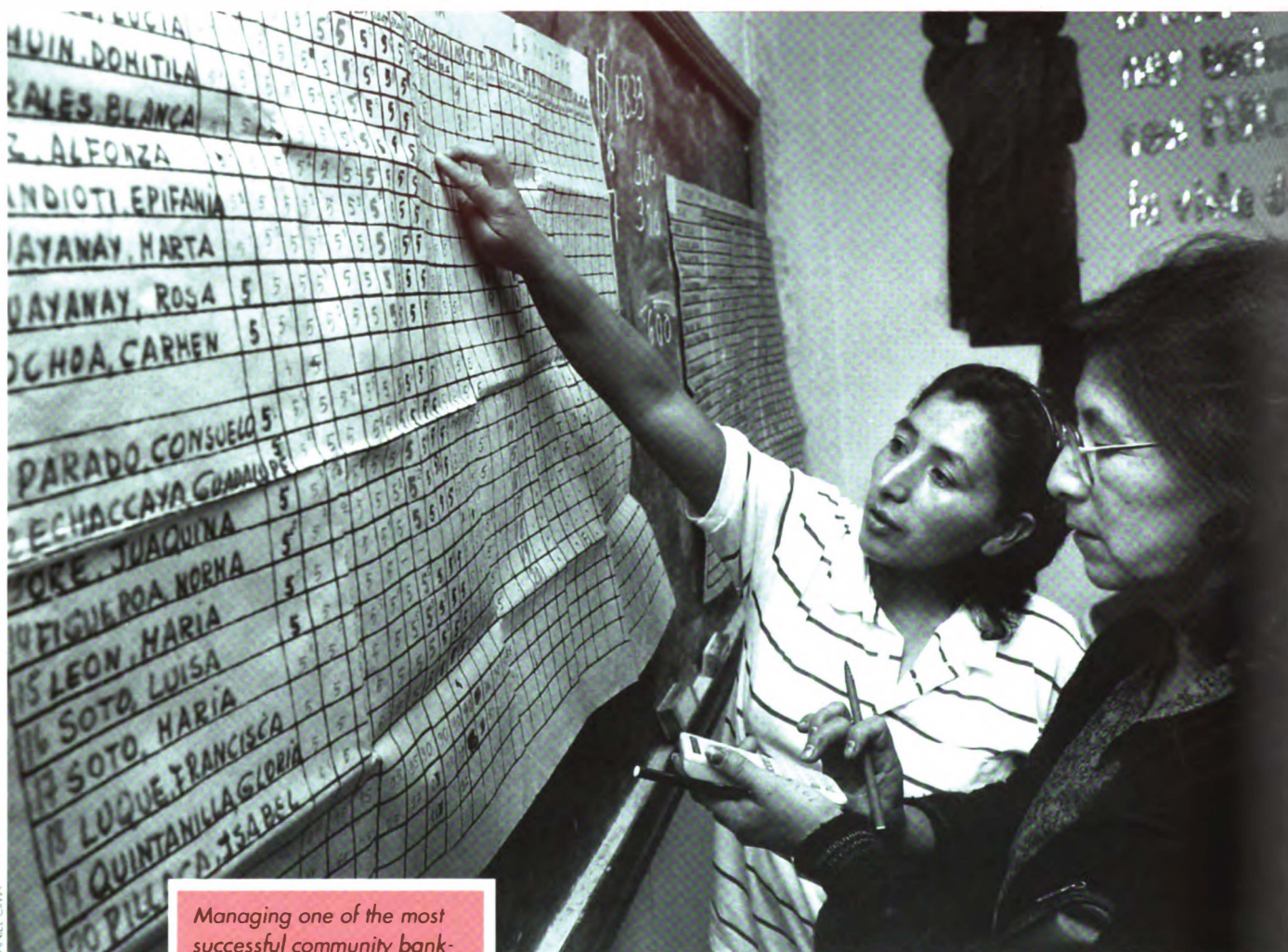


RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT RESOURCES: *Dilemmas of the "Grassroots Manager"*

STEVEN ARNOLD AND KELLY RAE REINEKE

For many grassroots managers,
the honor is often not worth the burden.



Managing one of the most successful community banking projects in the hemisphere is no easy task. The secretary of the Fundación para la Asistencia Comunitaria del Perú (FINCA) records the name, loan amount, and balance owed by each woman borrower.

Maria hunches over a table in a tiny office in a small provincial town, her lips curled downward as she tries to puzzle through a thicket of legal documents with only the benefit of a primary education. She knows the papers are important, that misreading how the words are put together could seriously harm not only her family and neighbors, but the many others she now represents. Looking up momentarily to clear her eyes, she lets her attention wander. It hardly seems possible that six months ago she had been a

village leader planning the next community meeting. Then colleagues at the regional assembly elected her as one of seven directors of the federation of community associations. Now here she is, the dirigente in charge of land rights, responsible for working with over 50 communities that seldom speak as one. Finding the best course is further complicated by the conflicting demands and opportunities brought by outsiders, including industrialists, government officials, tourists, international donors, and assorted development "experts." She knows that her election was a real vote of confidence in her leadership skills. But her pride in taking the job is tempered by the responsibility she feels for protecting the interests of villagers throughout the region. On days like this, frustrated by what seems an impossible task, she wonders if the honor is worth the burden.

María seems an unlikely revolutionary, yet she is part of a quiet revolution sweeping Latin America. María,¹ and thousands like her, are former community leaders who in the past 10 years have stepped up to become "grassroots managers" in the thickening web of intermediary organizations emerging across the continent.² As local pressures mount and state resources dwindle, these organizations are reweaving the sociopolitical fabric, mediating everything from health services delivery to the adjudication of land disputes. Many observers think this trend signifies an historic turning point for Latin American society, allowing people at the grassroots to participate in their own development and reap the benefits of their labor. But seen through María's eyes, the new paradigm's promise often seems like a mirage when confronted with the practical problems of trying to attain it.

Part of the problem lies in the concept of the "intermediary organization" itself, an umbrella term covering many kinds of institutions at many levels in society. Advocates of intermediary organizations typically cite those operating at the national or regional level. Their high visibility and well-institutionalized structures obscure the reality of the majority, which are much smaller, often more ad hoc, and work just above the community level. In theory, these local-level intermediary organizations occupy a pivotal role, providing the first layer of contact between the community and outsiders by assisting and aggregating the work of base groups that emerge from communities themselves.

In addition to their social service and advocacy roles, local-level intermediary organizations also promote productive activities that range from agroprocessing and marketing to urban microenterprise. The variety of tasks is matched by the variety of organizational forms, which varies from membership organizations created by and responsive to their base constituencies, to grassroots service organizations (GSOs) started by churches, development professionals, businesspeople, universities, or even the government (Carroll 1992). Research on local-level intermediaries remains fragmentary and anecdotal, but María's frustrating experience seems more common than exceptional. Unfortunately, careful discussion of her problems from the vantage point of grassroots managers themselves rarely emerges. This is

ironic since even a cursory examination such as this one shows how the dilemmas affecting the fortunes of grassroots managers are intertwined with the prospects for effective projects and programs.

Many of the frustrations of grassroots managers stem from two interrelated causes. First, making the leap from the community to the intermediary organization is far more difficult than outside observers think and grassroots managers expect. Despite being bright, strongly committed, and knowledgeable about local realities, new managers like María often find themselves ill-equipped to deal with the array of problems suddenly thrust upon them. Leadership skills that helped them inspire community involvement become secondary to the administrative and technical skills needed to be effective in their new positions.

Second, intermediary organizations are often inadequate training grounds and support networks for the people who staff them. While there is much talk about intermediary organizations being the muscle tissue and nervous system for mobilizing strong civil societies to solve intractable social problems, scant attention is paid to how these small and often struggling agencies can generate the human and capital resources to meet their responsibilities. Heady expectations overlook the fact that tasks being devolved have already proven too exacting for the state or the private sector. "Community enterprise" has shown it can help fill in the gaps. But if outside partners—whether government agencies, donors, or the business community—are unwilling or unable to clarify the true costs involved, it can create major problems for the intermediary organization running a program and unpleasant surprises for grassroots managers who find themselves trying to make up the difference.

Local-level intermediary organizations, as their name implies, are caught "in between." This places grassroots managers in a very delicate situation. Instead of advocating the interests of one community, they often find themselves in the difficult and unfamiliar position of reconciling a variety of stakeholders, who may not only have competing interests but competing visions of what is to be done and how. When this involves negotiating with corporations, government agencies, or other powerful outsiders, the situation is even thornier. Constituents may be suspicious that the manager is being co-opted or defending only personal community interests, while structural features of class, race, and gender often place grassroots managers at a disadvantage in getting a hearing at the negotiating table, much less making their case.

The first half of this article will explore some of the quandaries new grassroots managers frequently confront. The final half will examine what might be done about it.

RESOURCE SCARCITIES AND OPPORTUNITY COSTS

María's first shock was having to leave her farm and move with her husband and six children to the town where the regional association was headquartered. The pressures of the new job were bad enough, but she had to face them without the support of her friends and neighbors. She quickly discovered that her small stipend from the association did not begin to cover the cost of replacing the food and housing provided

by her finca. And who would look after the children now that her relatives were so far away? Even when she returned to her village for visits, old friends seemed distant, with some saying that María had forgotten them after "going off to the pueblo to earn a big salary." María was upset hearing this, until she remembered having said the same things about the dirigentes when she had been a community leader.

María's situation illustrates the costs and tensions involved in moving from a "community economy" into the formal economy. Her friends, and at first María herself, may be impressed by what seems a "big salary." Intermediaries are not "voluntary organizations," since management and staff typically receive some form of regular compensation. But these benefits may be highly illusory, for two reasons. At the local level of intermediary organization, "regular" describes intention more than actuality. Particularly for membership organizations, pay may depend on funds generated voluntarily by the community. During hard times, communities fall behind schedule and the amount raised may be much less than initially expected.

Even when compensation is timely, the net return quickly shrinks after subtracting the costs of replacing in-kind benefits once provided by the home community's informal support system. Unlike more-formal public organizations with well-established rules for per diem and overhead, local-level intermediary organizations often lack the tradition and resources to cover job-related expenses. These costs do not disappear—they are absorbed by the staff. As a result, grassroots managers like María frequently discover that instead of a step up, life is even more difficult than before.

Grassroots managers also may find themselves dipping into their own meager resources or borrowing from friends and relatives to cover program as well as personal expenses. For example, one grassroots manager financed an essential trip to the capital to register community land titles by convincing her widowed mother to sell one of her pigs. As personal resources dwindle, managers' anxiety increases. If they tap their savings or credit to bail out the organization one more time, will enough be there to buy their children books and uniforms when school starts, or to pay for medical care in the event of an illness or accident in the family?

Consultants and other outside experts working with these organizations often overlook such hidden costs, which leads to miscommunication and resentment. For example, many development practitioners from abroad who accept salaries below what they could earn in the private sector at home make their "sacrifice" well known, overlooking their own wage differential with the talented grassroots managers they work beside. When there is difficulty raising money for "overhead" through grants or community contributions, some consultants blithely recommend creating some sort of business without asking where already overworked managers will find the time or energy. One grassroots manager noted a blatant double standard when consultants suggested that staff should grow crops to help pay their own way. "Where," he wondered, "is the corn field in the capital that pays the consultants' salaries and expenses?"

RESPONSIBILITY AND RESPECT

María knew her work was important. Secure land rights for the villages she represented were crucial for meeting their common interests and concerns. In the past, outsiders would come to a community with gifts for the local leaders and a cornucopia of promised jobs, housing, and city goods for everyone else. María knew these benefits seldom materialized, and usually had hidden costs. Her own community was reporting that industrial waste had so contaminated the river it was no longer safe for cooking or bathing. But what could she do? At the big meeting she had worked so hard to organize, she argued on behalf of the region. The government officials and oil people treated her like an ignorant "country girl," dismissing her suggestions with amusement and contempt. Afterwards, a representative from an environmental group in the capital berated her for a presentation that wasn't "academically respectable." Now there were rumors that local village leaders, swayed by big company promises of a cleanup and benefits, intended to negotiate on their own, destroying any chance of working out a comprehensive strategy to help them all.

María's position is not unusual. Many small intermediary organizations are involved in issues that affect the daily lives of community members. But having responsibility does not guarantee respect. The condescension of outsiders is hurtful but expected after a lifetime of tightropeing the gulfs of culture, language, education, and class. What is truly devastating for the grassroots manager is lack of support from the communities. To be sure, intermediary organizations can be weak and sometimes corrupt. Local leaders frustrated with the perceived slowness or unreliability of intermediaries are tempted to go directly "to the top," convinced they can get a better deal by acting alone. As one put it, "*Dirigentes* think they are important, but they are just spectators in the stands. The real players, the ones who score goals, are those of us in the communities." This tendency is exacerbated by outside interests—in the public or private sector, or even international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—that bypass intermediary organizations not only to accelerate the process, but to maintain control of the agenda.

Preventing side deals that undermine the general interest requires the grassroots manager to have a foot in both camps without being or seeming compromised. That is difficult in Latin America, where a long tradition of "clientelism" makes it difficult for "intermediaries" to avoid being seen as exploitative middlemen. It is further aggravated by divisions of class, ethnicity, and gender. For example, a *dirigenta* from an indigenous area cut her hair and adopted city dress to be taken more seriously by outsiders, only to lose the respect of her own community. Female grassroots managers also often face discrimination from fellow office workers who treat them like servants or "loose women," making up degrading stories if their advances are refused.

FROM COMMUNITY LEADER TO DEVELOPMENT MANAGER

The work is overwhelming! In school María had learned to read basic things like the newspaper, and she had served as

A member of the Cooperativa de Servicios Progresar, which collects and recycles refuse in Bogota, Colombia, learns bookkeeping.



MIQUEL SAVAGO

the secretary taking notes at community meetings. But working in an office was completely different, and no one seemed to have time to explain anything. Yet here she was reviewing and typing up complex legal documents that would be carefully scrutinized by government officials. And at last week's training session, everyone was lost. Consultants from the GSO teaching the course had good intentions, but María couldn't see how their big ideas fit the practical problems she faced. She was also very disappointed that no one asked about her ideas for managing funds that were working out well—instead, she was supposed to learn a long list of accounting terms unrelated to what she was doing.

Her community work had required María to be more leader than manager. While these leadership skills continue to be essential in her new role, it is handling day-to-day management and administrative procedures that may well spell out the difference between long-term success and failure. And it is here where local-level intermediary organizations and their staff seem to need the most assistance. Even the most-experienced informal community leader may have little understanding of basic office routines that are essential to the functioning of an ongoing organization.

Part of the problem is that the "book" on effective grassroots management ideas and strategies, written by and for grassroots managers themselves, has yet to be written. Like all managers, those at the grassroots need to develop three basic skills—how to manage people, resources, and information. But outside experts seldom gear their training to the actual needs of the organization or the educational levels of its staff.

Too often money is wasted on exercises such as a new budget technique, when what is really needed is a careful discussion with the staff to see what their problems are, and identify what resources are readily available for solving them. Since grassroots managers are typically creative and practical people, it is useful to start a dialogue so that staff can begin sharing ideas with one another

that already work. For example, one manager devised a simple notebook for storing and filing receipts so they were in order when she prepared her financial report.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND CORRUPTION

María tries to compose her thoughts for the upcoming strategy meeting that several dirigentes have organized to confront the president. Carlos (the president) knew he wasn't supposed to take the boat, but he did so anyway and didn't lock it up on returning. Now someone has stolen the propeller, making it impossible to visit any of the communities along the river. It will cost \$200 for a new propeller, and Carlos refuses to pay, saying it's a community expense. Even if he agreed, where would he get the money?

Even though intermediary organizations are starved for resources, they may seem relatively better off than those they serve. This creates strong temptations for using resources for personal rather than community needs, with organizations typically having weak sanctions against abuse. This problem is all the more acute since not all situations are as clearcut as María's president taking the boat. What does an association treasurer do, for example, if his best friend requests a "loan" to get medicines for his wife who is seriously ill? The treasurer knows that the organization was established to serve the community, but isn't his friend part of the community? The concept of community interest, often vague, grows vaguer as membership grows and face-to-face accountability must be replaced by formal rules that ensure transparency and fairness. If the organization begins



DANIEL CIMA

For many grassroots managers, what's best for the organization may not always be what's best for their families. For this Peruvian woman "banker" from the Fundación para la Asistencia Comunitaria del Perú (FINCA), as for María in our story, her daughter's well-being has to come first.

to serve individual needs, however worthy, it can endanger its legitimacy.

Part of the problem in reconciling individual and community interests also

comes from efforts by grassroots managers to find ways to get resources for underfunded programs. For example, outside consultants to a health care program in a poor area were strongly critical of community paramedics taking a few cents from patients for the medicines they provided. One promoter summoned the courage to say, "Yes, but those few cents here and there help pay for big medical emergencies. And how else are we supposed to pay the busfare when we have to travel between communities? And how will we feed our children when we don't have time now to grow enough food of our own?"

These practical considerations also create openings for outside stakeholders to bend an intermediary organization to their own interests. Donors supporting grassroots programs, for example, have enormous clout. Sometimes a grant as small as \$300 has been known to shift priorities and create doubts about who really owns the program. Even when the goal is not to impose an outside agenda, a donor can hamstring an intermediary by demanding a level of paperwork geared to its own reporting needs rather than crafting terms that don't swamp the grantee's administrative resources.

An offer of seemingly benign services by outsiders (e.g., local landowners or oil drillers) can also cause problems. Should, for example, intermediary staff accept free rides in boats or jeeps to visit a community? How does one maintain both the image and the fact of impartiality if a conflict arises between the community and the outsider?

BURNOUT AND CO-OPTATION

"Am I doing what's best for you?" wonders María, watching her youngest daughter play on the floor of the office. María joined the association to help her community, and to ensure that her family would have a brighter future. If she leaves the association now, it will take them time to find a replacement, assuming anyone qualified is also willing. But something has

to change. Returning to her finca would at least mean her family will be properly fed. One of the oil companies has also hinted they could use a "bright young woman with a good knowledge of the area," holding out the possibility of a nice house and salary. She can still hear her colleague José laughing at her ideals of community service. "Be realistic," he had said. "This is your golden opportunity to become recognized and get a great job that will let you buy those things from the city you've always wanted." Putting down the documents she's been reading, she picks her daughter up onto her lap, and gazes out the window. "What should I do, cariña, what should I do?"

María's thoughts about leaving are not surprising. Many young staff in local-level intermediary organizations leave their positions, returning to their farms or more-traditional jobs in the community. Others may be tempted to use community funds for their own use, or go to work for those formerly seen as "the opposition." Some, like María's colleague José, see their work in the intermediary organization from the beginning as little more than a stepping-stone for advancement. But although the evidence is fragmentary, a great many seem more like María. The impact of Freirian philosophy and methods in Latin America (Freire 1970) has created a large number of problem-solving community leaders committed to the possibility of participatory change. The stresses and strains of making change happen,

however, can make the process appear so overwhelming that those like María are left to wonder, "Maybe José is right after all."

Examining the dilemmas facing grassroots managers in local-level intermediary organizations presents a sobering assessment of the gap between theory and practice. While the rhetoric of grassroots development supports these institutions in the abstract, the reality is that the odds are against them. Organizations given responsibility without sufficient resources are often undermined or bypassed, leaving many grassroots managers with two unenviable choices: they can leave, burnt out and feeling like failures, confirming a prejudice that they are not up to the job; or they can become co-opted and use the system for personal interests.

To improve the odds for success, two interrelated themes stand out. First, systems must be found for calculating the types of resources that are necessary, and making them available. Second, effective grassroots managers are one of those resources, and it is time to carefully rethink the skills they need to succeed and how those skills can be developed.

RESOURCING ORGANIZATIONS

The imbalance between responsibilities and resources that characterizes intermediary organizations in their external relations with the state and the economy is frequently reproduced within the organization itself. Because this is often overlooked in discussions about grassroots development, managers in organizations with the fewest resources often find themselves facing the toughest challenges and workloads. This oversight is not confined to Latin America, as a description of local groups trying to reform city public schools in the United States shows:

The demand we [place] on lower-class organizations is one which they are, as a population, least [able] to meet. We are asking those with the most limited resources to be the most resourceful; to eschew individual needs and incentives for the good of the group; to maintain allegiance to broader social issues and goals and limit their efforts to build large and stable organizations; to broaden the base of their own participation and internal democracy and become more independent and self-reliant [and] reduce direct external dependency. We encourage them to sustain advocacy as a primary strategy, although this requires the greatest investment of time and energy. . . . In fact, we are asking them to be the source for reform of the very system that has denied them any means of access (Gittall 1980).

In the case of Latin America, efforts by many donors, and others in relatively secure positions, to minimize nonessential expenses do not fully factor in the thin margin of error faced by even the best local-level organizations. Carroll (1992) is one of the few to point out that outsiders "fail to appreciate mundane but essential costs" of intermediary organizations, such as electricity and telephone bills. While there is merit in donors wanting funds to go directly to projects and communities, this tends to ignore the operating



Luis Cruz, former president of El Ceibo, communicates by radio with farmers in the Alto Beni, Bolivia. El Ceibo's system of rotational management has made for effective participatory decision-making in this cacao-producing and marketing federation.

costs of the intermediary organizations themselves. Ritchey Vance (1991) notes that even the larger, more established intermediary organizations are affected.

Suggestions that organizations raise their own funds for salaries and expenses exact their own price. Beneficiaries are often already contributing labor and materials, but they lack the cash to pay the full cost of services; and intermediaries that start businesses to generate income risk diverting resources from their primary task to pursue ventures they often lack the market skills to pull off (Robison 1994).

Consequently, intermediary organizations, strapped for resources, tend to shift the load onto their own staffs, who become responsible for fund-raising efforts that too often go no farther than their own or their families' pockets. While such informal funding might have sufficed at the community level, intermediary organizations that make grassroots managers unwitting agents in their own exploitation cannot expect to survive for long.

Donors, governments, and other funders have an interest in breaking this cycle. Their own scarce resources will be wasted in an endless succession of start-up projects unless those funds help build strong and sustainable organizations to carry out promising ideas and carry them forward. That

may sometimes mean coverage of some overhead costs. But it also means rethinking how those costs can be reduced. It means working carefully with grassroots managers not only to remove specific bottlenecks, but to make problem-solving an ongoing process. One approach has been the IAF's experiment with moving beyond support of discrete projects in Colombia to building networks that link community organizations, local-level intermediaries, and GSOs in a complex web of mutually reinforcing activities. Funds are recycled for maximum impact, and knowledge is institutionalized so that new grassroots managers don't have to reinvent the wheel. Efforts are now under way to expand the tradition of private philanthropy in Colombia to generate new local resources for grassroots development so that organizations can rationally plan activities without relying on fickle overseas donors.

MANAGEMENT SKILLS FOR GRASSROOTS MANAGERS

We have seen that grassroots managers need to develop new skills to make the leap to the intermediary organization. But they not only need to master the time-saving routines typical of any office, they actually need to be more creative than managers in better-funded organizations precisely because their resources are so limited. As Stanley (1991) points out, "Once people have come together, dynamic leadership skills and the development of managerial skills are needed to maintain the consensus and transform the enthusiasm of shared ideals into the nuts and bolts of essential services."

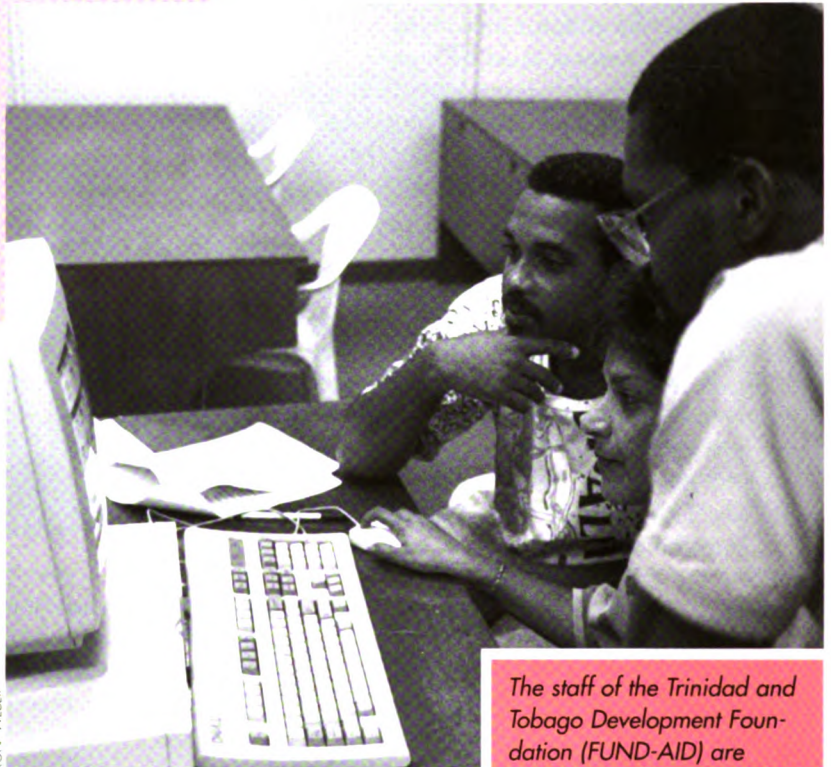
But the very idea of "management" is often resisted for two reasons. First, community activists have presumed it was ideological shorthand for shortchanging workers and the poor. Drucker (1990) observes that this perception may be changing. "They know that they need to learn how to use management as their tool lest they be overwhelmed by it. They know they need management so they can concentrate on their mission."

For community leaders trying to make the jump up to intermediary leadership that challenge is especially trying. Not only must new skills be learned, but those already mastered must be adapted or they become liabilities. Ritchey Vance points out, for example, how strong personal loyalties and the bond of *compadrazgo*, that rely on face-to-face exchanges of service between individuals at the local level, can be a disaster at the intermediary level. This pattern led a producer's cooperative to financial ruin because it encouraged the purchase of second-rate produce from members, the hiring of advisers based on personal ties rather than demonstrated professional competence, the diversion of profits and savings to meet immediate needs rather than long-term investment, and the selling of food on credit to needy individuals without figuring out how they would repay.

Paul (1993) suggests that this approach leads to "internal struggles and lack of internal and external accountability

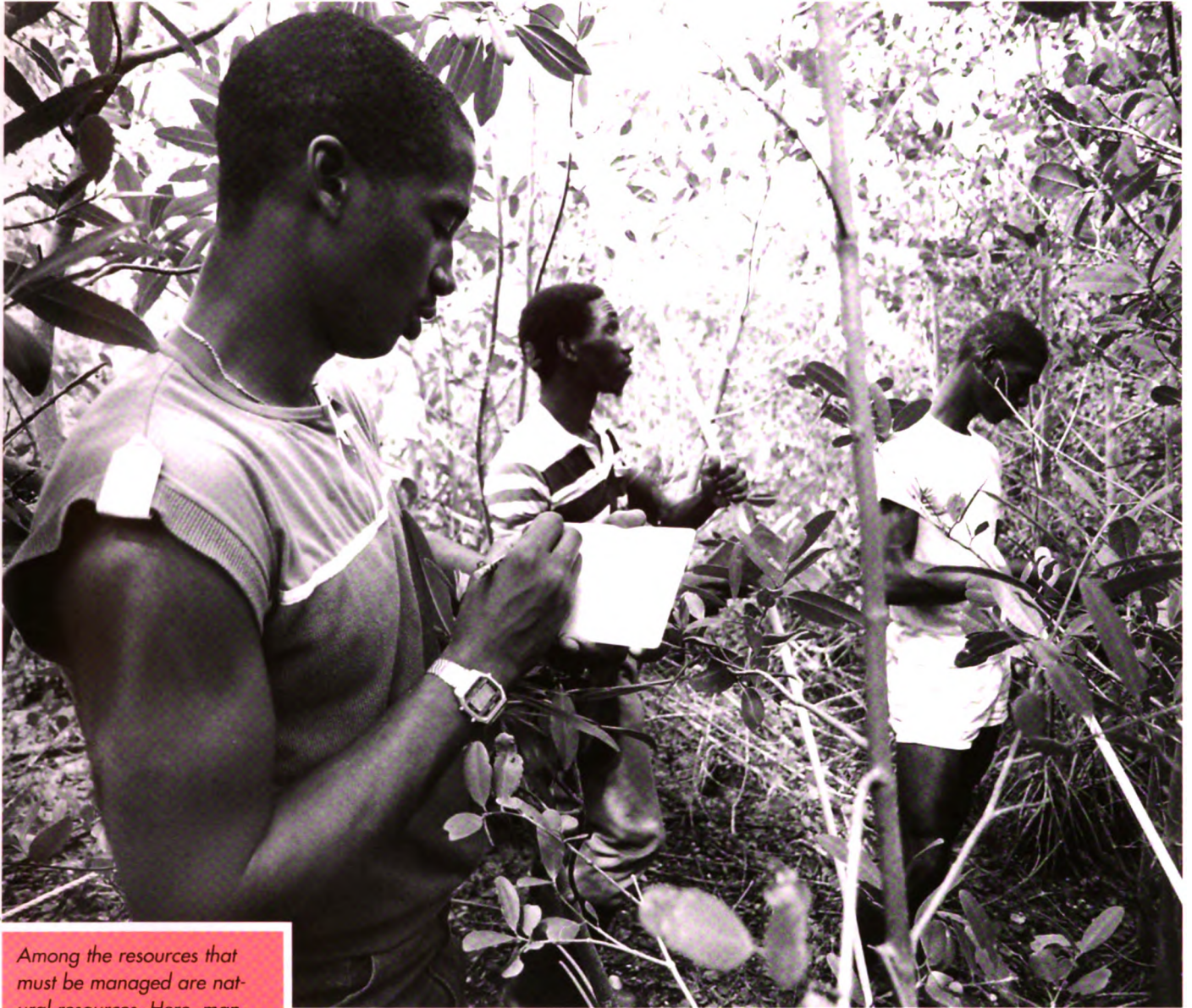
[that] can bring the organization down and leave the issue or problem pretty much where it was when everything started. Except that good people are now cynical and burned out and have lost trust in organizational efforts for change." The tragedy ripples outward. If those local leaders who show the most promise and credibility become so entangled, why should their communities believe that participatory development is worth the effort or even possible?

What is to be done? Even when grassroots managers seek help in developing management skills, they often find the training is inappropriate. The triad of core skills—managing people, resources, and information—must be reexamined from the perspective of grassroots managers themselves.



The staff of the Trinidad and Tobago Development Foundation (FUND-AID) are being trained to operate a new PC that will improve the efficiency of monitoring a loan portfolio of some 5,000 small businesses.

Managing people: Managing people is easily taken for granted and assumed to be an innate skill (Britell 1992). But intermediary organizations work with different kinds of people, and require a blend of leadership skills. Matching managers with the right skills to the right jobs and getting them to work together as a team are difficult, especially if each person must wear many hats. Grassroots managers who are prominent community activists are often at sea if they are asked to supervise technical agreements, while technicians able to hold their own with outside experts may have difficulty holding the confidence of communities. Assembling a competent team is difficult when managers sense they are on their own in an area outside their competency. Good intentions are not enough; when things go wrong, fingers are pointed. In such high-stress positions, staff feel unable to reinforce their



JEFF PERKINS

Among the resources that must be managed are natural resources. Here, managers from the National Research and Development Foundation in St. Lucia make a two-year inventory of the mangrove stock.

colleagues, focus only on problems, and sap each other's self-esteem.

Ironically, effective teamwork is sometimes impossible precisely because the or-

ganization has created a relatively flat and loose egalitarian structure to avoid inflexible and exploitative hierarchies. Without clearly defined roles, rules, and responsibilities, the goal of promoting equality and fairness may be lost. Little will be accomplished if people work at cross-purposes. Important information may never surface if meetings are dominated by those who are most assertive, and programs can be taken over by the unscrupulous, who use the looseness to shape the situation to their own ends. Outside experts often exacerbate the situation by speaking about "participation" while in fact pushing their own preconceived agendas. It is important to establish benchmarks that link process to performance.

Effective participatory decision-making is possible, as the Bolivian cacao farmers of El Ceibo have shown in manufacturing chocolate for the national market and exporting to the United States and Europe (Healy 1986). But it took time and skill to craft operating procedures that were inclusive and efficient, and blend them into an overall strategy for developing and employing the organization's human capital. El Ceibo rotates leadership positions to make the sacrifices of service less onerous, and has developed a core technical staff who learn on the job by working with outside consultants whom they eventually replace.

Once organizations begin to create agreed-upon lines of authority, there is the practical problem of getting people to be accountable for work flow. For example, the president of one small intermediary organization had to file reports on their work at intervals to the IAF. "But how can I do my overview when no one gives me their program sections? No one comes through on time. Of course, our salaries are low and most of us have to work other jobs to make ends meet.

So I end up writing most of the report myself, after chasing them down."

It isn't simply a matter of meeting outside deadlines; it is also a question of internal coordination to reduce demands on staff overwhelmed by their individual assignments in the field. "We keep missing each other," complains one South American grassroots manager. "We're always coming and going, and there is only one motorcycle for all our programs. Sometimes I'm not sure when it will be back, so I can't tell people when to expect me. Sometimes another person heads off to a community I also need to visit, but I only find out when he's gotten back and it's too late." This group finally devised several workable solutions. A chalkboard was put up with everyone's name on it. Staff checked off the "in" column when they arrived, and on leaving wrote in the "out" column where they had to go and when they would return. A weekly meeting was held to plan the motorcycle schedule and to share critical information about program visits.

Managing resources: Managing money, equipment, and utility outlays is critical to survival when times are tight. Base groups frequently have problems because the treasurer mingles community funds with personal funds and loses track of which is which. The problem becomes more critical at the intermediary level as organizations become larger and more complex. Tendler et al. (1983) point out how stores and credit offices often fall apart as a "result of inadequate book-keeping and accounting" even though the "requirements do not seem overwhelming," because the groups had "no experience at it and little training in arithmetic." This opens opportunities for corruption, ranging from the treasurer who suddenly makes an expensive addition to his house, to an outside professional accountant who siphons off organization funds to his personal bank account.

Bebbington et al. (1992) expand the observation, noting that "at the administrative level, lack of expertise in modern accounting methods is perhaps the thorniest problem." While funds sometimes go "illicitly astray," more commonly it is "confused balance sheets" that create the appearance of wrongdoing. "Accusations feed counteraccusations, which eventually sap organizational cohesion."

The need for effective accounting is now almost universally recognized, but most training programs do not focus on the real and pressing needs of organizations. The real challenge is not to train a handful of staff in arcane concepts but to devise a simple, transparent system that enables members and beneficiaries as well as leaders to see clearly how money is being spent. This system should help cut costs and make decisions about investments based on returns, while reducing the temptation for a few insiders to raid the till (Bunch 1982).

A second area of concern involves maintenance and replacement of capital equipment. While common cultural traditions such as indigenous festivals and work groups can be tapped to build community centers or to keep public areas clean, communities often have difficulty when expensive machinery such as tractors or trucks are introduced.



This Mexican forestry manager from Asesoría Técnica a Comunidades Oaxaqueñas (ASETECO) measures and documents trunk widths before sending the wood to the factory.

Figuring out how to factor in depreciation costs and repairs and ensure regular maintenance is difficult when everyone is responsible and no one is accountable.

Managing information: This involves a number of essential tasks, from keeping files and records straight and preparing reports, to carrying out research for planning and evaluation. Grassroots managers face problems most managers don't face, such as keeping the files dry and clean so bugs will not destroy them, and out of the hands of children playing at the feet of their working parents because there is nowhere else to go.

A primary task is keeping information flowing smoothly from top to bottom and vice versa. Hearing what needs are from the field, letting people know what is happening with funds, coordinating activities, and assessing results are vital if confidence isn't to be undermined by rumors and schisms. But new managers, confident they won't grow remote be-

cause of the close contacts with communities they've come from, often find themselves overwhelmed by logistics. In one group, six programs had to share a single motorized canoe to reach member communities. Monitoring and implementation drifted when the outboard engine broke down or there was no money for gasoline. Even if the motor worked, things still could go awry. For example, a *dirigenta* had to decide between leaving her seriously ill child in uncertain care or missing a scheduled appointment with community leaders who had already begun walking or paddling upstream a full day to arrive at the meeting spot.

Understandably, staff often leave from the strain of their positions, creating a challenge in maintaining institutional memory. Other organizations have the same problem when they rotate key positions every few years to avoid "entrenched" leadership. One *dirigente* recalled walking into his new office, looking for materials to prepare him for his duties. "All I found," he says, "were empty bookcases and a few old files filled with bug-eaten paper; I had to start from scratch and learn everything myself." During the next two years, he learned valuable lessons about how to work with the communities he visited as well as the range of outsiders who came to his office. He wanted to put these ideas on paper for his successor, but there was never enough time. Now, two years later, he is too tired and concerned with paying off his own debts to train the next vice president, who will start over with almost no information.

MANAGING THE DIALOGUE ABOUT MANAGEMENT

Grassroots managers are at the front lines of Latin America's development process. If they are to succeed in their role as facilitators of change, they need the tools to do their job. Too often their preparation is minimal, and the organizational cultures they enter undermine rather than support on-the-job learning that enhances performance. That so many persevere despite the pressures of burnout and co-optation testifies to their individual commitment.

Given their centrality, it is amazing that grassroots managers have for so long remained virtually invisible. Part of the reason is that management theory is geared to well-resourced organizations in the public and private sector. Most training programs fail because they do not recognize that grassroots managers are pioneers in uncharted territory. The unique nature of their role requires careful rethinking about resources and training from the perspective of grassroots managers themselves. Many of the managers interviewed for this article articulately described their dilemmas. Some shared with us the solutions they had crafted with their colleagues to handle specific problems. Channels for gathering and disseminating that accumulated wisdom need to be developed so that new managers and new organizations do not have to start from scratch.

Intermediary organizations already struggling to fulfill their daily obligations cannot be expected to accomplish that on their own. Donors can play a key role by identifying successful programs and practices already developed by grassroots managers, and sponsoring a participatory dia-

logue among them that allows managers to explore their common problems and ideas for solutions. Such participatory research has already worked at the community level in targeted areas of grassroots development, resulting in such influential guides as *Two Ears of Corn* (Bunch 1982) for farmer-to-farmer extension services and *Helping Health Workers Learn* (Bower and Werner 1985) for community-based medical care. A similar process needs to be undertaken with the people who link community programs together across a wide spectrum of development activities. Parts of this process may already be under way, facilitated by the IAF and other organizations. But until grassroots managers find their generic voice and can make it heard, too many worthwhile project ideas will fail because organizations could not grow their human capital. ■

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¹ "Maria" in fact represents a composite of experiences related by a variety of grassroots managers during research by Kelly Rae Reineke in Brazil, Ecuador, Honduras, and the Caribbean.

² Sheldon Annis was one of the first to describe the forces spinning these webs, nearly a decade ago, in *Reorganization at the Grassroots: Its Origins and Meaning*, *Grassroots Development* Vol. 11:2.

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