NGO grows having accountability for the management becomes increasingly necessary. In terms of Maya Pedal, Carlos (and his family) were for the most part responsible for the entire business, whether he wanted it that way or not. Within the past year (since receiving the Curry Stone Design Prize), Maya Pedal has amplified and expanded to become a bike shop and store, diminishing the former NGO whose primary purpose was to

provide a viable alternative of bike machines to those in need. While the expansion isn't exactly the direction Carlos desires for Maya Pedal, the organization has proliferated faster than he could control it, and now it's necessary for more management, preferably in a somewhat standardized structure.

The second major problem faced is the evaluation problem; performance evaluations, which are easy and common in office-type organizations, are much more difficult in public organizations. Projects are not routine but experimental, goals are abstract, and daily affairs may be carried out in the face of direct antagonism from officials. Every NGO has its own set of unique goals and intentions, making them very difficult to compare and contrast; they're not simply making a profit that one could compare numbers, but their universal purpose is to provide a service and help for others. This is very difficult to approach with a fiscal and commercial perspective. As far as the obstruction and aversion faced by the organization, it's a problem faced in many developing countries, and I found it especially evident in Guatemala.

The third complication is the "economies of scale" problem. Put simply, the majority of third sector organizations are relatively small and most lack the funding for the necessary improvements and resources they need. They are either unaware of the areas they need improvement in, or are aware but lack the access and opportunity to get the needed corrections.

What I did at Maya Pedal



***The showroom of refurbished bikes for sale (above)
Working on bikes in the shop (left)***

While at Maya Pedal my primary responsibilities included fixing and repairing (sometimes reconstructing) bikes, mainly discarded and junk bikes donated from the States. After the bikes were in good, working condition, we'd put them in our showroom and sell them. I also made repairs on bikes brought in by the community, and worked on building some of the bike machines. Volunteers who had been there longer did more of the financial and administrative work, while I functioned more as a mechanic. I also helped make sales and built partnerships with the different hostels in the cities (they would buy bikes from us which would be used by their guests for tours). Months before I arrived Bikes Not Bombs and Working Bikes Coop (NGOs from USA) donated over 530 salvaged bikes and parts to Maya Pedal, so when I wasn't working on bikes I was organizing the various parts and bikes in our limited space.

Corruption in a Foreign Country: Is this Normal?

One thing that stood out to me in Guatemala more than anywhere else I've been was the corruption. I don't doubt in the other countries that corruption exists, but I was definitely less aware and informed about it. One of the biggest obstacles faced by NGOs in developing nations is corruption. Where there's poverty there's desperate people willing to resort to anything to get money and provide for their families, often at the expense of ill-fated others with little themselves, and groups whose aim is to provide aid and helping the needy in the first place. Worse yet, if it's not somebody exploiting or ripping off the organization, there are people who will falsely go under the name of a charity or NGO with the sole purpose of taking the money for themselves, misleading donors and giving NGOs a bad reputation.

A Death on the Farm

While I was at Maya Pedal, I was fortunate enough to get a glimpse of the history of Maya Pedal from one of the long-term volunteers, in particular the past year when all the changes began. The organization was created in 1997 with the help of Canadians from PEDAL (Pedal Energy Development ALternatives; an organization which recycles and refurbishes discarded bikes), and their original aim was to begin sustainable development in Guatemala. In 2001 Asociacion Maya Pedal gained local control, and for the next nine years remained an organization primarily focusing on Bicimaquinas with a variety of functions, from pumps to threshers, grinders to trainers. The machines are usually less effort and more efficient than their counterpart, and offer an alternative when electricity is not available. Moreover, they are made using local materials, adapted to meet the needs of the people/groups they are created for, are independent of energy costs, and offer a touch of exercise for the user.

It wasn't until Maya Pedal became a Curry Stone Design Prize Finalist in 2010 that things started to change. The Curry Stone Design Prize originated "in the belief that designers can be an instrumental force for improving people's lives and the state of the world." Every year they search out the next big idea, focusing on emerging projects around the world that exude true creativity and ingenuity. Their intent is to ". . . make the talents of visionary designers available to broader segments of society [and] inspire the next generation of designers. . . for social good." Award winners generally address "pressing societal issues and humanitarian conditions" with their designs, and aspire to "improve daily living conditions around the world," responding to areas such as shelter, water, or a recent crisis. Eclipsing the Curry Stone benchmark, Maya Pedal was nominated for the award, and while it didn't receive the \$100,000 grant, it earned honorable mention as a finalist with a \$10,000 grant ("Curry Stone Design Prize").

Problems started when Carlos prepared to go to the US to receive the grant for Maya Pedal. Not trusting Carlos and his good intentions, many believed he was planning on stealing the money and running away to the United States. Coming from a country like Guatemala where the exchange rate is 7.7 Quetzales to one dollar, \$10,000 is a lot of money to acquire. Word travels fast, and threats began to come from people questioning Carlos's loyalty while he was away. People would come by the shop talking with the volunteers, asking for Carlos and making serious threats involving him and his family. Some were even carried out; one of Carlos's employees that worked on his farm were killed by an adversary, and this past spring Carlos was forced to sell his beloved farm.

Regardless of rumor and popular belief, Carlos was true to his word and returned to Guatemala with all \$10,000. With Maya Pedal's financial advisor at the time he went to deposit all of the money in the bank, a business partner there to prove legitimacy. However, shortly after the deposit the financial advisor returned, alone, pulled out 80% of the money, and ran away with \$8,000. The bankers never even questioned the withdrawal, seeing the consultant there shortly before with Carlos; they assumed he had a good reason for draining the account. The incident left Maya Pedal in debt, which they're still suffering from and trying desperately to alleviate. It's safe to assume Carlos continues to receive the threats involving him and his family; on numerous occasions he's asked us if people had been by the shop or calling looking for him carrying threats of all kinds. I don't believe he ever would have sold his farm if it wasn't serious.

Outside the local distrust, threats, and petty theft from kids, the government has proven to be corrupt and a problem as well. Attempting to pick up the remainder of a shipment of bike frames and parts donated from the States, even after paying the necessary 1500 Quetzales to the shipping dock that was holding the parts Carlos was still denied access. The police and authorities took the money and told Carlos he couldn't claim his belongings despite having the proper paperwork. When Carlos returned later that day empty handed and I asked why he wasn't allowed the shipment, he told me the police can do whatever they want in Guatemala; even if everything is done right, they have the final say. Thankfully, Carlos returned the following day (to either get his money back or his bike parts) and they finally agreed to give him what he owned.



Carlos (right) with a volunteer taking inventory



The shop after receiving the rest of the shipment

Other NGOs with Problems

Especially in recent years, more and more false NGOs are being exposed for their heresy and fraud. They're interfering in matters outside of their allocation, exploiting people's generosity, and pocketing donations. For organizations that have "Non-Governmental" in their name, many spend a substantial amount of energy and resources meddling in governmental matters. Merriam-Webster defines government as "the complex of political institutions, laws, and customs through which the function of governing is carried out." In their analysis on the influence NGOs have in international environmental negotiations, Betsill and Corell write "they try to raise public awareness of environmental issues; they lobby state decision makers hoping to affect domestic and foreign policies related to the environment; they coordinate boycotts in efforts to alter corporate practices harmful to nature; they participate in international environmental negotiations; and they help monitor and implement international agreements" (67). Now these are all good things, and may be justifiable in the sense that the intentions behind their movements are to help a people or group, providing a civil service to make a positive change for the better, but it's directly interfering with politics, laws, and customs. The involvement of NGOs in diplomatic and lawmaking processes largely began to emanate after the Ottawa Convention, when hundreds of NGOs banded together to campaign for an international ban on the use of landmines. In 1997 they received a victory and the traditional weapon was banned internationally (Anderson). In an article in *The Economist*, "Sins of the Secular Missionaries," NGOs are described acting more as spies for their governments and political leaders, groups such as the International Crisis Group and Global Witness "publishing detailed and opinionated reports from places beset by war." Some act as diplomats, "not attempting to help the victims of war, but to end the war themselves." Often originating from Western societies, they bring their western values and ideologies with their causes and campaigns. In

addition, “many of the former leaders of guerrilla and social movements, trade unions and popular women’s organizations have been co-opted by the NGOs” (Petras, 435).

Betsill and Corell continue to describe the politics that many environmental NGOs get involved in, their international transfer of information playing a huge role in persuading and influencing the public in the various political matters and causes they support. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, especially when it’s this involvement which enabled Greenpeace to spur Gerber Corp. to stop using genetically modified products in their baby food. However, it raises the question of whether these former “do-gooders” have overstepped their boundaries. Petras characterizes many NGOs as being vehicles for upward mobility, a means of producing money for its members. They compete with radical sociopolitical movements and receive funds from overseas governments. Of course, a number of the aforementioned NGOs may qualify more as corrupt NGOs than the customary, humanitarian centered organization.

At the 8th International Anti-Corruption Conference, members listed the most prevalent types and cases of “fraudulent” NGOs. Listed were “Come and Go” NGOs, impulsively sprouting up when times are hard, and Commercial NGOs, set up by businesses to make bids and win contracts while still being tax exempt. Criminal NGOs are used directly as vehicles for smuggling goods across borders, Mafia NGOs, found primarily in Eastern Europe, are used as a means to launder money and offer protection, and Party NGOs unite aspiring, defeated, or banned political parties. Perhaps the most prevalent of the crooked third sector organizations is the bent NGO, which although performing the duties technically required from it, it abuses the system in the process, unethically over-invoicing and participating in “sweetheart deals” with contractors.

Hiding behind an NGO front, activists are able to promote their beliefs wherever they want. Others, ill-informed about the situations they get involved in, wind up sending their aid and charity into the wrong hands, inadvertently feeding armies and sheltering hostages rather than serving refugees and civilians. NGOs from western cultures campaigning for anti-slavery by “buying children’s freedom” in southern Sudan have done little to eradicate and impede the practice of trading slaves, but rather financially sustain it. Others let their selfish desires for personal gain get in the way. When refugees from Rwanda rushed into Goma in 1994, the people were dependent on NGOs for food and water. The story was enough to draw the media and cameras to the scene, and in their desperation for publicity and large donations, the plight led to “a frantic scramble for funds” by NGOs, compelling them to lie about their projects (“Sins of Secular Missionaries”). Rahn reported in *The Korea Times* of some of the crime committed by one of the largest environmental groups in Korea, The Korean Federation for Environmental Movement. One of the leaders of the organization officially apologized after spending the groups subsidies and donations on staff salaries,

paying off a girlfriends debts, and buying a sports car. The BBC reported in 2003 that over 800 NGOs in India had been blacklisted by their home ministry after allegedly being of “dubious origin and [serving] as a conduit for rebel funding both from foreign sources and government development money” (Bhaumik). Focusing on Africa in particular, NGOs tend to provide distorted images, portraying the people as helpless and the country as destitute in order to attract more donors, a substantial portion of the donations going into private pockets. Rather than painting a picture of a people with potential, they are seen as hopeless and dependent on charity, alluding to potential donors that they are incompetent for foreign direct investment (“NGOs Present False Images of Africa”). An article from Agenzia Fides divulges the plight of false NGOs in Pakistan, Protect Foundation Pakistan in particular, which targeted Christian donors to give to flood refugees, claiming “Christians are beaten and left to die without aid” (“False NGOs Take Advantage of Christians’ Suffering”). The incident brought in over \$25,000 from Western donors, which in turn ended in private pockets. After police investigated the matter further the exchange of funds was blocked and those involved were arrested. In Accra, Ghana, Mr Ken Amoah took exploitation to the extreme in his NGO Children In Need Ghana. After giving false picture and stories to entice people to donate to his foster home, he pocketed the money, abusing the rights of the children involved making them work as laborers, begging outside for food. He was even found to “resort to physical assault, intimidation, and starvation” to the orphans (“Fake NGO Exposed”). The New Times (Rwanda) reported in 2009 about the NGO Ndengera who claimed that “every 14 seconds a Rwandan child is orphaned by AIDs,” a fact that is blatantly false. When put under investigation the website was shut down, and when searched the organization Ndengera was not found in the district data bank (“Rwanda: ‘Ghost’ NGO under Fire. . .”). There are over a million NGOs worldwide, and most genuinely aim to act as public benefit organizations to support and aid those in need, but unfortunately those exploiting the good will of others often portray NGOs in a negative light, inhibiting other would-be donors from trusting and contributing to legitimate NGOs.

Key Importance of Community, Communication, and Partnerships

For any NGO to be effective and to continue to function in the midst of inevitable adversity and tribulation, it's imperative they have a strong relationship and communication with their community and their various partnerships, both internationally and domestically. It's important to maintain the communities trust and support behind their cause, to build strong ties, and to be a trustworthy and loyal cause for any donors looking to support and partner with them.



The Junta

Over the years Maya Pedal has made close ties and direct partnerships with a number of organizations and groups, both at home and abroad. Their domestic partnerships include organizations and collectives that aim to develop and produce organic practices and consumer goods. There are groups in Chimaltenango and San Martin which effectively produce animal feed, and groups in San Andres Itzapa developing agricultural practices, all using Maya Peda's bike machines. One group I worked directly with was The Junta, Women for Development in Action, in San Andreas Itzapa. They are a local group of women who make 100% organic aloe shampoo, grown from plants in their homes. The revenue they raise from the shampoo in turns goes to help support their families and their independently run local municipal reforestation project. While there we worked on finding alternatives for selling the shampoo to a larger audience, potentially advertising to hostels and hotels in larger cities.

One problem we ran into with the Junta was their contribution and augmentation in the community and for Maya Pedal. Their heart and intentions were definitely in the right place, but it was questionable how much they were actually contributing. They are one of the only groups that Maya Pedal financially supports

monthly, giving them 1500 Quetzales to work with. In return a member from Maya Pedal meets with the head of the group, and the group attends the monthly board meetings for Maya Pedal. The head of the Junta is illiterate, making legalities and formalities difficult. The fact that Maya Pedal is financial supporting the women's group is great, not only connecting and partnering with the rest of the community, but inadvertently empowering local women to unite and make a difference. However, the group would definitely benefit from some direction and ideas for expansion from the rest of the community. They receive a considerable amount of money every month, and it's questionable whether they have put the money to good use, or what else the money has gone to other than the planting of a few trees. Similar situations make the "economies of scale" problem evident for Maya Pedal, arguably the biggest problem facing the Junta being that they lack "easy and cheap access to the specialist knowledge" they need (Aksel, Baran).

Bikes Not Bombs and Working Bikes Coop

Two of Maya Pedal's biggest financial supporters are Bikes Not Bombs and Working Bikes Coop. Both partnered with Maya Pedal after public awareness for the organization amplified to the Western and international community when they received the Curry Stone Design Prize. Unfortunately, while the partnerships have been huge in expanding Maya Pedal and providing it with tools and resources it never would have had otherwise, the donations have inadvertently lead to more harm than good.

Bikes Not Bombs (BNB) is stationed in Boston, and promotes bicycle technology as an "alternative to war and environmental destruction." They strive to use "technologies and technical assistance as [an alternative] to militarism, over-consumption and inequality that breed war and environmental destruction." BNB not only operates a full-service bike shop, but carries out youth programs, and of the 6,000 bikes and parts they receive each year they ship 4,800 to various economic development projects around the world ("About Bikes Not Bombs"). Working Bikes Coop (WBC) is stationed in Chicago with the mission of "[diverting] bicycles from the waste stream in Chicago by repairing them for sale and charity." Funded through the sale of bicycles they are able to give away over 5,000 bicycles locally and internationally every year ("About Working Bikes").

Major changes at Maya Pedal began earlier this year when it received ample donations from each organization totaling three shipping containers full of donated bikes and parts. Unfortunately, the generous charity would need to be claimed at the docks, a shipping fee paid for holding them there until they could be retrieved, and an additional fee paid for the transportation of the parts from the docks to the shop. The fees were part of what put Maya Pedal in debt after their account was drained. After the donations were

received everything had to be documented (and photographed) to prove we got it all, and everything sold would be recorded, to prove that the charity is going to what Maya Pedal claims it is. This is to show BNB and WBC that Maya Pedal is a legitimate organization and their donations are going to a worthy cause, and to ensure their continued support. If Maya Pedal goes into debt, gets behind on various payments, if the donations and parts come up “missing” or unclaimed, or the organization stops bearing good fruit, these are all reasons and incentives for their two largest financial supporters to discontinue their charity towards Maya Pedal. This is one of the main reasons the volunteers work so hard (knowing what’s at stake) to insure that things are done on time and to “Western standards.”

One of the biggest problems that came out of the donations were that they came out to be an unbelievable amount of discarded bikes and parts (mostly in crippled and impaired condition)- way more than Carlos knew what to do with. While some are easily used for the bike machines, Maya Pedal received over 530 rummaged bikes alone. It was after the donations that Maya Pedal was expanded to operate as a full-service bike shop, selling the refurbished bikes (and various parts) to its customers. Originally a small bike machine shop, the organization is now too big for the shop that holds it; there’s no room for the donations, the volunteers, or any sort of growth. The benefit with the abundance of bikes is that as long as they continue to sell their products and parts, they can slowly pull out of debt. Also, more and more people are hearing about Maya Pedal and coming from all over Guatemala to buy bikes and parts, which is increasing public awareness of their cause and giving them good publicity. However, Maya Pedal still has more than they know what to do with, and are forced to find something to do with it relatively quickly before another donation of bikes and parts comes. This expansion and transition from bike machines to a bike shop is the primary part that is overwhelming and defeating Carlos. Maya Pedal has gotten way bigger than he ever intended, and he’s now in over his head. He wanted to help the community by offering a sustainable alternative: bike machines. He never wanted to run a bike shop, and now Maya Pedal functions more as a bike shop than anything else. The good intentions of BNB and WBC have inadvertently driven Maya Pedal in the exact direction Carlos didn’t want, emotionally driven Carlos into the ground, and have expanded Maya Pedal faster than anyone would have imagined.



The roof of Maya Pedal, where 100s of discarded and defective donated bikes are stored, awaiting repairs



Arguably this could have been prevented with proper communication, better communication of what Maya Pedal needed, their goals and ambitions, and what direction they intended to go in. Communication to partners and supporters is imperative when the organization wishes to continue the partnership, and to ensure the partners know what their support is going to. That same communication is also crucial for future volunteers, to get the right people to come and support the cause, people with similar goals and ambitions.

Although the support from BNB and WBC may have been too much too soon, and definitely more than Maya Pedal knows what to do with, their support is necessary in insuring the future of Maya Pedal; it would be very difficult to continue to run and function as an organization unless it expanded in some way. The donations not only provided Maya Pedal with some much needed funds, but provided them with more international publicity and attention than ever, which will in turn lead to more volunteers, which are essential to the daily life, and future of Maya Pedal.

I found communication, community, and the dependence of others to be crucial for survival in Guatemala, whether referring to survival in a business sense, or simply for the individual. For any NGO, without the financial support of donors and various domestic/international partners, they will go under; in a sense they are completely dependent on others. The ties with their community is the primary reason they exist; to provide a service for the various regions they reside (or have connections to). Moreover, volunteerism is absolutely

imperative, as without it Maya Pedal would have no “employees” and people to run the daily tasks and functions of the organizations. In a sense, it survives on the kindness and assistance of others who are willing to take the time and energy to help while receiving no pay or compensation for their work. The concept is counterintuitive and deviant from the norm, working for nothing when money could be made elsewhere, but volunteerism isn’t so much about the work you’re doing, but the help and assistance you’re providing (who you’re helping).

The Tour



From the left, Olivio, Pam, me, and Colombo in front of Maya Pedal before leaving on our bike tours. Olivio and I travel north to Coban directly, while Colombo and Pam would take an alternative route, traveling through Guate.

While in Guatemala I was fortunate enough to do a small bike-tour through the country with a local Guatemalan. The trip ended up taking four days, in which we rode from San Andreas Itzapa to Coban. We rode everyday from dawn until dusk, covering over 210 km of rigorous terrain full of relentless hills, switch backs, and poorly maintained secondary gravel roads. It was hands down some of the most demanding terrain I’ve ever biked on. During the trip I experienced first-hand the importance of communication and community, and how essential it is to rely on the kindness of others for assistance, be it a service or survival. The initial challenge I found was the communication barrier, as my partner only spoke Spanish, and my Spanish was minimal. We were also in a Spanish speaking country, traveling through small towns that tourists (and other English speakers) would not reside in. I was forced to learn quickly how to communicate with my friend (and others), using my limited vocabulary to voice any questions, worries, and more than anything to simply make conversation during the long hours we were riding on country roads. More importantly, communication was essential for insuring our safety and correct direction/route; my friend had never traveled north, and our map was anything but detailed, exact, or accommodating for what we were doing. With virtually no marked or labeled roads, roads which would haphazardly split, we were constantly asking questions to people on the streets and in the community for direction, as well as advice or permission where to sleep (ranging from hotels to camping and staying outside abandoned buildings). Communication was not only important for

enabling us to reach our destination via the correct paths, but our bikes delivered so many problems that we never would have made it without help. My partner's bike in particular was less than adequate. Within hours of starting on our journey he crashed, forcing us to carry his gear on our backs the rest of the trip, and requiring us to repair the damaged bike with zip-ties until it could be properly fixed (over two days later). On the third day he discovered a loose pedal, which led to an entire bottom bracket plus lower cassette and crank replacement. That same day I found a faulty tire and bad pump on my bike (forcing us to walk to the nearest service station). Accommodation and services are much fewer and harder to come by in a place like Guatemala; towns are very far apart, and businesses aren't exactly advertised. When my friend discovered the faulty pedal we immediately asked the first person we saw walking on the road where the nearest bike shop was, who proceeded to direct us to the next small town, in which we should look for a man that goes by "Peligroso." This led to more questions in the tiny, one road town, after which we eventually came to the wooden house of a local man who, evidently repaired bikes and had the necessary parts. There was no sign, and no way we would have found the right people and fixed the problem if it wasn't for the kindness and help from strangers, people who were willing to take time out of their day for the benefit of people they didn't know.



A brief downhill before continuing the climb



Taking a quick break on tour

The Cultural Divide

The longer I stayed and lived in Guatemala, the more evident the cultural divide was, and how important cross-cultural communication is. Guatemalan customs are different; gender roles are much more rigid and distinct, religion and heritage is different, language, lifestyle, livelihood, and vocations. What's good and effective for one group is anything but equal across cultures. For one society efficiency is idolized, but for another, one that perhaps has an abundance of labor and time, providing work and jobs trumps efficiency.

While some cultural differences may be more evident than others, it's key that the primary individuals running the local NGO, wherever it may be, are from and grew up in the region. They will have ties and connections with the community, know locals who could help and offer support, know what the community needs better than anybody, know what is appropriate, and more than anything enable the service/mission of the organization to be sustainable. One problem we ran into at Maya Pedal was knowing how much to charge for the various parts and bikes we were selling. Especially when involving kids, volunteers often felt bad charging children for essential parts, such as brake pads and cables. One volunteer in particular had a very difficult time charging for the basics, assuming that everybody that came in was poor. The problem with that is regardless how essential brake pads are, how cheap they may be in the States, and how much money we have compared to the locals, at the end of the day we are still trying to run a business and pull ourselves out of debt. If we give one kid free parts, word will get out and we'll have to do it for everybody, inevitably driving Maya Pedal out of business. The kid who needed the brake pads told the volunteer he didn't have the seven Quetzales they cost, and when we told him we couldn't give them away for free the volunteer threw his own seven Quetzales at us and stormed out of the room, overwhelmed that we would send a child away on an unsafe bike. When we talked to the kid a bit later we learned he had 20 Quetzales with him, and simply misunderstood what we were asking for. Not everybody is poor without money, scraping to get by; one needs to know his/her customers and community.

It also doesn't help very much if a group comes, provides a service they feel is helpful, but use a technology that is more advanced than the region is ready for (such as an elaborate water filter), then leave. Once the filter needs assistance or general maintenance the people won't know what to do with it and it will become useless, regardless of how badly the people needed clean water. When I was in Thailand working with EWB we noticed the original slow sand filter water tank the community was using needed maintenance, but the community was unclear how to fix it, so the tank was switched off. The tank might as well have never been executed because the community continued to drink the dirty water and get sick, the exact thing that EWB intended to prevent. If an organization is providing a service in the form of a technology or system, whether it's providing better drinking water, light, healthier cooking methods, or more effective transportation, it's crucial that the technology is relevant to the people, otherwise the effort of the NGO is futile. It would be solely for the benefit of those implementing and working with the organization, making them feel good that they provided a service helping those less-fortunate, even if their service, energy, and resources were entirely useless in reality. If people from the community are involved from the beginning, they will not only help insure that the project is relevant and important for the region, something they specifically asked for or need, something they can't provide on their own, but they will also know what technology is relevant and used in

the area. They can take ownership of the project, knowing how it's built and functions so that when it's not working properly or needs maintenance they know what to do. This will also make it much more their project, rather than "the NGO's project," something brought and left by foreigners. Of course, this sustainability, "grassroots" ideology is much more relevant for NGOs providing technologies and services in the means of teaching and developmental projects rather than those focusing solely on distributing aid and disaster relief to people.

What Maya Pedal Does Right

While Maya Pedal may have a substantial amount of corruption targeting it, minimal management, and inadequate resources, what it does right make it an organization I would return to work with in a heartbeat. In essence, the pros of the organization far outweigh the cons. Not only is it primarily run and managed by locals from the area, the main member (Carlos) living in Itzapa and knowing nearly every member of the community, but the bike machines are all made there, requiring no electricity. The organization is sustainable and the service it provides is an appropriate technology.

The Maquinas



A Bici-Bomba used at a local farm



Me giving it a whirl

Coming from a local Guatemalan, it's evident that the technologies and machines utilized at Maya Pedal are appropriate and fitting technologies for the area. Majority are designed by Carlos using local materials, resources, and methods. Whether one's constructing a bicycle blender, grinder, nut-sheller, trailer, water pump, coffee depulper, microconcrete vibrator, or electricity generator, all the parts and necessary tools for construction can be found locally, and many of the machines are designed specifically and altered for each individual customer. I absolutely loved watching Carlos work, whether fixing a bike or building a machine. He has incredible ingenuity; we'd be stumped with a problem, given up and deemed the situation hopeless after hours of work and failed attempts, and Carlos would come over, usually laugh, hit the bike with a sledge hammer or bring over some tool that was in no way designed for what he was about to use it for, and five minutes later the problem was fixed. He has this gift of looking at a problem or situation open-mindedly, in a big-picture, functional perspective. We tended to look at the various machines and tools at our disposal and see their uses solely for what we were taught they were created for; a drill is for drilling, grinder for grinding,

saw for cutting etc. Carlos looked at them and saw them for the general function they provided and ways the function could be manipulated and created to perform other duties; a driller could be used to screw-in parts, hold pieces steady, measure exactness etc. I found it very difficult to think “outside the box” when I ran into a road-block while working on a bike; I don’t have enough of an understanding of how bikes function and are put together to see them with the big-picture perspective. Coming from America where virtually everything has to follow certain standards, regulations, and exactness, it’s hard to separate from the structured strain of thought to look at a bicycle objectively, finding solutions that are specific to the particular project I’m working on. Many solutions aren’t universal, but by bending certain frames, adding washers, and tweaking various parts, specific cases and individual bikes can be fixed and completely functional.

I found that most Guatemalan’s were similar to Carlos, approaching problems from a “how will I fix this with what I have” rather than looking at “is this even possible to fix?” Because most there don’t have as many resources and as much at their disposal, they are forced to learn to work with what they have, and how to make it work. For the average American, bicycles are for recreation, not a necessity. It’s different for many of the Guatemalan’s I came across; their bikes were their transportation, indispensable for work and making a living. Moreover, they didn’t have the funds to take their bikes to a shop for every small problem or difficulty they ran into; they would find a way to fix it with what they had (usually involving wires, zip-ties, various bolts and washers). Most people would come in when they needed air in their tires or to buy a break pad because all were down to the metal. Nobody came in for a general tune-up. The Western cultural differences compared to Guatemalan become very evident just looking at the bikes that get donated to Maya Pedal; the people that donate them from the United States view the bikes as broken, hopeless, and expendable. We learn really fast that majority of the bikes we receive just need a little work and a quick tune-up to be perfectly suitable and accommodating bikes for Guatemala. They may not look the classiest, but function is way more important than appearance.

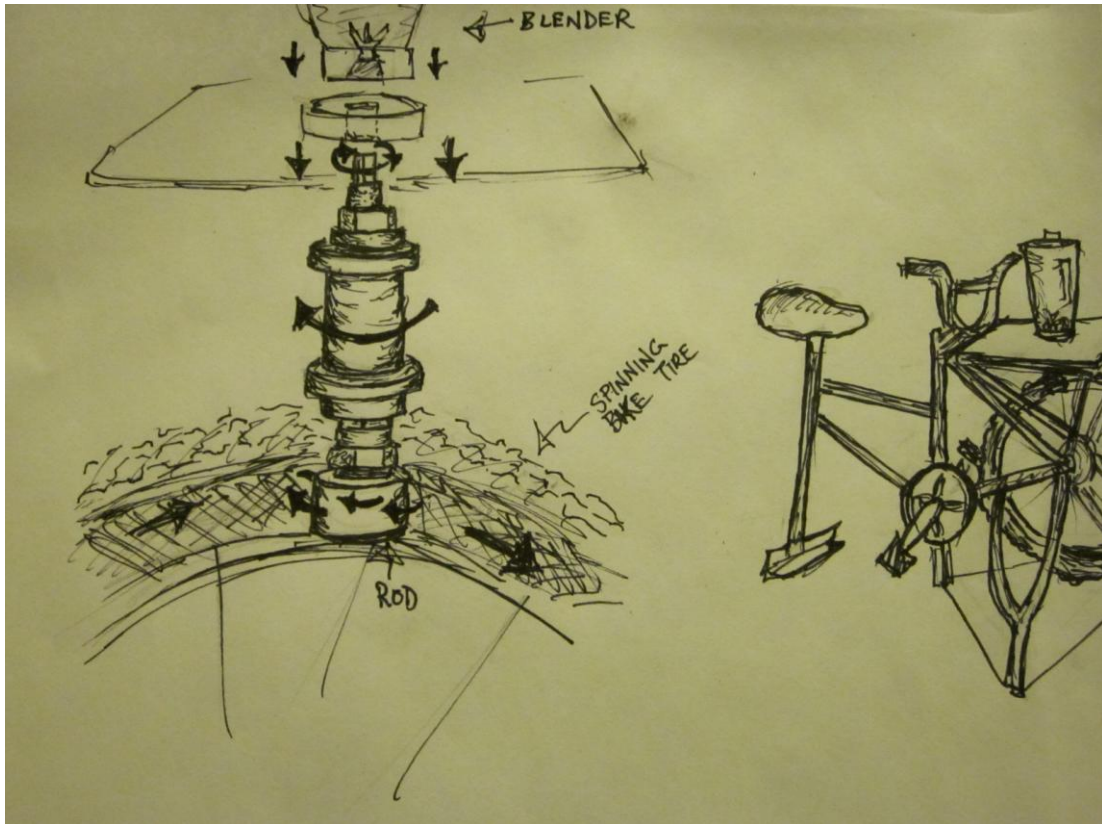


The frame of a Bici Liquadora (bike blender)



Initial prototype for a chicken-defeatherer

My favorite part about the machines was how simple many of them are to build and construct, and how cheap the materials are. While some of the machines are a bit more complex than others, most are so elementary that anybody could understand how they work, regardless of their educational background. The bike blender, for example, takes a spinning tire and places it next to rod, enabling the rod to spin. This spinning rod is attached to the blender base, which when spinning will spin the blades of the blender (screwed on top).



The Bike Blender (Bici-Liquidadora): A close up of the system that “powers” the blender blades to spin (left). The final product (right).

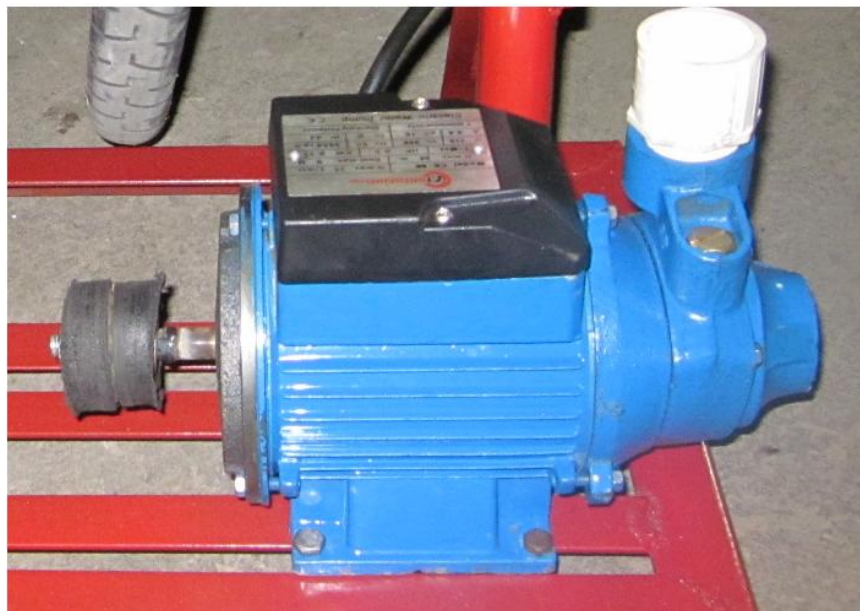
Before I left I was even able to build a Bici-Bomba (water pump) that had been ordered, and it was substantially easier than I would have guessed. The one I built used an electric water pump, which can be purchased for ten Quetzales (a little over a dollar), but instead of using electricity the power was generated by a spinning wheel. By using steel L-metal we constructed and welded together a basic bike stand, which can be hooked up to almost any bike. The stand simply lifts the back tire and allows the user to pedal while the bike remains stationary.



The painted stand (left). Cutting an old bike frame to use the parts for a bike machine (right).



A small rod and wide rubber wheel is then welded to the end of the existing spinning rod on the electric pump. When placed near the bike tire, the tire spins the rubber wheel rapidly, which spins the rod on the electric pump fast enough to generate the electricity needed to power the water pump.



Electric pump with attached rod and wheel.

The electric pump is then bolted to “tracks” fastened to the base of the stand in a way that allows it to move along the base, enabling it to adjust to fit individual bikes.



Electric pump bolted on the “tracks”

The L-metal is bought in town, but every other piece (bolt, screw, and washer) are found in the shop. We use sections and fragments of beater bike frames and forks, old seat posts, parts of headsets, and virtually every other part of a standard bike. Very little is thrown away at Maya Pedal; almost all of the parts can be

used for something, be it repairing another bike, building a bike machine, or even to make everyday household items, such as a handlebar towel racks, pot holders, dish racks, or tables.



The final product- my first Bici-Bomba.

The final step is to spray paint it. Afterward it is a completely sustainable bike machine, fully adjustable and mobile, that pumps water simply by riding a bike.

Grassroots

When it comes to providing a service or aid in a developing, third world country, arguably one of the best philosophies and ways of approaching the situation is to work at the grassroots level. Teach the people and provide them with the resources they need to help themselves. Rather than becoming dependent on outside aid and donors, enable the people to become self reliant, and equip them to pull themselves out of poverty. It's empowering the people and allowing them to take ownership of effective solutions, creating a sustainable solution. There's no one, universal solution to the various hardships that people face around the world, be it lack of clean water, shelter, sanitation, food, or employment. When dealing with developmental problems, there are an infinite number of solutions, some much more effective than others, and each catered to the individual situation, region, and community. The best way to determine the correct solution for each case is to ask the community and have them help develop a solution. They know what they need and what they have better than anybody, and if they're in the developmental process from the beginning, they will be able to repair and adjust the solution when needed.

The advantages working with the "grassroots" is that it's specific for each case, creating self-reliant groups that can pull themselves out of their difficulties. It also eliminates many of the critiques and problems with many of the NGOs today; misconceptions and misunderstandings of various family structures and cultural customs are avoided because the ideology is enabling the people to come up with a solution that fits them best. They aren't relying on donations and charity from the outside but becoming self reliant, eliminated a substantial amount of corruption.

The NGOs

There are a number of organizations that have adopted the grassroots philosophy, or at least parts of it. Working Villages International was formed in 2005, and is an NGO that exemplifies the attitude that people "don't want to be eternally dependent on others, but instead want a means of supporting themselves" ("Working Villages International"). The organizations provides an opportunity for communities to become independent by supplying them with job training, raw materials, and a small amount of startup capital. Paul Polak teaches practical and sustainable solutions for pulling people out of poverty, emphasizing the idea that poverty isn't permanent. In his "12 steps to practical problem solving" he advocates going to where the action is and talking to the people facing the problem, focusing on the problem in its specific context. He encourages people to take the risk to think and act big, stripping the problem down to its very basic elements. The answer is often very simple and obvious, and could even be a solution or invention already

discovered. He continues to advise problem-solvers to design to “specific cost and price targets,” to approach it with a three year plan that’s practical, and create a solution that is worth the effort (one that will have measureable impacts). Amongst various solutions Polak has created and advocated are a low cost systems for drip irrigation, ensuring that between 80-90% of the water goes directly to the plant roots, a treadle pump that increases the efficiency of watering land, water storage systems that hold enough water to drip irrigate a quarter acre of farm land for 100 days of the driest time of the year, and donkey carts that can haul half a ton of water and wood through rough terrain. The various products provided greatly increase the profits of those using them, which enable the consumers to pay back the loans for their products with ease.

Other effective NGOs that have borrowed various parts of the grassroots philosophy are Light Up the World (LUTW), which aims to provide “affordable, safe, healthy, efficient, and environmentally responsible lighting” to the developing world (“History: Light Up the World”). LED lightning systems have shown to be substantially more reliable, economical, and efficient than traditional kerosene lamps (providing little light and emitting dangerous smoke). In addition to bringing light to over 26,000 homes in 50 countries, LUTW’s methods have been used by local organizations, paired with their own enterprises of development and microfinance, to undertake their own programs. Lifewater strives to acknowledge basic needs of people everywhere, such as safe water, community health through hygiene, and fecal disposal. By adapting each solution to meet differences in land, individual cultures, and the local materials and tools, they look to give people life and health, and intellectual development, starting from the very basic necessities (*Lifewater Int.*). The mission of Engineers Without Borders (EWB) is to “support community-driven development programs worldwide by collaborating with local partners to design and implement sustainable engineering projects” (*Engineers Without Borders*). They not only address the specific needs of each community, but involve that community in the solution and process from the beginning. Rather than searching out projects, EWB waits for a community to contact them with a problem, making each program driven by the community from the start. Their projects are aimed to meet basic needs such as clean water, sanitation, structures, agriculture, energy, and civil works. In addition, each partnership that is formed with a community lasts a minimum of five years, and a general requirement of each project before it can even begin is that the people have the necessary material, resources, technical labor, finances, and administration to keep the solution active and working in the long term. While this blocks projects in many areas that really need help, it recognizes that some infrastructure must be present in the first place in order for a technology or facility to be implemented and sustained. Every developmental project that EWB undertakes is engineering related, community driven, promises to partner with that community for the long term, ensures quality, safety, expertise, appropriateness for each individual problem, and is a sustainable solution. Similar to EWB, Doctors Without

Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres) offers assistance to over 60 countries, addressing people whose survival is threatened by catastrophe, neglect, and violence as a result of natural disasters, conflict, malnutrition, and epidemics (“About Doctors Without Borders”).

There are infinitely more NGOs in addition to those mentioned above that also strive to offer aid or assistance in various forms to those in need. While some are much bigger and effective than others, all reside for the primary purpose of helping the destitute and less fortunate.



Wrapping it Up

Now more than ever, Non-Governmental Organizations are popping up all over the world. The different civil service organizations come in all different sizes, have different purposes and agendas, some have been around for years while others don't even last an entire year. Some focus on charity and donation, others emphasize education, empowerment, and self-reliance. Some are solely local organizations, while others have branches that stretch worldwide. Amidst every business, organizations, and system around, there will always be critiques, flaws, and weaknesses. The reality is nothing in life is perfect, especially those run, influenced, and in direct contact with human hands. There will always be corruption, selfish ambitions, and inadequacies, especially with organizations such as NGOs, which rely heavily on charity and donations ("free money").

However, I find the goal and purpose of most NGOs to be incredible, the plight of many to simply help others, offering a way of sharing the wealth and fortunes of one group to those less fortunate, be it through volunteering one's time or money. Having experienced and worked with a variety of different NGOs, I found Maya Pedal to be a great organization with a solid collection of core values, ambitions, and ideologies.

Maya Pedal embodies what I would describe as an effective NGO. While it may have had its flaws, it was locally run and managed, sustainable, used local materials and methods, and partnered with the local community and surrounding regions. Moreover, the primary purpose and aim of the organization was to help others, providing a service in the form of bike machines to make life easier and daily tasks, at home or at work, more manageable and efficient. In addition, Maya Pedal has expanded recently and become a full service community bike shop, helping others at an economically-reasonable level.

One of the best qualities of Non-Governmental Organizations is that they provide a way for the fortunate to lend a hand to those less fortunate. Someone who's been blessed with excess time, money, resources, or knowledge can take it and in turn use it for someone else's benefit. People are enabled to selflessly help others, from their neighbors to people across the world, providing a means of uniting others under a common goal.

I had one experience at Maya Pedal in particular that I will always remember, that has resonated ever since as the true purpose why we were there. One day after we'd already closed up shop we had a knock on our door; it was the local ice cream man. The ice cream man was an energetic, friendly, enthusiastic old family man that would occasionally come by and bring us all free ice cream. Evidently that evening somebody in a truck had come extremely close to our friend while he was riding his bike (delivering ice cream) and ended up

taking out half of his bike. Our friend was thrown off his bike, ice cream (strapped to a makeshift back-wheel rack) was thrown everywhere, his front tire was completely destroyed, and most impressively his left pedal was cleanly sliced off at the crank (having been hit with an incredible force). The ice cream man came to us shaken up and in tears, not knowing what to do or where to go. Selling ice cream cones for a living, he was very poor, and his bicycle was essential for him to support his family. Immediately everybody in the shop came together for a giant communal effort to fix this man's bike. Less than an hour later we had replaced his front tire, fixed the breaks, replaced the break pads, replaced the crank and pedal, and repaired the gear shifters. With every repair we made the worry in the man's eyes was evident, as there was no way he could pay for the alterations and improvements, but in the end we told him we didn't want money. We were all volunteers, and helping a friend in need is way more important, especially when we've been given so much. With tears in his eyes he accepted the gift, and it was evident that he was eternally grateful. We saw him many other times after that night around town, and every time he was smiling from ear-to-ear, excited to greet us and make small-talk. Sometimes it's more important to simply be a good friend with no strings attached rather than wondering what's in it for you.

To answer the prominent question of whether NGOs are worth the effort, especially with all the problems, corruption, and issues engulfing them today, I would say without a doubt yes. If one person gets the help they need, one life is saved, one community is empowered to rise from their poverty and become self-reliant, and one ice cream man can continue to work and provide for his family, reassured that there are members in the community there for him, supporting him, then every hardship and trial that NGOs face is unquestionably worth the effort.



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