

Breaking the Dependency Mentality in International Development

Written by Robinson Cook

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ROBINSON COOK, APR 24 2015

In 2012, the port workers in Colombia began a major strike against a multi-national employer who was violating the law through abusive subcontracting schemes. As the strike continued for several weeks the union's financial resources began to run out, weakening their resolve. To assist the striking workers, the NGO I worked for began providing technical assistance via training (on how to apply new labor standards that had been passed as a part of the free trade agreement between the U.S. and Colombia) every evening at 6:00pm. This allowed the NGO to provide meals to the union members and their families. The family members simply signed an attendance sheet so their names would be included in the final count of union members who had participated in the training. The food support allowed the workers to stay on strike longer and gave the local union more time to negotiate and put pressure on the employer. Once the NGO could no longer provide meals, the port workers union suspended the strike shortly thereafter with no clear resolution. Would the strike have taken place without the expected financial support of a foreign NGO leading to a more measured response and different approach with the employer? This wasn't the first time the NGO had provided support for a strike, so when the NGO was forced to stop providing support in order to comply with contractual obligations set by United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the stage had been set for tensions to rise. How do field practitioners know whether or not they are doing the right thing despite their good intentions? How do field practitioners make sure they don't create a mentality of dependency among their partners with their very presence and support?

In January of 2013, as a representative of the same NGO mentioned above, I spent two days with the local union leaders attending a union organizer's funeral (he was brutally gunned down while waiting for his bus one morning due to his organizing activities) and subsequent strategy sessions on how respond to the murder. From the moment I arrived until my departure three days later, the union members constantly reminded me that they would need financial support for the upcoming strike. I made it very clear that the NGO could no longer support strikes, but they simply ignored my advice and continued to ask again and again.

Part of the reason that the Colombia trade unions were so casual and persistent about asking for money is that they were accustomed to operating in a more informal environment where they could simply make verbal funding requests for transportation, conferences, negotiations and trainings, and receive it with minimal questions asked. The formal processes for funding requests that were in place weren't always followed or consistently enforced, ultimately leaving the NGO spending valuable time to chase down receipts and other supporting documents during audits. Once the expectations are established and become a part of the relationship's DNA, it's painful to break the dependency without some discomfort. The Union members now felt somewhat betrayed by the NGO as they were operating under the assumption that the support would be endless. Now the relationship had to be reestablished under a new set of operating norms. Furthermore, many developing country partners don't have a sense of finality to the funding as they don't always operate on rigid funding cycles like their American counterparts which further reinforces the misunderstanding that American NGOs have endless amounts of money.

How then, can U.S. based organizations involved in development work avoid creating a dependency mentality? The following are five recommendations foreign NGOs should consider using:

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1) *Establish clear boundaries from the beginning about what they will provide financial support for, how they will support it and in what format a request should be completed.* This can be accomplished through a memo of understanding (MOU) between the two organizations with an addendum that has a simple page with two columns, one on the left with a heading that says what will be supported and one on the right that states what will not be supported.

2) *Hold local organizations accountable by only taking requests for funds through a formal written process.* This can be accomplished through an email or a letter. The point here is to get the requester in to the habit of putting things down on paper so that there can be a record of the transaction and prior thought about what is really needed.

3) *Requests for help with travel or refreshments should be made a minimum of seven days in advance.* There were several instances where local partners would call and say they needed funds for plane tickets to come to meetings in Bogota the next day or later that week. This typically meant significantly more expensive airline tickets. With a seven day lead time, the requester is forced to plan out their travel or at least consider using their own funds.

4) *Use reimbursements rather than cash up front.* A reimbursement process insures that the requester will keep receipts and plan travel more wisely. There were several times where the NGO had simply purchased an airline or bus ticket for a partner to travel and then had to spend valuable hours at the end of the next month trying to track down the receipt or a copy of the boarding pass for accounting purposes. Sometimes a local partner would even miss flights costing the NGO money to change the itinerary. If the local partner is using their own money, it is more likely that they will do everything in their power to be on-time for that flight.

5) *A limited time frame should be made clear to all parties to make sure the local organizations don't think the support will be open ended.* Foreign NGOs need to make it clear that there is a finite amount of time for the assistance to take place and that it needs to be judiciously spread out over a planned and specified timeline so as to avoid only asking for support in a crisis. Monetary assistance should be seen as a valuable resource rather than a commodity.

Enforcing all of the above should make the demand for financial assistance more deliberative forcing local organizations to think about whether they want to expend their own resources up front for travel and accommodations. If they decide against it, then the U.S. organization shouldn't feel compelled to act. There will always be emergencies, crisis and last minute requests that field practitioners will want to resolve quickly as that is the nature of the work. However this should not stop field practitioners from taking actions to avoid creating a dependency mentality.

About the author:

Robinson Cook lived in Bogota Colombia for the past three years where he successfully launched a 501c3 organization, The Bogota Employment Project (www.bogotaemployment.org, Twitter: bogotawage) assisting newly employed displaced women in transportation. Robinson's career focus is to improve the livelihoods of vulnerable, low-income and refugee populations through work-force development. He holds an M.A. in International Relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, and a B.A. in Political Science from Howard University in Washington DC.