In Conversation: Ian Smillie

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Although the critical need to build local capacities in emergency and post-emergency situations is widely recognized, reality often flies in the face of stated policy and good intentions. Strengthening local capacity is easier said than done, and there are real tradeoffs between outsiders taking action quickly in the midst of an emergency, and building longer-term local skills.

Patronage or Partnership: Local capacity building in humanitarian crises examines this dilemma from various local perspectives, through eye-opening case studies from Bosnia, Guatemala, Haiti, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, and Sri Lanka. The book, to be published in May by Kumarian Press and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), is the outcome of three years of investigation by the Humanitarianism and War project at Tufts University.

Clyde Sanger, an Ottawa-based journalist, recently interviewed the book's editor, Ian Smillie.

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How do you define local capacity-building in the context of emergencies?

There's been a lot of writing about capacity-building in development, but not much where emergencies are concerned. The definition I like best in the book is from Kathy Mangones, who writes about the difficulty Haitians have had over the past 200 years in getting a grip on their lives and their society. She talks about "new strategies and directions based on the capacity and potential of concerned populations, enabling them to move from object to subject, victim to actor, *to the possibility of being*." The phrase is from a poem, and it captures what capacity-building is all about: to be a person and an actor in your community

How did you select the six case studies for this book?

We were looking for a cross-section, both geographically and by type of emergency. So we had two cases from Africa, one from Haiti, one from Guatemala, one from Sri Lanka. We wanted at least one post-Soviet experience — that's Bosnia. We were looking for countries that had apparently very weak civil societies (Bosnia and Mozambique) and others with strong ones (Haiti and Sri Lanka), to see what difference that made. We also looked for countries where the heat of the emergency was on (Sierra Leone and Sri Lanka are examples) and cases where the emergency had passed. One of the problems we are facing today is that a lot of emergencies are protracted.

Then we tried to get slightly different themes into each one. With Guatemala the theme is gender, with Haiti the theme is food, in Mozambique it's health; in other cases it is just the emergency. The study in Sierra Leone got sidetracked by the rebel invasion of Freetown. Our author, Thomas Turay, was there and the theme became the panic and the reality of living in the middle of chaos.

***Patronage or Partnership* dwells a lot on the capacity of international agencies to build capacity.**

Yes, it's hard enough in long-term development projects to build capacities. It's even more difficult in the rush of an emergency. One point made in the book is that the people who would be most likely to build capacities aren't there, simply because there is so much turnover and so much burn-out.

Another problem is the question of timing. Donor agencies tend to provide funding for three-month or six-month periods, and they provide it to save lives, not to hold workshops or training sessions.

The book stresses the importance of being very clear about the purpose and target of capacity-building. Since these things can change, isn't it rather difficult to define them?

In Rwanda, before the genocide, there was a lot of capacity-building among NGOs and civil society organizations. But they either did nothing when the genocide began, or even got involved supporting the Hutu killer groups. In his book *Aiding Violence : The Development Enterprise in Rwanda*, Peter Uvin makes the point that building local capacities for their own sake doesn't necessarily achieve what you want. We saw the same situation in Bosnia with a students' organization that CARE supported. The students were not interested in working across the ethnic divide, probably because as young men they had been fighting in the war and lost some of their comrades. If you don't target people who are really interested in building the right kind of capacities, you might be wasting your money.

CARE worked with other organizations in Bosnia involving women and the elderly. They included people from all ethnic groups who said there had never been an ethnic problem before. They were trying to return to some situation of normalcy. But they had no experience of how to do this themselves because, as one of them says in the book, "Before the war, everything was fine. The government did everything. We didn't need organizations, or civil society."

Can you say a few words about the Mozambique chapter? Both under the Portuguese colonial system and under the Frelimo administration, Mozambique was very centralized. Yet, aid organizations from Finland and Denmark went in to build up a local community around the health system. In this instance, there was a tussle between a community and the state.

This is an interesting chapter, because it is different from the usual take on civil society. The author, Steve Lubkemann, says that people have different ways of dealing with government: if the government is bad or overpowering, civil society is a way to opt out of a relationship with the state. A lot of the discussion about civil society is to build it up so that it can engage and be a "voice," but, he says, you cannot have a civil society if you don't have a government to react to. But the government has to be willing to create the space for civil society, otherwise it will go off in its own directions.

In a lot of discussions about civil society, someone will draw overlapping circles: one for the state, one for civil society, one for the market. These circles are about the same size and they overlap more or less the same way. In most countries it isn't like that. In Mozambique, the government circle is much larger and the circles barely overlap. The government would love to have more control, but civil society is trying to get as far away from government as it can.

Did your own views change while editing this book?

I assumed that it was just as possible to build local capacities in emergencies as it is in development. We have talked about getting away from the "continuum idea," where you start with an emergency, then do reconstruction, and then do development. We know we can do development at the same time: for example, people can run schools in refugee camps. But I thought it would be a little bit easier than the case studies in the book show.

We can exhort international agencies to do capacity-building. But, even if they want to, there are real problems concerning their own knowledge and ability. Their staff come into an emergency cold, young, stressed, and then face the problems of money and timing. And the people whose capacity you might want to build may not have the same agenda as you do.

In some ways, we may have set the bar too high in demanding that people do more capacity-building; on the other hand, I think the book shows that we haven't done very much. So I think there is perhaps a middle ground: the bar needs to be raised from where it is, but we need to be realistic about what's possible.

The Editor

Ian Smillie, an Ottawa-based consultant and writer, has worked for more that 30 years in the international development. He has managed large development enterprises in Canada, Africa, and Asia and has written extensively on the subject of nongovernmental organizations. He is a leader in the global effort to curb "conflict diamonds." Mr Smillie has been associated with the Humanitarianism and War Project since 1997.

The Book

Patronage or Partnership (ISBN 0-88936-944-5, $35) can be ordered online at the Booktique on the IDRC website.