

Helping self-help: The fundamental conundrum of development assistance

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Abstract

For more than half a century, there have been government programs and international organizations devoted to socially engineering development. As evidenced by the recent United Nation's Millennium Project report, surprisingly little has been learned as to why that mode of development assistance is ineffective. This paper takes an interdisciplinary approach to explaining the old idea that the best form of assistance is to *help people help themselves* but that this cannot be “engineered” as is amply evidenced by over a half-century of failures. There is a conundrum: how can the helpers supply help that furthers rather than overrides or undercuts the goal of the doers helping themselves? Otherwise, it is actually “unhelpful help.” The overriding and undercutting forms of unhelpful help are analyzed and strategies for autonomy-respecting help are presented.

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1. Development assistance as helping people help themselves

1.1. *Learning the lessons from the last half century*

It is only in the post-World War II era that there has been a concerted effort by the developed industrialized countries to offer technical and philanthropic assistance to the developing world. Overall, the official aid offered by developed countries and by the international agencies such as the World Bank has not been a resounding success. Where development has been most successful—as in East Asia—the official aid agencies have had little to do with it, and where the aid agencies have focused much of their assistance—as in Africa—that help has not been crowned with success. In

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the course of the latter half of the 20th century, there have been many hard lessons.¹ Unfortunately the major development assistance organizations have not learned these lessons.

In the early days of concerted development assistance (the 1940s and 1950s), development was seen as a huge socially engineered investment project. Outside agencies could help to finance the investments and to supply expertise. Impoverished people were lacking a number of specific “things” and once they had received those “things,” they could then break out of their poverty traps, take control of their destinies, and achieve economic and social “lift-off” to development. The investments need to be planned and coordinated into a “big push” to finally break out of the otherwise self-reinforcing vicious circles of poverty and to “take off” on the path to development.

The principal intellectual critique to the big-push-investment-project approach to development was provided by Albert Hirschman in his *The Strategy of Economic Development* (1958) and in later writings. Reduced to a single idea, Hirschman’s point was that if a country had the capacity to plan, coordinate, implement, and absorb the “big push,” then it would hardly be an underdeveloped country in the first place.

Yet the development assistance industry, then and now, cannot “hear” any message about the ineffectiveness of what they are geared to do. Hence they keep on repeating the same basic ideas as if past failures were only due to insufficient resources invested, insufficient “bigness” to the “push,” and the like. After nearly 40 years, the World Bank published a book, *Investing in Development* (Baum and Tolbert, 1985), which indicated that it still saw development as a large investment project. Now after 20 more years, the United Nations Millennium Project (directed by Jeffrey Sachs) has published its report which even has the same title, *Investing in Development* (2005). And it has the same message.

“The key to escaping the poverty trap is to raise the economy’s capital stock to the point where the downward spiral ends and self-sustaining economic growth takes over. This requires a big push of basic investments between now and 2015 in public administration, human capital (nutrition, health, education), and key infrastructure (roads, electricity, ports, water and sanitation, accessible land for affordable housing, environmental management).”
(UN Millennium Project, 2005, 19)

Change the dates, and this passage could have been right out of the big push literature of the 1940s and 1950s. After 60 years of failure for this social engineering approach to development assistance, what is one to do? Recommend rereading Hirschman? Here I will take the different approach of going back to the basics of the assistance or helping relationship. Over the ages, many social thinkers, educators, and philosophers have wrestled with the fundamental conundrum of helping self-help. Most external “help” actually overrides or undercuts the budding capacity for self-help and thus ends up being unhelpful. The big push schemes of the major development assistance agencies are for these reasons “unhelpful” on a grand scale.

1.2. *The helper–doer relationship*

It is a very old idea that the best form of assistance is to *help people help themselves*. We are all familiar with the ancient Chinese saying that if you give people fish, you feed them for a day, but if you teach them how to fish—or rather, if you help them learn how to fish—they can feed themselves for a lifetime.

¹ See Ellerman (2005) for more on international development assistance.

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