

I hope this note will be useful for AIDers, especially the project and overall coordinators of AID chapters -- both new and old. Project quality is one of the most important things in AID and with so many NGOs out there and the different levels of excitement and motivation that we go through with time, the job of a project coordinator is not so easy. Below I have compiled some of my experiences over the years and it may be useful to you all....

--Ravi

Looking Back at AID Projects

It is tough to classify projects meaningfully from a more practical decision making point of view than the subject and state-wise categorization. But sometimes it is good to think of projects from/with:

- a) From very new NGO/groups or individuals or students in India wanting to do something.
- b) with established NGOs that are reasonably big
- c) with movements and struggles and NGOs working in solidarity.

Each has its charms and challenges, potentials for success and failures. Likewise in each category there may be several projects, how do we choose among those?

- a) From Start-Up groups/small NGOs/individuals:

This is usually a few motivated individuals wanting to do something, or have started something, and who have through some personal contacts or through some other NGO or just by chance gotten in touch with AID. The budgets they are handling is probably a few thousand or tens of thousands of Rupees that they are collecting locally or putting in themselves while volunteering. So AID help to them would actually go a long way and help define their progress. This is the exciting bit -- that we were the first group that found them and that we would grow together in some way. The plans they make would be both idealistic and realistic -- there would be a dream and also there would be the immediate work at hand. The budget they make will probably have many gaps, will probably be at most a lakh and it will be very negotiable, in the sense that they may have thrown in some high budget items (due to the dream) but even if we find that impractical and say we won't be able to fund that it would be fine. In fact some items they won't be sure why they are writing those, other items that need to be there, they might miss.

Now the major challenges would be for us to figure out if the group will pull through and survive even if we were to fund it. We can only guess by discussing with them as to whether the key members or volunteers will be around for some years, plans to get more people involved etc. Usually their answers will be truthful -- they won't be able to commit anything but some things we can see -- are at least a couple of them going to be there in that area and do they have the motivation (for example if they are students when will they graduate).

The other challenges are -- will the work go well because they don't have much experience. Because an AID collaboration will represent a new level of funds and work even if they have been around on their own for a year or two. Here usually the group will be very positive it can do the stuff as it's a short term plan and can be made based on current enthusiasm of all its members.

The final challenge is that how to send them the money -- as they won't have FCRA. This has to be sorted.

Ok so we sort all these and support them. Usually a wise decision is a small investment of around Rs 100,000 maximum. Care should be taken to tell them many times that whatever local support they are getting they should continue to solicit that as it is a dependable source of their funds and that is what has put them in today's position, so it is very valuable. We will be really looking forward to hear from them -- after 6 months, after a year. So many questions. Did they survive. Did what they planned work out, what did and what didn't. Did the AID support make a difference? What is the status of their ability to survive the next few years (human resource wise, volunteer wise) etc.

These questions are important because we could potentially provide them funds again but do they have the rest of the pieces to continue the work? Again their longterm answers will be sketchy but some progress will definitely be there in the effort.... this will tell us whether the future is optimistic or not. If it seems ok we should continue support maybe at a slightly higher level if needed but under Rs 1,50,000 generally.

3 years pass like this, then what? Somewhere in the 2-4 year period the effort will make a quantum jump. Something they did will work out very well that has motivated them and they have survived and will now grow!! A field visit by us and seeing the success of their work will also motivate us. Expect bigger budgets, more concrete plans from them. This is the time to also recommend to them to look for other groups for support as well. AID should try and support as much as it can, for after all that was why we were supporting them -- to come to this stage. Every year will bring growth and consolidation this is becoming a longterm effort or Focus Village/Effort.

On the other hand things may look down on their 3rd or 4th year and it may be time to reduce budgets and eventually say goodbye to the project. This is pretty sad, not only for AID here but also for the group in India which has come to a similar realization. Sometimes the

group in India may continue in its small way as it did before AID and that is very good if it does that.

The thing is as project coordinators with start-up projects both outcomes are likely and do not represent failure. The group's work even if it didn't survive -- while it did something was probably good and the difference it made would still count. In fact visiting there several years later will bring back memories of work we did there and it will be graciously remembered by those that it helped.

Coming back to those that have grown -- the key challenge here is to maintain the history so that the different project coordinators and chapters that this NGO goes through are excited by the history and can understand the present based on it. Otherwise how can AID establish a longterm collaboration if a new chapter doesn't know this long history of collaboration? How is this chapter going to differentiate this with another project proposal it gets?? Also this is one of the key reasons for taking the Focus Effort concept up -- chapters should really understand that Focus Villages or Efforts of AID are special because not always are all documents of AID kept properly nor is there time to read everything even if they are all there somewhere.

Examples where there was growth:

Lodhar School -- It started with a Mahendra -- an AIDER in MD -- going as a junior faculty member to IIT-Kanpur and then linking with Vivekananda Samiti there that was a group of students doing some coaching classes to labour children and expanding that to the nearby villages via AID help. Their first support came from AID and it was like this for almost the first 4-5 years. We started with classes under a tree in Lodhar, then next year was a 1.5 room low cost school, then the year after was adding a room every year and looking for honorariums for teachers etc. Now the school has till Class 8. In the fifth year or so ASHA also joined in and maybe ILP too. AID has supported every year slowly increasing and then levelling off. Their dream is to become for UP like Ekalavya is for MP. Mahendra's getting a permanent position in IIT-Kanpur and also of one more person there were key to their stability.

Vimukthi -- This was a group of TISS Graduates all in their early twenties and just out of college wanting to do something in villages near Raichur. They assembled about 5 people from Mumbai, Kerala etc, via the NBA and TISS connections and together they wanted to do something. Again AID was the first group that supported them and this was the key. Their work with dalit women, and then watershed and then income generating activities to make terra cotta jewellery is remarkable. We are in 3rd or 4th year of support now. Another funding agency also supported them in the 2nd or 3rd year. Their plans are to create self-sustaining women's groups and movements and move on to newer villages.

Vasantha Cancer -- This was one person whose mother passed away due to cancer who started the trust and with strong motivation. There was some very small support and solidarity from AID and everything else was his personal resources. The effort has really grown -- he has gotten many of his doctor friends involved, does grassroots fundraising in India through concerts and with AID help has conducted camps in villages and

in coimbatore and Mumbai. Now is planning to start a mobile cancer unit to be able to go deeper in villages. It is amazing to see that at fundraising concerts organized by Dr Ramanathan people like Sunil Dutt speak, the auditorium is full -- and to think that a few years back he was just one person working. Currently AID has the proposal from him for the Mobile Cancer Unit and that JHU is probably looking into and may need 1 more chapter to look into.

There are other examples of successes like Grass/Aid-India Srikakulam effort etc.

Examples where things didnt grow as well:

Vikalp -- This is a small group of organic farmers in a remote tribal village. Mainly the lack of FCRA meant that we couldnt really figure out a way of supporting this though for 1-2 years in between we found some way of doing this. The effort in India too couldnt really galvanize perhaps because we couldnt come through as well as we could have due to the lack of FCRA.

Rajahmundry Schools: We started with a small "island" in godavari for classes for children of fisher folk. The idea was to extend to several other such islands that form in godavari off Rajahmundry that are submerged during the monsoons but fisher people come back to them once the lands open up. We had to close the classes after 1.5 years though the classes were going well on this one island these couldnt be expanded -- there wasnt that much commitment/local ability on the ground. SO children were all put in regular schools of Rajahmundry -- the classes helped in making this happen and the project was closed.

Even today AID gets projects from such small groups or motivated individuals. Hopefully this will help in developing those.

Looking Back at AID Projects: Part 2...

b) From established NGOs reasonably big:

An NGO that has been around for some years, that has some campus, staff, volunteers and programs, FCRA status, annual report and perhaps even a web-site and email address is perhaps the most likely applicant for an AID project. Because of these it is able to locate AID web-site or some volunteer of AID and then manages to bring to table a proposal. Often times for new chapters and volunteers it is exciting to receive a proposal and visit the NGO as it has enough people to make these arrangements. Major concerns for AID are the quality of NGOs work, involvement of the village people in the planning and execution of the project, and the relevance of our small support of a few thousand dollars while the NGO itself may have annual budgets of \$50,000-\$500,000.

Normally we tend to ignore the last two concerns and focus on the proposal at hand and what we can support. Proposals are usually ones to do with education, health, micro-credit, or livelihoods, same kind of things that we see in many proposals. Lot of these areas are where NGOs have skills/training and they are applying them to the villages. The major question of course is that even without our support they seem to be doing it what difference will we make to such big NGOs that have

government support and big funding agencies supporting them already. Its a good question without an easy good answer.

We end up choosing some of these proposals to support. I would say then we may as well choose those in geographical areas where we need to be but have a low presence... like in North India or even in some districts of southern states.

The other thing is to look for some innovative proposals. However this should be done with a lot of caution because most big NGOs are not so good at innovative things -- they probably end up sending high budget proposals with a lot of confidence but which wont really serve the purpose - for example a major marketing proposal that says they will achieve self-sufficiency and profits in 3 years for developing some livelihood at a big scale. But they will actually keep needing funds to run this while the output products will be there they will be highly subsidized. Then we may as well have tried this at a smaller scale with a smaller NGO. A big NGO usually plans things in a big scale, even if it is being tried out for the first time by it. During project review, we should try to scale it down when we work on innovative things with big NGOs.

There is one category of proposals from big NGOs that may be worth looking into -- where they are addressing local needs -- of that geographic region -- they probably are doing that work with the involvement of local people and it is probably good. SO it wont be a project that is based on our skills -- like health, education etc -- but probably something based on the need of that area -- water or if it is health something specific to that region. A proposal that is motivated by the special conditions that village or region is facing rather than overall literacy or other usual indicators, will probably be interesting.

I am not saying the usual work in education, health, micro-credit etc of big NGOs isnt good, though there is a decrease in quality owing to the scale. It is just that it goes on without needing AID support. What really is of interest with big NGOs after some initial contact, site-visit and support is the exchange of views, vision and ideas -- they also know AID support is small but they are attracted by our volunteers with dedication as in the past some of them may also have been like us in the USA or working and quit to do this work. Likewise we can discuss with them ideology, plans etc. Some big NGOs have in fact told us that they dont necessarily need our support but would like to keep in touch with us. SO if some volunteers of AID have taken to some big NGO and have gone beyond the funding discussions to other things that may lead to using some of their infrastructure and local resources or evolving together something. Sometimes it may just be keeping each other involved. In fact resources of big NGOs are often used by smaller local NGOs -- like for meeting places etc.

On the other hand there are some big NGOs that keep sending us several proposals every year and we really need to talk to them of non-funding relationships if they are good and we relate to one another well, and about the fact that AID doesnt really have so much money.

Thus a relationship could evolve with some big NGOs where AID funding neednt be done every year but we nevertheless have good communication

and contact with them. That is how a meaningful longterm collaboration with Big NGOs is likely to evolve into Focus Villages/Efforts.

EXAMPLES where it worked well:

i) BCT -- We have been working with them for 10 years. But have supported them only in some of these years. However we have developed a meaningful relationship over the years. Initially our support was from some generic project proposal. Then we found that a lady -- Susila -- from the USA with experience of working with handicapped children was going to volunteer there for a few years with a vision to set up BCTs handicapped unit which didnt really take off till then. There were no funds in this direction from other agencies as BCTs fundraising was not strong also in this direction as it hadnt taken off. AID stepped in and supported for a \$3000 or so for a couple of years and that made a big difference. The handicapped program really developed in BCT and got other funding as well. Then we again didnt support them for a couple of years and then supported ERMU their fledgling marketing unit. This also worked quite well and Suresh who set this was in good touch with AID. This was again a small support \$4000-5000 annually for 2 years. Meanwhile we kept in touch with the handicapped unit -- visiting them, and giving some orders of khadi clothes etc that the handicapped childrens tailoring unit was developing to feed to the Mumbai Eco shop. Dr P. Rao attended the AID-India conf in chennai, and on invitation from AID visited the USA and launched RIM. The suggestion that RIM take up village level fellowships support came from Dr Bhagat based on our saathi program and has become the mainstay of RIM. Dr Rao approached us with the new Balamandiram program and village schools programs. We approached the balamandiram at a smaller scale than pbly BCT would have hoped and suggested that there be some self-employment opportunities and more volunteerism for the village level workers of this program. Some of these suggestions were taken seriously. When Suryanarayana, a worker of BCT returned to his native Srikakulam village to initiate the AID-India/GRass effort there we approached BCT to use their FCRA and they agreed -- we took 2 years to make this request (sometimes communication isnt easy as we may feel reluctant to ask a favour) and they agreed but by then AID-India got its FCRA. ARavinda worked to set up an interns program with BCT one summer which went well.

ii) Vidyanvahini -- We had very good communication with Madhukar Deshpande right away. We supported VV's mobile science lab for only 1-2 years though we have kept in touch with them for 10 years. Madhukar helped AID right from the start connecting us with various other people and groups and putting in good words. AID also keptijn touch with Ashok of VV who is the mobile science lab instructor. Ashok came to the narmada valley and srikakulam and did his science demonstrations at our request. 2 years ago Ashok broached the idea of developing watershed in his native village -- Surodi -- along lines of Anna Hazare's work. This would again be something small and new that is starting with only AID support. The project was approved and Surodi's watershed work is going real well through the gramsabha. Vidyanvahini has taken it under its umbrella and FCRA. We wanted to replicate the idea of mobile lab in other states and Madhukar and others were very willing to work with us though it has not materialized yet due to our volunteer resources having other work at hand. We discovered that

Madhukar was also a strong supporter of the Narmada and other peoples movements for several years and Madhukar saw how AID really was able to put the movements on its agenda where other groups he worked with or knew in the USA hadnt been able to, and this really meant AID was special to him and he is always ready to help us.

iii) Swanirvar -- Sujit, like MADhukar also mentioned quite early I think, that AID support was not to be the main reason for collaboration but other ideological things. When John Matthias made the video of swanirvar they used it very effectively for their fundraising -- pbly even more than AID has used it for its fundraising. Sujits involvement with progressive groups in WB, the low-cost swanirvar toilets and their kitchen gardens were things we could learn and try to use in out work in other projects.

Other Examples:

There are several big NGO projects that we have done for 1-3 years or so and then havent continued collaboration on a monetary or non-monetary level. Sometimes we approve very usual projects from big NGOs without too much thinking on why we are doing this. There are also other examples where it is working well -- I havent listed all obviously.

Looking Back at AID Projects: Part 3...

c) From Struggles/Movements and NGOs in solidarity with them:

People's struggles and movements often take up pressing local issues, the village people organize themselves and spend a lot of time, effort and energy. Lots of time the focus of the struggles is on reclaiming rights and making changes in the way the govt. programs or policies are running. Struggles unite people and achieve changes at this important level. Those working in struggles are also aware of the need to do specific constructive projects in the villages -- both that could be connected with the struggle -- for example if struggle is on land, water and energy what are the alternatives -- and those that may not be directly related to the struggle -- like education, health. City volunteers/leaders as well as village volunteers and leaders of struggles are well aware that of the importance of projects in villages.

Usually struggles do not have infrastructure or resources and may even lack expertise in constructive work. What they have is a huge voluntary base in the villages and a strong sense of social justice and equity in what they do. So the marriage between NGOs and struggles is a good one - NGOs normally do not have the kind of voluntary force and commitment the struggles have, but they have the know-how to pull off some constructive projects.

So what we find is that every struggle draws NGOs and people who are interested in constructive work. The struggles also define windows of opportunities where the synergy of the people for a particular work along with talent required to accomplish it is in sync. So we tune into struggles and find these opportunities to get very good projects done

along with NGOs in India.

So we provide funds, the NGO the expertise and the struggle the voluntary force and the overall framework of the thinking behind the project and the linkages to the pressing issues that it is working with. The net result is project work that is perhaps the best. In many cases we also are in solidarity with struggles and lot of AID volunteers have taken the issues up here in the USA and have called or written to govts in India in connection with them.

The major things we need to be aware of are that lots of things are coming into place together -- the NGOs, the struggle, the specific project idea and the local issue -- so the timing is crucial. If we delay too much and take too long to approve the project the opportunity could pass. The same pressure applies to the NGO that is pbly not in the region of the struggle but was drawn to it. It needs to send its personal and commit itself to the opportunity as well.

The other thing is that the project proposals will naturally come from the NGO that is really implementing the project -- however the proposal in isolation of the struggle cannot be understood. Why this proposal at this time can only be understood if AID has awareness of the struggle as well.

As we work with a struggle and associated NGOs we will find that greater confidence builds in all -- and more proposals and opportunities come our way. Once again there may not appear to be too much pattern in them unless the history of the struggle and the various situations that give rise to various proposals are understood.

The importance to AID for proposals associated with struggles is very clear. There are very few NGOs that work with struggles, there are not many struggles that AID comes across, and there are hardly any funding agencies that are in solidarity with struggles as they do not have the confidence that their donor base would understand struggles and also it takes effort and energy to understand and work with struggles that they may not have put in. AID is perhaps the only Indian organization in the USA that supports hundreds of projects and also has open solidarity with struggles. ANd remarkably the best work that we have done, I feel is with struggles. So it is an ideal situation where there is a niche application for AID -- supporting projects of NGOs associated with struggles works very well.

For the village person struggle is something that is theirs that they relate to. The NGO that comes through the struggle is someone that has understood them who they will be happy to work with. They will keep a watch on the NGO they will ensure that the NGOs work is of high quality and they will plan the work along with the NGO. If the NGOs work isnt good the struggle and the people wont really work with the NGO as why should they invest their time? This ensures accountability.

In a successful collaboration, a Struggle, corresponding NGOs and AID will naturally work together year after year and the work will be unusual, out of the ordinary. Many of the proposals will be unique and the collaboration will pull off things at low cost and very quickly. It is not a surprise that all Jeevansaathis are working with movements/ struggles and often such proposals will come from saathis and

JeevanSaathis. From AID end recognition of the niche importance of struggles to AID and the need to act promptly should be there. There should be confidence that previous work with struggles has produced the best projects.

Examples of some high quality work with struggles/movements:

i) Inspired by Narmada struggle and through AID-India and BSFC: We developed the Pedal generator which put us on the map of alternate energy. In consultation with us, a IIT-Bombay student developed a working proto-type. A factory in Vadodara which is aware of the Narmada Movement agreed to produce it and we now it is available on mailorder to any place in India. It is applicable for lighting schools and meeting places. Then we linked with People's School of Energy and BSFC and did the 15 KW micro-hydro project to light up all houses and hamlets of the tribal village Bilgaon in the Narmada valley. The Rural Devpt minister of Maharashtra appreciated it. This had many visitors including several govt engineers who want to replicate it, Ashutosh Gowrikar (director of Lagaan looking for film ideas) etc. A whole village is now lighted through people's energy -- a first for Maharashtra. We are now planning on using day-time energy for livelihood creation, drinking water pumping, afforestation etc. The alternate energy effort in Narmada valley is not only a Focus for AID and AID-India but also is drawing a number of movements and NGOs. A number of newspapers have written on this work.

ii) Micahel and Swati's Mozda work via AID India and BSFC: Linking with children of Gandhian parents who decided to live in a village while also opposing environmental degradation and pollution of village resources M and S are part of PSS, a struggle that has several such youth from Gandhian families. The watershed work in Mozda, the eco-shop in Mumbai and support for testing water quality in villages is work of AID that has increased the water table in tribal villages in Narmada District of Gujarat as well as has recently won an award.

iii) Inspired by TNSF - HBP via AID-India: We linked with the people's science movements that drew volunteers from universities and science teaching backgrounds to initiate literacy movements in several states of India via training several village-level volunteers in the 1980s. Through several years of building confidence on one another and visiting and understanding each others work and small projects we took key roles in the Hundred Block Plan (HBP) with an aim to replicate TNSFs work on malnutrition in several blocks in TN and Bihar and as it develops to other states in India as well. Like in the above 2 examples, the large volunteer force is a highlight which is able to not only collect data of nutrition and weight levels but also provide door to door counselling of parents that makes parents aware of how to distribute their food between children and what nutritious foods they should buy or make from local produce. The malnutrition pgm is ranked in UNICEFs top ten around the world. Work also includes setting women's savings and micro-credit programs and women's meetings.

CONCLUSION:

This concludes the three categories of AID projects and experiences

based on the past. There are many NGOs and projects out there and the amount of AID funds are small. But if we can identify crucial ones and support them then our resources will be used imaginatively and strategically to create a big change. Hope this has been useful send me your comments etc if any.

--Ravi