

## BOOK REVIEWS – REVUE DES LIVRES

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Elizabeth O'Kelly : *Aid and Self-Help : A General Guide to Overseas Aid*. London : Charles Knight, 1973. x, 140 p., ill.

**Reviewed by Mark W. Delancey \***

The author describes this short book as an attempt to assist the general public and overseas volunteers in understanding why foreign aid given in time of disaster is often as great as the factor which prompted the aid. She also argues that developing countries should be allowed to plan and direct their development programs, that there should be stress on self-help and co-operative effort in development plans, and that mechanization should be avoided wherever possible in those countries that have a surplus of labourers.

The book is divided into three sections - a discussion of international aid in time of man-made and natural disasters, a description of overseas aid in non-disaster situation and a case study of a self-help co-operatives program that the author planned and directed for several years in Bamenda Province of the then British Cameroons. An appendix lists the names and addresses of organizations involved in overseas aid programs.

Elizabeth O'Kelly has been intimately involved with aid projects for a long period, eleven years as a community development officer in the British colonial administration of Cameroon, three years in Sarawak as an advisor on women's institutes and almost two years in Viet Nam as a director of a refugee organization. The book is largely a product of her experience, and it profits from the lessons she has learned.

O'Kelly differentiates between natural disasters, such as earthquake, and man-made disasters, such as civil wars. In natural disaster the rich and powerful suffer as greatly as the poor and powerless, but in man-made disasters the rich are usually able to escape the consequences. One suspects that the rich take a keener interest in aid operations for natural disasters. Of greater importance, argues the author, the political and propaganda aspects of man-made disasters make relief aid much more difficult and unappreciated. Certainly, the problems involved in the relief operations during the Biafran situation illustrate this. In natural disasters a quick assessment of the damage can be made, needs assessed and appropriate action taken ; in man-made disasters these steps are often rendered difficult by the political overtones. This dichotomy is rather weak. The famine in Ethiopia was a natural disaster, but, the initial reactions of the Selassie government had, in purpose and effects, results not unlike those O'Kelly describes as pertaining to man-made disasters.

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The author makes several important points about disaster aid - the need to understand the sensitivities of host government officials, the need for professionally-skilled volunteers rather than simply another pair of untrained hands, and the inappropriateness of most material aid sent from abroad as part of disaster relief efforts. Her proposal for the establishment of a « two-tier relief corps » (national units in each country and an international, mobile unit at the United Nations) is an excellent idea deserving very serious consideration.

In general, the section of the book on disaster relief is worth reading.

The second section of the book is much weaker and less useful than the first. The discussion of foreign aid in non-disaster situations is an attempt to cover too many subjects (or a subject too complicated) in too few pages. O'Kelly considers the problems of world population growth (p. 38) and environmental destruction (p. 39) in one paragraph each. The political aspects of aid are considered so briefly as to lend an appearance of naiveté. In an eight-page chapter on the importance of social and religious customs she attempts to point out those cultural aspects of Asia and Africa which differ from those of Europe and might affect development projects. In so doing in such a short chapter the author uses sweeping generalizations and stereotypes, with all of the error that such a procedure must incur. She violates by demonstration her major premise, that one should understand the culture of the people with whom one is working.

In this chapter and in the one titled « Personnel for work Overseas » the reader is given some insights into the attitudes of an ex-British colonial officer, a certain ethnocentrism blended with strong paternalism, a regret that colonial days have passed away, and — sadly — an occasional lack of understanding of the peoples with whom she has worked for many years. In a later chapter she writes that young men in Cameroon work for short periods on plantations « to earn enough money to buy a wife ». (p. 100). That misinterpretation of African marriage customs — « to buy a wife » — was disposed of long ago. Research into labour longevity at the Cameroon plantations indicates that men stay an average of six years and that the « target worker » concept is not applicable.

Much of this section reads like a primer for volunteers embarking on overseas duty. Yet, because of its brevity and the sweeping generalizations it contains, it will be of little use to such people. This rapid trip around the world of strange customs cannot assist the volunteer assigned to India, Viet Nam or Cameroon; a thirty or forty page chapter on each country might do so. There are projects suggested for volunteers in rural areas. These are thought-provoking, but the author imparts too little about the needs and problems of each project to allow a volunteer to read and then go to work.

In the third section of the book, « A Project in the Cameroon », O'Kelly describes and analyses her attempts to develop corn mill

societies in Bamenda Province in the 1950s. The author effectively illustrates several of the points she made in the previous parts of the book — the importance of careful planning and the need for understanding the culture of the people involved, the concept of self-help and involvement of those the project is to aid in the actual running of the project, the value of co-operative effort, the need for small-scale projects in proportion to community needs, and the avoidance of complicated technologies and overwhelming doses of mechanization. However, it appears that one of O'Kelly's cardinal principles was neglected in this case ; there is no indication that the people of Cameroon were involved in the planning of the project. Yet, on the dust-cover we are told that this book is « a plea that the developing countries should be allowed to determine their own development in their own way and at their own pace ». O'Kelly has given us an example of a well-meaning, but paternalistic, colonial officer laying a project on « her people ». The project seemed to work, and therefore it is deemed successful in the eyes of its originator.

Unfortunately, a valuable opportunity for long-term evaluation of a development project has been missed in this study. Here is an undertaking begun in 1952. The author's direction of the project ends in 1960 or 1961, and so, too, her description of the project virtually ends at this point. The time just prior to independence, independence and the years since that time are discussed in two and one-quarter pages ! Did the corn mill societies last ? Did the co-operative stores idea take hold and provide services throughout the Bamenda area ? To use a term common in the literature today, did these innovations become « institutionalized » ? Did they really take hold and become a part of the people's culture ? Perhaps the author could not afford a trip to Cameroon to observe the results of her project some years after she had turned it over to Cameroon leadership, but she certainly could have made some sort of inquiry. The brief comments she gives us on this important aspect are very disappointing.

Overall, then, the book is unsatisfactory. The most serious criticism is the brevity of the book, or one might argue that it is the over-ambitious task the author has set for herself. The section on disaster relief is the most useful part of the book ; the other sections are weak. However, O'Kelly does make some important comments on aid and the aid process. Her argument for small-scale projects, in tune with local needs and culture, and her demand for local leadership must be considered as critical elements in successful development projects. This is a study of the micro-aspects of aid, and that is one aspect of aid studies that has been too often missing. She does not consider the other end of the scale, the macro-aspects of aid. There is no discussion of aid and its role in the current international environment. Do the micro-aspects of aid really matter in a world organized and structured as the world is today ?