

Sovereign Local Organisations and Social Movements - holding rightful power



By Doug Reeler of the Community Development Resource Association, July 2008

“My sense is that people see organisations as vehicles through which to do things in the world not realising that in building organisation they are shaping the world” James Taylor, CDRA Homeweek, July 2008

The word sovereignty is well-used by small-farmer organisations and allied practitioners when they speak of *food sovereignty* or *seed sovereignty* as a right of autonomous self-reliance, of local ownership, of decision-making from a stance of consciousness and free-choice, not subject to the will and whims of those outside who may seek to control or exploit.

Sovereignty is a particularly powerful concept when applied to organisation, suggesting the same authentic qualities, describing a home-grown resilience, an inside-out identity, the idea of an organisation being the expression of the free will of its own constituents. It should be clear that rights like food sovereignty can only exist if they are embedded in strong, sovereign organisation.

Sovereignty is both a quality of organisation to be developed and a right to be respected and defended. *If development is about shifting or transforming power there has to be a clear concept of where power can be rightfully and sustainably held - sovereign local organisations and social movements are an obvious location.*

But sovereignty is hard to come by. We witness vibrant, if disorganised, community-based organisations, movements and local NGOs, continuing to line up for funding, fitting themselves, their work, structure, language, indeed their life, into the templates of short-term funded projects and tightly contained project-cycles. Local organisations continue to be the service-providers of donors and government to achieve their externally formulated project goals, with a few participative processes thrown in to give them local flavour. And all gamely assisted by NGOs and professional consultants, themselves competing for funding and held to account against external measures.

Some of the larger international NGOs working out of a rights-based approach have begun to recognise the importance of supporting local organisations and movements as rights-holders. But despite the speak of “rights” we continue to witness local organisations or “partners” being assessed against templates, checklists and models of a “best practice” organisation developed in the North and having their capacity built accordingly. We witness lively volunteer-based organisations and emerging grassroots movements being rebuilt into more professional organisations losing their character and representing only those interests of the community that align with funding or NGO guidelines. We witness them developing into better-behaved citizens, possibly alleviating some small vestiges of poverty in the short-term, but angry only when the funding slows, no longer at the injustices they were born out of, becoming a pale shadow of their potential at best and a blockage to authentic development at worst. We sometimes wonder whether the NGOs and donors of the development sector have become latter-day missionaries, undermining indigenous potential and naively and unwittingly softening up the natives for more post-colonial globalisation!

This is development without local sovereignty and it has long accompanied the deepening poverty of the marginalised of this world. It is also extremely difficult for the development sector to admit this veiled role without exposing its own lack of sovereignty and backbone.

The situation may be dire but it is not hopeless. There are sovereign organisations and movements on all continents bucking this trend, often supported by developmental donors and NGOs, and the sector needs to seek them out and learn from them. There are many initiatives, programmes and projects that hold great promise if they can adjust or transform themselves towards incorporating a more directly organisational approach or indirectly providing support in this direction.

If this is true then it requires that development practitioners, including donors, pay more attention to the concept of organisation itself and the practice of facilitating the development of authentic and sovereign local organisation and social movements. There may be a growing body of professional OD facilitators in the sector, some of whom are developmental, but we believe that it is a discipline that needs to be more widely learnt and become more central to the practice of the sector as a whole, not just a small professional enclave.

What are some of the key aspects of the identity of a sovereign organisation or movement?

... such an organisation strives to know and work with its own purpose. It works on and out of clear principles and values and has the courage to hold onto these.

... it is an authentic expression of the will and voice of its own constituents. It can provide services but is not the service provider of another organisation's purpose, and while it may accept funding it is not a surrogate vehicle for the funded projects of outside agencies.

... a sovereign organisation is culturally and structurally unique, not a clone of some external "best practice" template.

... a sovereign organisation is politically conscious, knows its rights and responsibilities and understands the power relationships it is held in.

... a sovereign organisation is able to cooperate and work with co-travellers and peers without losing its sense of self. Sovereignty does not denote parochial, insular behaviour, though there may be phases of independence, of inward development and of finding own identity, before opening up to collaboration.

... sovereignty is both a quality and a process of continual learning. The ability to learn and adapt will determine its sovereignty in a changing and volatile world and thus its increasing effectiveness. A sovereign organisation learns from many and varied sources, primarily its own hard-earned experience, but also through its diverse horizontal learning relationships with co-travellers and peers.

It is in encouraging and supporting these qualities and processes that we may find the real challenges of developmental practice for NGOs and donors. What it requires is the time to see what is living in communities that is authentic, that has potential, accompanied by a deep respect for what is local and indigenous and a subtlety of practice to give thoughtful and careful support where it is needed.

Perhaps it requires practitioners and donors who are working on their own sovereignty, beholden to their own purposes and values, derived from the needs and rights of those they seek to support, rather than as the funded, outsourced agents of higher powers.