
THE INTERNATIONAL OUTREACH OF U.S. NGOS

*By Robert Kellett
Online Managing Editor
Mercy Corps*



U.S. nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and their counterparts abroad promote participatory democracy, economic development and long-term stability worldwide, according to Robert Kellett, Online Managing Editor for Mercy Corps and a freelance writer living in Portland, Oregon. Mercy Corps describes itself as a nonprofit organization “that exists to alleviate suffering, poverty, and oppression by helping people build secure, productive, and just communities.” The agency’s programs currently reach over 5 million people in more than 30 countries, including the United States.

Ibrahim used to dread the walk. Every day, the 11-year-old would wake before sunrise and begin the lonely trek that took him over the rugged terrain of his native Eritrea until finally, after three hours and more than 11 kilometers, he would reach his elementary school just in time for classes to begin.

Tired and exhausted, the only thing that hurt worse than his calloused, bare feet was the gnawing pain of his empty, hungry stomach. Like many children in this impoverished, drought-ravaged eastern African country, Ibrahim’s parents could only afford to feed him one meal per day. So he was left to fend for himself, often attending a full day of classes and walking more than 20 kilometers back and forth to school before taking his first bite of food for the day.

Even though he was an honor student and considered by his teachers to be one of the brightest children in the entire school, Ibrahim was on the verge of dropping out.

“I was too hungry and too tired to learn,” he says. “I stayed home to make sure that I got something to eat.”

His dream of someday becoming a doctor was on the verge of ending before he even became a teenager.

In March 2002, Mercy Corps, an American nongovernmental organization (NGO) headquartered in Portland, Oregon, began a school-feeding program designed to assist children like Ibrahim. Each school

day, more than 54,000 boys and girls throughout Eritrea receive high-energy, nutritious biscuits at their schools. The results have been nothing short of phenomenal with dramatic increases in school attendance and student performance in schools across the country.

For Ibrahim, the food at school has made a world of difference. He is back in school and once again earning the highest grades in his class.

While the school feeding program’s primary goal might seem obvious — feeding hungry students so that they can continue their education — there is also another subtler goal that isn’t as easy to see, but in many ways is just as important. Every day, Mercy Corps staff works closely to implement the project with staff from Vision Eritrea, a local Eritrean NGO that focuses on community-based development programs, and the Ministry of Education. Together, they are also helping to train Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) so that parents in local communities can have more input in their children’s education and the future of their communities.

This transfer of knowledge will have benefits that will last long after the programs that Mercy Corps and roughly half a dozen other American organizations operate in Eritrea come to an end.

“U.S. NGOs have learned over the years that for any kind of program to be effective, whether it is responding to an emergency or long-term programs

in areas such as health, education, agricultural reform and economic development, there needs to be a healthy civil society,” says Mercy Corps Executive Vice-President Nancy Lindborg. “By working in partnership with local associations, government authorities, other NGOs and private businesses, we believe that they can be better positioned to identify and work towards solutions to their most pressing problems. The ultimate goal is to help the various actors in a society interact with one another to solve problems peacefully for the common good.”

In this age of instantaneous communication where images of disasters and war are beamed by satellites into homes around the world, it would be easy to associate the work of U.S. aid agencies only with emergency relief. Around the world, American aid workers labor under often grueling and difficult conditions to assist individuals and families struggling to survive the aftermath of natural disasters and wars. U.S. NGOs provide critical food, water and medicines that literally save the lives of hundreds of thousands each year.

What is often not seen on television and what doesn't often appear in the newspapers is the work that U.S. NGOs and their local counterparts are doing to promote participatory democracy, economic development, and long-term stability worldwide. From projects that provide AIDS education in Africa to microcredit lending in the Balkans to democracy building in the former Soviet Union, U.S. NGOs are playing a critical role in improving the welfare of millions around the world.

InterAction, the largest alliance of U.S.-based international development and humanitarian nongovernmental organizations, is made up of more than 160 member organizations that operate programs in every developing country in the world. These organizations are helping individuals to overcome poverty, exclusion and suffering by advancing social justice and basic dignity for all.

“There are myriad examples of how basic assistance has improved people's lives,” InterAction President Mary McClymont said in an interview last year. “Smallpox was eradicated in 1977; over the last 30

years, illiteracy has been reduced by 20 percent; life expectancy has increased by 20 years; river blindness, which killed hundreds of thousands of people throughout Africa, has been virtually eliminated. These kinds of things are going on all over the world because of development assistance.”

U.S. international NGOs as a rule strive to be politically neutral and independent. Most of the NGOs receive funding support for their international projects from a variety of sources including corporations, governments, faith groups, the United Nations agencies, and international institutions such as the World Bank. In addition, the organizations collectively receive close to \$3 billion in donations per year from individual American citizens and private donors.

One region where U.S. NGOs have played an especially important role in helping to empower individuals and groups over the past decade has been in Central Asia. By almost any measure, civil society in Central Asia has grown, if not flourished, in the decade following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. From a few hundred scattered, informal groupings of citizens during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the nongovernmental sector in Central Asia has grown exponentially, and now encompasses over 10,000 organizations of varying sorts, from small, community-based organizations and initiative groups to large, regional NGOs with full-time staff and multiple offices.

As a result, individuals and groups who have often been marginalized — the disabled, single mothers, the elderly, refugees, ethnic minorities — have gained a new voice through the formation of local NGOs and community groups. In turn, these groups have received invaluable support from U.S. NGOs which have provided direct funding assistance, training, and technical support that has made the voice of Central Asian NGOs even stronger.

The combined efforts of U.S. and local NGOs can be seen in communities across the Ferghana Valley, an impoverished and ethnically diverse region where the twisting borders of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan meet. People living in the Ferghana

Valley have experienced their share of hardships since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and communities continue to face problems such as access to clean water, adequate health care, and crumbling schools.

Where local and national governments are often unable to assist communities to meet their basic needs, community members have begun to take matters into their own hands. With grants and technical support from a number of U.S. NGOs, community groups in the Ferghana Valley are working to fix schools, overcome ethnic differences, care for disabled children, advocate for legal reform, and lay the foundation for a better future for their children.

In Central America, U.S. NGOs are working throughout rural and urban communities to strengthen local organizations and to help community members to help themselves. In a region that suffers from high rates of infant and maternal death, there has been a recent effort to increase access to health care facilities and to provide health education.

CARE, an NGO with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia, recently completed a maternal health care program in Guatemala that has dramatically improved the quality of health care in Baja Verapaz and Alta Verapaz. Working with the Guatemalan Ministry of Health, the program helped to train female community members to train others about maternal and child health care.

One of the lasting results of the program is that 53 community clinics have been established, helping to make health care more readily available to 22,400 families in remote areas for years to come. Children born in the region today will get a healthier start on life and grow up in communities that are better equipped to provide for their future.

Ultimately, any development program, whether it involves health care in Central America or hunger in Africa, can only be successful if it is sustainable long after U.S. NGOs leave an area. In countries around the world, a broad range of U.S. NGOs are working side-by-side with communities, local NGOs, governments, and individuals to lay the foundation for a more just, prosperous, and peaceful world. The results of these collaborations are clearly being seen today and they will be felt by people around the world for years to come. ©

The following Web sites provide general information about the work of U.S. international NGOs:

www.interaction.org
www.alertnet.org
www.reliefweb.int

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