



How Relevant Is Global Thinking?

Is a global perspective superfluous to your daily work? These real-life examples may change your mind.

BY BONNIE KOENIG

“We don't need a more global perspective. What we need is help in our own backyard!"
“Taking a trip to Rio to learn the lessons of poverty is vicarious and unnecessary.”

You've heard these statements and others like them. Somehow we separate ourselves into those who are enthusiastic about “global thinking” and those who see it as irrelevant to their day-to-day activities. But why the need for such polarization? Do “global thinking” and practical local help have to be mutually exclusive?

Some Examples of Practical Solutions

Many nonprofit organizations throughout the U.S. are discovering that global thinking can strengthen their own local programs and provide breakthrough solutions. And more and more we are discovering that we can look outside our own country for helpful models. Let's take a look at some practical examples.

The Women's Self Employment Project (WSEP), a Chicago-based organization which lends women money to run small businesses, took as one of its models the Bangladesh's Grameen Bank. WSEP's founders were looking for creative alternatives to traditional job training when they heard about Grameen. They borrowed these essentials from the Grameen model:

- giving short-term loans
- requiring frequent repayments
- organizing women in groups to provide support
- using group peer pressure to ensure repayment rather than demanding collateral.

For the first few years, they followed the Grameen model fairly closely, supported by a visit from Grameen Bank's founder. Then they made some changes to stream-

line the program to the Chicago environment. These adaptations included:

- providing more flexibility to the number of women in a support group
- providing more business training at the beginning of the program.

Connie Evans, WSEP's president, notes the importance of publicizing their model. This publicity led the U.S. government to recognize that extending microcredit to women isn't just an issue they should focus on “over there” through international aid programs. Rather, it's an important economic development tool domestically.

WSEP's use of the Grameen model inspired a series of exchanges between the two organizations' staffs. These interactions led to valuable cross-cultural learning experiences and collaborations with counterparts elsewhere in the world. One product of these collaborations was an educational video on the business practices on women in Senegal, West Africa.

The National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC), based in St. Paul, Minnesota, draws on its staff members' backgrounds and its experiences with programs in Somalia to design its American-based programs. NYLC is committed to engaging young people through innovation in learning, leadership, service, and public policy. According to NYLC's vice president, Wokie Weah, NYLC advances a new vision of youth, community, and learning borrowed from all cultural backgrounds. NYLC shares the belief of many African cultures that true community grows in the hearts of people involved in a collective group.

Based on a successful youth service project in Somalia, NYLC incorporated Somalia's “Gathering of Elders” idea into its annual National Service-Learning Conference to recognize the importance of elders in creating and sustaining communities of learning. NYLC also incorporates the African art of storytelling (based on a



tradition of oral history) into its youth camps and professional seminars.

The Union Institute, based in Ohio, works to strengthen the U.S. nonprofit sector and its capacity to deal with public-policy issues. Dr. Mark Rosenman of the Washington office explains that his work has profited from the lessons of citizen engagement in the new democracies of Eastern Europe and South Africa. "Inspiration, as well as useful ideas about engaging young people and others, can be found in other countries," he notes. "There is a certain earnestness and political activism with a small 'p' that we sometimes lose in our struggle to obtain resources and keep services flowing."

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) launched its Lessons Without Borders program in 1994. This program is designed to bring home lessons that USAID learned in over three decades of work overseas. It was clear that many of the low-tech, back-to-basics approaches used in developing countries could be applied to similar problems in the U.S. According to Karen Anderson of USAID, "In virtually every country in which we work, we must overcome barriers of language, religion, and cultural mores. We have had much success where we have sought to understand the people with whom we work and incorporated their ideas and solutions into our approaches to solving problems."

As a result of Lessons Without Borders, community-development professionals in Boston, Baltimore, and Seattle have "rediscovered" many low-cost, creative approaches to reaching their clients and more effectively delivering basic services. As Karen Anderson explains, "Whether you're working in health, economic development, housing, or education, the bottom line is how effective you are in reaching and serving your intended clients.

"We in the resource-rich U.S. have lost sight of basic solutions to our problems."

Through Lessons Without Borders, many domestic development professionals are finding new and creative ways to overcome barriers resulting from diverse cultures, religions, and languages. International development professionals work in countries where resources are scarce and, therefore, must develop creative, low-cost ways to achieve their goals. Here in the U.S., we are resource rich and have lost sight of many basic solutions to our problems. Lessons Without Borders oftentimes reminds us of what we already know and reinforces the back-to-basics approach to solving problems."

Management Sciences for Health, based in Boston, applies international lessons to U.S. health-care. Its programs focus in the following areas:

- using part-time community volunteers to educate people about health care
- strengthening management systems based on techniques that were developed overseas but that are applicable to U.S. community-based health-care groups
- sponsoring conferences with speakers from other countries
- matching the work of health-care professionals in developing countries to the needs of immigrant populations from the same countries in the U.S.

Gayle Price of Management Sciences notes that tying "lessons from overseas" to priority problems in the U.S. in tangible ways makes all the difference. When speakers or experts from overseas can demonstrate real solutions to problems faced by American communities,

skeptics are convinced. She tells the story of one participant on an overseas trip who at first doubted that the experience would be worthwhile but then saw communities thriving in ways that could benefit his own community.

Price suggests that those who share her global mindset shouldn't try to "sell" this idea to skeptics. Instead, she urges, identify key issues; then pinpoint tools other cultures are using to address those issues.

The Local-Global Connection

These are just a few of the many U.S. nonprofits that are discovering that being engaged in the larger global nonprofit community can be very beneficial to carrying out their local missions. As these examples show, there are real benefits to "thinking globally and acting locally"! ■

Selected References

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Smith, George, "How We Don't Communicate," *Nonprofit World*, March-April 1998.

These publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center (608-274-9777).

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