

# humans at the center

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Donovan Russell

## Experiencing People

I have just returned to Lesotho after a week of idea and experience sharing in lushly green and beautiful Swaziland. The shared experiences were beautiful as well. They weren't limited to Swazi-American experiences. They were enriched by the participation of Basotho (people of Lesotho). Perhaps the situation was unique as development efforts go. Yes I lectured and yes I offered advice. But so did the Swazis and Basothos. The intent was to learn together. And I learned. I learned both technical and cultural things. No doubt I received more than I gave.

## Africans Have Much To Give

It's not a one-way street, this development business. Or at least it doesn't need to be. If Americans, Canadians, Germans, Russians, Chinese, British, and all who have responsibility for aid to the developing world, could have opportunities for in-depth involvement, if they could have a chance to "get down" and to get into it, reciprocal development could happen.

But it demands living together. It demands genuine, hands-on, problem solving. It demands adult-to-adult communication. Not parent to child; not child to adult. It demands a sharing of responsibility for programming efforts. It demands long hours together. It demands dining together, singing together, telling stories together, and confiding in each other. It demands mutual respect. It demands that "experts" get involved with communities and groups *to the point of becoming one with them*. It demands internalizing one's adopted situation. It demands becoming one in effort. It demands trust and confidence. It means that *one must really come to identify the problems of a new setting as his or hers*. It demands brotherhood and sisterhood. It demands a spirit of human equality.

And if one "gets down," what then? If one hangs around long enough to identify and be identified as "one of us,"

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what then? You discover that it's true, that's what. *You discover that you are one.* And you become open to the richness of your brothers and sisters.

And if you're in Africa, you discover something very important to the rest of the world. You learn. You learn that we could all learn respect for life and individual human relationships from Africans. You learn there are still people who have time for each other. You learn there are still people who have security in family and community.

You learn that genuine loyalty, courtesy, and respect are alive and well between the sexes and between generations. You learn that respect for elders, respect for fidelity, respect for knowledge, and respect for honorable behavior still exists in a fast-changing country. You learn there are still highly idealistic people. You learn that sharing is still a virtue.

You learn that the African people have a great but unassuming and unaggressive talent for leadership. You learn that there are many excellent minds in Africa, thirsting for knowledge and technique. You learn that spiritual actualization is as important (or perhaps more important) than economic development.

Africans have much to give the so-called developed world. One wouldn't know, one wouldn't understand if left "above" people problems and real people in the development effort.

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**... If we in the developed world could put humans at the center of things again, both our clients and ourselves would be better off.**

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### **Ideological Aid Is Condensing**

It's true. Many donor countries and agencies provide aid because they have come to believe there's an urgent need for it. There really is a humanitarian motive. Perhaps this motive is much stronger in the consciousness of aid field people than in the consciousness of their sponsors. There's also an ideological motive. Great efforts are being made in Africa by Eastern block nations because Western nations are deeply involved in aid programs. But aid for ideological purposes implies that the East and West have a better way of life; have political ideas and have a cultural heritage that would enrich the developing world.

Aid for ideological purposes tends to set up a parent-child relationship. Aid for ideological purposes tends to negate the possibilities of true sharing. Aid for ideological purposes tends

to raise the barriers to the learning that so-called developed nations could receive from the developing world. Aid for ideological purposes tends to bar the human relationships that could be built as linkages between peoples and nations.

The Africans know what's going on. The Africans are swallowing hard. They've made up their minds to make the most of it. They're determined to let the East and West fool themselves about superior heritages while gaining whatever they can in technique and infrastructure.

But, they perceive that much more could be gained by developed and developing peoples if this culturally imperialistic thing could be set aside. They perceive the handicap in ideologically oriented giving. They understand that ideologically oriented giving—whether between individuals or nations—inhibits the development of mutual respect, mutual empathy, mutual appreciation, mutual learning, mutual trust, and the oneness that could otherwise come about. And sadly, they perceive that development competition magnifies the polarization between East and West.

### **Making the Most of It**

But this is how it is. This is the kind of world we live in. And many people working in development (probably from both East and West) have accommodated themselves to it.

- "Yes, I know that people higher up in my organization probably have different reasons than I do for wanting to see this project succeed."
- "Yes, I know about ideological competition."
- "Yes, I'm part of the larger game—but I've determined that what I'm doing is good in and of itself."

Individual development initiatives and the motives on which they're based are often highly admirable. *But it can lead* to greater productivity, greater cohesiveness, better human relations, and greater satisfaction when the goals of an organization and the goals of the people working within that organization are congruent—no matter what type of organization it is.

### **Organizational Inhibitors**

If a government or donor organization is either (1) ideologically motivated or (2) indifferent to two-way development, it can inadvertently inhibit the creation of meaningful relationships between "experts" and clientele. The organization of development aid can obstruct true sharing in planning and programming. It can deny the understanding, between peoples, that could come about from cooperative problem solving . . . from living, singing, dining, and just being together. It can

breed and encourage parent-child relationships. It can keep people from getting involved together. It can make the growth of mutual respect and mutual understanding difficult. It can deny rich possibilities for communication. It can rob nations of friendships built on people-to-people closeness. It can keep us from knowing that we're one.

Donor organizations that are manned by officials who are either ideologically motivated or indifferent can easily become culturally imperialistic. As individuals, we know that until we really get to know another person—who is much different from us (perhaps in color, language, or custom), it's easy to discredit and dismiss. How much more likely is this to happen to a large bureaucratic organization?

Unfortunately, there's a tendency for aid efforts to become depersonalized. People, who haven't had opportunities to get really involved, find it easy to go on that way. Officials, who haven't experienced "hands-on aid," find it appropriate to organize aid efforts on what seems to be the most rational, the most cost-effective, and the most organizationally sound basis.

And, armies of experts who deal with recipient government officials *or* who engage and reengage in planning, programming, and budgeting *or* who make resource distribution on the basis of carefully researched studies *or* who plan, evaluate, and propose over and over *or* who understand capital flow as more important than people flow are put into place. Organizationally defined roles severely limit the sharing that can take place.

## **Conclusion**

If development could be seen primarily as a matter of individual change—as opposed to infrastructure building, capital flow, etc., then person-to-person relationships would come to be more important. If we in the developed world could put humans at the center of things again, both our clients and ourselves would be better off.

And the building of close personal relationships, between peoples of the developing and developed world, would go far beyond the promotion of development. It would begin to diffuse the costly and dangerous ideological struggle raging through the developing world. Finally, it would make both donors and clients much richer in the most human sense.