

The Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) and faith-based NGO aid to Africa

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The authors examine the role of international faith-based NGOs in foreign aid and development assistance for Africa, with special reference to the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). The MCC is successful in its contribution to development and empowerment in the 20 African countries in which it works because of its philosophical and programmatic focus on accountability, its holistic approach to basic rights, and a 'listen and learn' approach which embraces empowerment and social justice. Although a 'small is beautiful' philosophy does not necessarily feed the 'quick fix' methods associated with the New Policy Agenda, it remains the most effective, efficient, accountable, and grassroots-responsive way of dealing with development issues.

Introduction

The African continent has been the recipient of development aid for over five decades, but there is little consensus on whether foreign aid contributes to African development or perpetuates underdevelopment, or what should be done to rectify the situation. The latest African initiative, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD)—a social and economic rescue plan for Africa that focuses on good governance, increased foreign aid, trade, and debt relief—remains untested. However, African leaders have recognised that corruption needs to be curbed, trade encouraged, and democracy embraced in order to secure future foreign aid. The US Millennium Challenge Account created by the Bush administration (which will increase the US aid budget for Africa by US\$10 billion by 2006), aims to reward governments that respect human rights and are committed to rooting out corruption.

The post-Cold War era has seen foreign aid increasingly channelled through international and domestic NGOs rather than through bilateral assistance. The rise of neo-liberalism as the dominant development paradigm, also known as the 'New Policy Agenda', has solidified the prominence of NGOs in the global system. Indeed, a 1995 report on global governance suggested that there were almost 29,000 international NGOs then in existence, with an estimated US\$5 billion in aid channelled through the NGO sector (World Bank 2001:200). Many African countries have experienced a flood of NGOs, both foreign and indigenous. As the number of non-state actors has steadily increased, there is some (albeit mixed) evidence to suggest that NGOs have been better than bilateral aid at promoting development.

What is it that makes NGOs effective in the management of development aid? Are faith-based NGOs (FBNs) more successful than secular NGOs or government aid programmes? The current US administration's embrace of FBNs as a supplement—if not indeed an alternative—to government-led social services and humanitarian efforts in the USA puts such NGOs firmly in the limelight. Are FBNs an effective vehicle for development in Africa, or do they promote a culture of dependency and undermine self-help initiatives?

This paper focuses specifically on the lessons that can be learned from the case of the Mennonite Central Committee (the MCC), a successful FBN. Although we have not conducted an exhaustive comparison of all faith-based or secular NGOs, we argue that the MCC successfully contributes to development initiatives in 20 African countries because of its philosophical and programmatic approach, which focuses squarely on accountability, a holistic approach to basic human rights, and a 'listen and learn' approach that encourages self-help initiatives and empowerment rather than a culture of dependency.

Given the pervasive climate of corruption in Africa (one need only examine the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index to see that most African countries are clustered at the bottom of the list), accountability has become a crucial element in foreign aid and development initiatives. We argue that MCC's success as a development agency is closely linked to its success at ensuring accountability and legitimacy.

The role of NGOs in the development debate

It is not easy to define or measure a concept as broad as development. In fact, almost every development agency, NGO, or local association has a different, if not competing, definition of what development is, and what its ultimate goals should be. For example, the dependency and modernisation approaches have been at odds as to whether development means an increase in social justice and a better standard of living, or simply economic growth with the eventual 'trickle down' of wealth to the poor. Within the 'New Policy Agenda', development is often measured in terms of how economically and politically liberalised 'developing countries' have become, or more concretely in terms of how many projects have been successfully completed, workshops attended, and individual citizens trained—in other words, using quantifiable rather than qualitative advances in social and economic development.

This paradigm assigns NGOs—international and indigenous—the role of catalysts for political and economic neo-liberal change. Indeed, NGOs are now important actors in the promotion of the neo-liberal agenda as bilateral development agencies, tired of corruption, inept civil servants, and lackadaisical efforts, have opted to channel their financial assistance through non-state actors.

NGOs have thus been posited as the panacea for bad governance, poverty, and disempowerment. Most NGOs fall rather short of such lofty objectives, however, and a substantial body of critical literature on NGOs and civil society has developed over the last few years. NGOs have been criticised for a lack of accountability, transparency, grassroots participation, and overall effectiveness (see, for example, Dicklitch 1998; Ottoway and Carothers 2000). In fact, the conspicuous presence of NGOs, epitomised by the multiplication of 4 × 4s in developing countries, may send the signal that NGOs are there simply to hand out foreign funds. In other words, in the neo-liberal environment, many NGOs (national and international) are serving as 'gap fillers' both for the state's retreat from the provision of basic social services and in the sense that they represent market-driven programmes that are adjusted to fit the funding available rather than to further their social missions (Dicklitch 1998:6). If international NGOs serve simply as intermediaries in the disbursement of aid monies or 'resource transfer', they are significantly constrained in building civic empowerment, or what Robert

Putnam calls 'social capital' — '... features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam 1995:67).

Marina Ottoway, examining social movements in Africa, differentiates between 'trusteeship NGOs' and representative NGOs that are rooted in society. The former, because they tend not to be rooted in society, do not offer adequate grounding for social capital and empowerment (Ottoway and Carothers 2000:84). Similarly, NGOs that are engaged in 'resource transfers' or service delivery often lack the time or resources to contribute to the advocacy necessary to help build social capital, encourage local empowerment, and, ultimately, foster development. FBNs, such as the MCC, can be classified as representative social groups rather than trusteeship NGOs because of their focus on encouraging empowerment and social justice.

Addressing the problem of making aid more effective, one World Bank report suggests that there are three components for 'substantially improved international development cooperation': ownership and partnership, aid delivery mechanisms that are less intrusive, and selectivity (World Bank 2001:198). To be successful, people within the recipient country must feel as if they have a say in what is being done (World Bank 2001:194), which means that governments and aid recipients must be incorporated into the decision-making and evaluation processes. Aid must also be well targeted, not only in terms of countries with the greatest need but also those countries with sound economic policies and institutions (World Bank 2001:196). Unfortunately, these objectives are seldom achieved, especially by the World Bank itself, which tends to focus on the short-term goals of liberalisation and market growth rather than empowerment and social justice.

Ultimately, international NGOs or donors can only do so much to promote development. Development, or at least the desire for it, must come from within. NGOs can facilitate development, but they cannot create it. FBNs have a unique opportunity to harness a desire for development through their local faith communities, and also to ensure that the funds are used most appropriately.

Faith-based NGOs

FBNs can be defined as non-state actors that have a central religious or faith core to their philosophy, membership, or programmatic approach, although they are not simply missionaries. Some of the key international, non-missionary FBNs include American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), Catholic Relief Services (CRS), World Vision, Mercy Corps International, Lutheran World Relief (LWF), the Aga Khan Foundation, and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) (see Table 1).

FBNs are distinguished from secular NGOs by their access to ready-made constituencies. International FBNs can tap into domestic church groups and congregations, who thus provide these NGOs with access to a grassroots forum. More importantly, the church, especially in Africa, holds a position of reverence, moral legitimacy, and influence, although churches and faith-based organisations have also sometimes fallen to corruption. In many cases, local people are so involved in day-to-day survival and trying to secure basic needs that they do not have much time to engage in voluntary activities, even if those activities might benefit them in the long run. This is where the potential for faith-based organisations is the greatest because people often do still make time for church and church-related activities. Organisations like the MCC, which encourage fellowship inside and beyond the church, help build social capital and greater civic engagement. If one of the greatest threats to civic engagement and social capital is corruption or a lack of social trust (Putnam 1995:73), one of the greatest strengths of many FBNs, especially the MCC, is their keen understanding of the need for accountability, and the legitimacy that springs from their domestic and foreign constituencies.¹

Table 1: Selected faith-based NGOs: programmes, focus, and finances (2000/01)

Faith-based NGO	Religious background	Overall annual budget (2001)	Programme focus	Relationship with government	Africa focus
Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Founded 1920	Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches Response to hunger in the Ukraine	US\$63 million	Overseas operations in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East <i>Focus:</i> development, education, advocacy, peace and conflict resolution, capacity-building	US\$8 million in Canadian government grants	20 African countries (second smallest programme)
Lutheran World Relief (LWR) Founded 1946	Evangelical Lutheran Church	US\$32 million	Operates in 50 countries, 77 partner organisations <i>Focus:</i> basic needs, literacy, community organisations, women's participation, empowerment of the poor	US government grants: US\$5 million USAID, Department of State	21 African countries (45% of budget)
Mercy Corps Founded 1979	Catholic Social Teaching and Quaker-Mennonite Peace philosophies	US\$87 million	Operates in 30 countries <i>Focus:</i> emergency relief, sustainable communities, health, civil society initiatives, citizen participation, non-violent conflict management	US\$40 million US government grants US\$14 million government commodities	Eritrea, Mozambique
World Vision International Founded 1950	Christian relief and development organisation,	US\$525 million	92 countries <i>Focus:</i> emergency	US\$124 million 23% of resources: government	26 African countries (37.7% of budget)

Table 1: (Continued)

Faith-based NGO	Religious background	Overall annual budget (2001)	Programme focus	Relationship with government	Africa focus
World Vision International Founded 1950 (Continued)	special focus on children Not formally affiliated to any denomination		relief, education, healthcare, economic development, promotion of justice	and multilateral agencies	
American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Founded 1917	Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) Provided conscientious objectors with opportunity to aid civilian victims during First World War	US\$4 million	<i>Focus:</i> social justice, peace, humanitarian services, economic justice, peace building and demilitarisation, social justice, youth	US\$82,000 government grants	Four African countries: Angola, Mozambique, Somalia, Zimbabwe
Catholic Relief Services (CRS) Founded 1943	Catholic Church: Catholic Bishops of the USA	US\$373 million	Works in 80 countries <i>Focus:</i> emergency relief, health, agriculture, small enterprise, welfare, peace and justice, education	US\$91,860 government grants	30 countries in Africa
Aga Khan Foundation Founded 1967	Founded by His Highness Prince Karim Aga Khan: Shia Ismaili Muslims	US\$99 million	Branches in eight countries, 130 programmes in 13 countries <i>Focus:</i> health, education, rural development, community participation, women, environment	Funding partners: European Commission, Governments of Canada, Germany, India, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, UK, USA, World Bank	Branches in: Kenya, Mozambique, Tanzania, Uganda

Sources: www.lwr.org, www.mercycorps.org, www.wvi.org, www.MCC.org, www.CRS.org, www.AFSC.org, www.akdn.org

The MCC's philosophical approach

Background

The MCC is a relief and development agency founded in 1920 to respond to the needs of Mennonites in Russia facing starvation after the First World War. The Mennonite ideal, to offer help out of love for God to anyone in need, is the foundation of MCC service. The MCC is structured in terms of development, education, and advocacy, with missionaries as separate entities (Miller 2000:279).

The Mennonite faith descends from the Anabaptists, who split from Protestant reformers in 1525. The result of this split was a religion based on an unswerving commitment to the life of Jesus as a model, the encouragement of direct study of the New Testament by lay people, a belief in the separation of church and state, and a resolve for pacifism (Gopin 2000:235). Persecution for these beliefs has only made Mennonites better peacemakers: the memory of outsiders' attempts to change their own lives gives Mennonites the keen ability to respect other cultures and not presume to interfere in the lives of aid recipients (Gopin 2000:238–239).

Structure and decision making

The MCC's name reflects the coming together of 15 different church groups (Mennonite and Brethren in Christ) into one 'central' committee. The MCC is based in both the USA and Canada, with four regional offices in the USA and five provincial offices in Canada, each independently incorporated, with its own board of directors, fundraising, and programme responsibilities. A 13-member executive committee meets quarterly to discuss broader programme issues.

Key objectives

The MCC's quest for peace and social justice through non-violent means is an ongoing commitment. Peace and social justice are viewed as one ideal rather than as separate goals. Thus, the MCC seeks to 'help reduce structural blocks to more equitable distribution of resources' (Bontrager 1979:5) while helping people develop a new understanding of their problems. Projects are aimed at empowering people to develop an awareness of issues of justice (Bontrager 1979:5). This includes peacemaking, for example, which involves 'reflection, prayer, and an active non-violent witness to the structures that cause and perpetuate injustices and violence' (Driedger and Kraybill 1994:154). This often flies in the face of the 'New Policy Agenda', in the sense that the MCC is more interested in empowering people and promoting social justice than in embracing market growth at any cost.

Funding

Most of the MCC's funding comes from individuals, North American churches' relief sales, and sales from thrift shops. Most of its income is from donations, followed by Ten Thousand Villages (fair trade) sales. The MCC avoids a heavy dependence on government funding, with this restricted mainly to food commodities from the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). In fact, the MCC has advised the US government and USAID that it does not accept their assistance because it disagrees with their approach.

The MCC's programme approach

How the MCC works

The MCC, like other FBNs, often works through its in-country counterpart or at the request of a local institution so that its actions are not perceived as external intervention. Consequently, the MCC is often well received by foreign governments. Many people in the African countries in which the MCC works also accept the agency more readily because of its respect and support for their own cultures and solutions. A preference for smaller tasks at the community level allows the MCC to work closely with locals at the grassroots, something that also helps ensure greater accountability for aid funds.

The MCC's philosophy is successful on several levels. First, it acknowledges both short- and long-term concerns. Though engaged in some emergency relief, MCC efforts are largely directed towards long-term development. The MCC recognises that most armed internal conflicts are of a chronic nature, and so the organisation places its overseas workers on three-year assignments (two years in the case of North America) (Miller 2000:280). The MCC chooses its volunteers carefully, looking for culturally sensitive Christians who are committed to non-violence. MCC fieldworkers receive only living expenses, while the listen and learn approach fosters a firm relationship between the MCC and local people. This commitment differs greatly from the visiting experts of larger organisations who arrive in the middle of a conflict and depart shortly thereafter (Merry 2000:210). For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the US Institute of Peace found that organisations like MCC and Quaker Peace and Social Witness (QPSW), unlike other FBNs in the area, were praised for:

searching for ways to support local initiatives, rather than introducing their own preplanned programmes. Their long-term commitment is also viewed positively. Beneficiaries have the sense that they have become connected to groups and individuals who will not abandon them with the next grant cycle, who will be there with ongoing interest, concern, and support. . . They have constructed an immense treasury of credibility and trust, primarily through individual relationships between staff members and local actors. (USIP March 2003:7)

Second, the MCC works with grassroots civil society. In contrast to the traditional missionary model of simply giving, the MCC does not provide handouts: instead it builds relationships to work alongside civil society in addressing local issues, so that local people are its partners, not its dependants. For example, the MCC hires local staff, passing on its own methods in the hope that eventually the agency can leave and the programmes will still stand. For example, in February 1999, the MCC's last expatriate administrative assistant in West Africa left and was replaced by a Burkinabe citizen. The MCC began the transition from an operational programme to a responsive programme, moving to rely upon and be directed more fully by national church partners (MCC Workbook 1999, Burkina Faso report). Programmes are intertwined with local existing institutions to encourage long-term sustainability. Local partners include the Council of Christian Churches of Angola (CICA) (MCC Workbook 1999, Angola report) and the Brethren in Christ Church in Zimbabwe (MCC Workbook 1999, Zimbabwe report). Serious consideration is given to African culture and wisdom when addressing local problems, as the MCC often works closely with women's associations and elders' conferences (MCC Final Report 2001:1). In 1998 in Somalia, for instance, the MCC supported Somali women mobilising other women from different clans to protest against the clan killings over natural resources in the northeast (MCC Workbook 1998, Somalia report). Again emphasising women in rural areas, MCC Congo collaborated with a women's organisation providing agricultural extension services in the Bandundu province and also

helped this organisation send a representative for training in Burkina Faso (MCC Workbook 1999). In Nigeria, the MCC partnered with the movement for Christian Community Service of Nigeria (MCCSN) to provide funds for literacy classes and materials for women and for the training of women in small business operation. The MCC also trained others to use these resources to reach more women (MCC Workbook 1999, Nigeria report).

In some cases, the MCC works only as facilitator. For example, in Somalia in 1999, it provided funds so that traditional elders from warring clans could meet to negotiate—which enabled them to hold meetings in four different districts to bring differing clan leaders together—and then stepped aside (MCC Workbook 1999, Somalia report). Such mediation and conflict resolution led by the parties involved serves to empower local leaders and allows for long-term local peace initiatives that are not dependent upon outsiders (Merry 2000:208). Not taking charge of the conflict is one subtle way in which Mennonite workers respect indigenous cultures. This grassroots work fits in with the traditional Mennonite distrust of government and of national-level politics. In all instances, the MCC seeks out the root cause of a problem rather than providing a hand out to act as a band-aid to it (MCC Final Report 2001).

Focus on Africa

The MCC's main overseas operations are in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, the latter being the smallest, with the Africa programme the second smallest in terms of personnel and money committed. The MCC's involvement in Africa started in the early 1960s as a response to the request for teachers to staff national education development efforts (called TAP, Teachers Abroad Program) in the newly independent nations (MCC Final Report 2001). By the late 1970s, as the TAP programmes faded, the MCC became disturbed by the increasing emphasis on First World solutions to African problems and the value ascribed to Western technology (Lind 1989:11–12). Governed by its own unique philosophy, and in marked contrast to this trend, the MCC seeks to address problems collectively with its indigenous partners, giving due consideration to African culture.

In 2003, the MCC was involved in 20 African countries.² As a field-responsive organisation, the MCC works mainly in rural communities, especially areas that receive little attention from major international NGOs (MCC Final Report 2001:viii). Working ecumenically with a variety of organisations, the MCC is highly respected by church groups, NGOs, and governments, both local and international (MCC Final Report 2001:10). Thus, the MCC has the indigenous trust and legitimacy that has eluded so many other Western organisations. The primary focus of the MCC programme in Africa is building the capacity of churches and local organisations (MCC Final Report 2001:13). Several key goals in this area include supporting initiatives that will enable churches and peoples to be self-sufficient, and helping institutions to upgrade their management and leadership skills (MCC Final Report 2001:13). Ideally, the MCC will help its African partners gain access to structures and facilities such as the Internet, so that they can advocate on their own behalf (MCC Final Report 2001:18). The MCC also teaches peace theology, and offers training in conflict resolution and conflict management, while making use of African peacemaking practices as well. For example, in the Congo, the Congolese inter-Mennonite committee (CONIM) provided Anabaptist theology and non-violent conflict training to women's groups, youth groups, and pastors. In Nigeria, the MCC responded to critical levels of tension and mistrust between Christians and Muslims in Maiduguri by sponsoring a four-day peace-building workshop. Facilitated by an MCC worker, this workshop brought together concerned people of both religions of different ages from a wide variety of occupations and social classes (MCC Workbook 2000, Nigeria report:25).

The MCC devotes many of its resources to education, as it seeks to help young Africans to have a greater voice in determining the continent's future. For example, many MCC projects seek to combine peace and education. In the DRC, MCC workers worked to advance a peace curriculum for elementary schools (MCC Workbook 2000, DRC report:16). A similar project was conducted in Rwanda/Burundi for primary and secondary schools (MCC Workbook 2000, Rwanda/Burundi report:27).

Other programmes are directed towards connecting people, healthcare, advocacy, and income generation, among many other areas. For example, the MCC Exchange Visit Fund allowed Ugandans to visit peace and reconciliation projects in other parts of East Africa as well as to build relationships across ethnic and religious divisions (MCC Workbook 1999, Uganda report; MCC Final Report 2001:16–20). In the DRC, an MCC worker invited ten Kinshasa Mennonites to join her in a life education training programme. After their training, they increased the awareness of youth groups, Mennonite pastors, and women leaders concerning responsible parenting, family planning, and sex education, including AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. Some 1000 young people, 300 women, and 100 men participated in these various seminars (MCC Workbook 2000, DRC report:15). In Burkina Faso, Pastor Coulibaly, president of the Mennonite Church, was part of a team of religious leaders who successfully intervened with the government when large numbers of students were arrested and beaten during protests related to the violent death of the outspoken Burkinabe journalist Norbert Zongo (MCC Workbook 1999:13). And finally, in Kenya, the MCC shares good agricultural practices with the Masai people in growing more drought-tolerant short-seasoned maize, sorghum, and beans to improve food security, teaches the importance of using good wood—softer wood from faster growing trees—and built the Oloshoibar Dam (MCC Workbook 1999, Kenya report). Other involvements of the MCC include hosting a meeting of the Eastern Africa Conference (EAC) and placing numerous teachers in rural villages throughout Africa (MCC Workbook 1999, Tanzania report).

Why the MCC approach works

Working closely with the people

Although it is an FBN, the MCC is not a traditional missionary organisation.³ It does not seek to proselytise, although it works with mainly local faith-based organisations such as Presbyterians, Lutherans, and United Methodists (Dallell interview, June 2002). In fact, it is the values that the MCC promotes and embodies rather than the promotion or practice of religion that makes it such a successful development organisation.

The MCC also works with women's groups, farmers' cooperatives, and government agencies. Its volunteers do not have to be Mennonites, but must be Christians dedicated to non-violence. The MCC is successful because it is a hands-on, not a handout, organisation. Community partners are involved at all stages of decision making as equals, not as subordinates: the MCC does not 'sub-contract' other NGOs but seeks to be at one with the people with whom it is working.

The MCC is driven by its field operations, not by its donors. Decisions are made in the field, based on local conditions, needs, partners, and relationships, rather than in head offices in North America. Decision making is participatory and emanates from the grassroots up rather than from the top down (Dallell interview, June 2002), with MCC country representatives taking the lead from local partners rather than vice versa.

Accountability and legitimacy

Central to accountability and keeping corruption to a minimum is the close relationship the MCC has with its local partners. The MCC chooses these very carefully, and does not simply disburse aid and then leave. Grassroots participation and decision making further provide a sense of ownership by and partnership with recipient communities that other NGOs seldom achieve. This close relationship allows for transparency in expenditures and accountability.

The MCC certainly acts on questions of inappropriate or unsanctioned usage of funds, and it conducts regular programme evaluations, including audits to ensure that funds are being used appropriately and as intended (Dalellew interview, June 2002). The frequency of the evaluations will depend on a mutual agreement between the MCC and its local partners, but will include at least one final evaluation upon completion of the programme.

The fact that North American MCC volunteers, called Country Representatives, must spend at least three years in the field gives a sense of continuity to the programme work. Further, their being paid only living expenses reinforces the voluntary ethic that buttresses the MCC. The MCC's philosophy is to live alongside the constituency it is trying to help: to teach by example. This not only helps to maintain the low overheads and administrative costs that make the MCC one of the more cost-effective international NGOs, but also adds to its legitimacy and the respect it commands. In 1999/2000, 9.3 per cent of its funds were spent on administrative overheads, rising slightly to 11.1 per cent the following year (MCC Fact Sheet for 2000, 2001).

The small-scale nature of its operations also enables the MCC to be vigilant against corruption and encourages greater overall accountability. This did not happen by accident: MCC growth is 'calculated'. As Tesfatsion Dalellew, Director of the Africa Programme, says, 'it is a constituency-based organisation that always works with partners. And this occurs after the relationship is built and we know each other well' (Dallellew interview, June 2002). Because the MCC is smaller and less dependent on external funds than many other NGOs, it can continue to respond to the grassroots rather than to donor priorities.

Holistic approach

The MCC does not simply concentrate on disbursing financial assistance—it sends people and not just money. Arguably, the MCC is successful because it takes a holistic approach to development. The agency does provide emergency relief, but also focuses on basic human needs, including subsistence, shelter, and the preservation of life, with programmes in the fields of education, health, agriculture, peace and justice issues, relief work, and local job creation. But the impetus for these programmes must come from below, rather than from above.

The MCC's core purpose is social justice, which it promotes via advocacy and education. This does not mean that the MCC stands in the front line; rather, it chooses to work behind the scenes in promoting peace and social justice (which it refers to as 'capacity building'). At the global level, the MCC also engages in lobbying governments through its offices in Washington, DC and Ottawa.

The MCC is not driven by timeframes or results, believing in the importance of intangible results that cannot be measured in quantifiable terms. The agency aims to enhance the dignity of the individual (MCC Final Report 2001:91), and to 'educate people so they see and speak for themselves' (Dallellew interview, June 2002). In short, the MCC is interested in empowerment, and in paving the way for greater social justice.

'Listen and learn' approach

NGOs, especially international ones, are often perceived as arrogant and ethnocentric. The MCC, however, does not purport to know it all. Instead, its 'listen and learn' approach is linked to the agency's accountability to its grassroots partners and helps to promote self-help initiatives. The MCC thus facilitates but does not seek to control projects and programmes. It takes a 'service attitude, rather than a telling attitude' (MCC Final Report 2001:91), which helps avoid the 'white elephants' that are neither necessary nor in many cases even wanted by local communities accepting NGO help.

Policy lessons

The MCC has been an effective development NGO because of its philosophical and programmatic approach. Its relatively small size, independence of foreign government donations, and commitment to grassroots participation has reinforced its accountability and legitimacy, not only to its North American membership but also its African constituency. The MCC is a hands-on, not a handout NGO. It is careful to oversee the management of aid without undermining its partnership with its constituency and local ownership of programmes. Furthermore, its selectivity in dealing with partners and its programme focus enable the MCC to pursue a commitment to social justice that is broadly applicable and effective, but whose results are not necessarily quantifiable.

Although the 'quick fix' approach (or New Policy Agenda) to underdevelopment, poverty, and disempowerment might be the dominant development paradigm of the time, it is clearly not the most effective. The MCC, like many other FBNs and local church communities, has a long-term commitment to development, poverty reduction, and empowerment. Although a 'small is beautiful' approach does not necessarily provide a 'quick fix', it remains the best, most efficient, and grassroots-responsive way of addressing development challenges. The time-intensive practice of establishing community networks and long-term relationships between an international NGO and local partners is still the best way to build social capital and civic engagement. Keeping local partners accountable and responsible for literally every penny can be time consuming and burdensome, but it does ultimately ensure transparency, accountability, and legitimacy.

Ultimately, if more development agencies and NGOs working in Africa were structured along the lines of the MCC with its holistic, grassroots approach, and its focus on accountability and empowerment, development might take longer, but it also might actually take place, ensuring greater social justice, human dignity, and local ownership.

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Notes

- 1 For example, in Malawi, churches (including the Episcopal Conference of Malawi, the Malawi Council of Churches, and the Muslim Association of Malawi) have become

involved in the 'Faith-based Community Group Campaign' to help fight corruption. See Transparency International (2001) 'Churches engaged in anti-corruption fight', *TI Daily Corruption News Full Text Service*, 28 November 2001, available at www.transparency.org/press_moni.html (accessed 6 March 2004).

- 2 The MCC is currently engaged in Angola, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Kenya, Lesotho, Mozambique, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia, South Africa, Sudan, Swaziland, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.
- 3 Even the MCC's SALT programme, which focuses on more traditional missionary activities, is not one of proselytising. It focuses on cross-cultural learning and assistance where possible, and is service oriented, like the US Peace Corps.

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