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Not Seeing the Wood for the Trees: Searching for Indigenous Non Government Organisations in the Forest of Voluntary Self Help Associations *

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that the self help or mutual aid association is an ideal partner for small scale development agencies. Indeed this African institution is the quintessential Non Government Organisation (NGO). It is embedded in the social fabric of the every day life of the poor. The self help voluntary association is the ordinary African's own response to the stresses and difficulties they face, part and parcel of their repertoire of coping mechanisms and adaptive strategies. This paper discusses the selfhelp voluntary association in the context of the Ethiopian situation, but this institution exists throughout the continent and much of what is discussed applies equally to self help associations that exist outside Ethiopia.

The paper begins with a brief review of the literature concerning self help voluntary associations and then goes on to describe the evolution, adaptation, function and role of this institution in Ethiopia. In the second part of the paper some suggestions are made about the potential of the institution as a developmental agent or partner. Both International and Indigenous NGOs have, unfortunately, been unwilling or unable to find ways in which to model themselves on, or find mechanisms to assist, self help voluntary associations.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with self help voluntary associations¹ as indigenous, vigorous and thriving institutions which have for some reason been ignored or, at

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best, overlooked by development agencies and workers in their search for the indigenous agency. The paper begins with a brief survey of the literature and then examines the establishment and growth of Addis Abeba the capital of Ethiopia. Having established the backdrop the paper turns to the evolution of voluntary, neighbourhood and other associations and the correlation between traditional forms of organisation and modern urban associations. Finally the previous record of self help voluntary associations in developmental tasks is addressed and some propositions made about future development work through these institutions. After briefly describing the NGO sector the paper concludes by suggesting some ways in which Indigenous NGOs could begin the task of identifying and accommodating themselves to the 'voluntary association' institutions.

The literature on self help associations

Voluntary self help associations in Africa have received substantial attention in anthropological writings. Most of the literature on such associations has been concerned with the adjustment of tribesmen to the urban milieu in West Africa (Little, 1957, 1962; Kuper, 1965; Ottenburg, 1955; Meillassoux, 1968; Wallerstein, 1964). Consequently, the focus of attention has been on the bond between migration and ethnic identity, the point at issue being whether self help voluntary associations tend to buttress ethnic parochialism by emphasising distinctiveness or singularness and highlighting primordial loyalties, or whether they perform an educational role, gently easing the rural tribesman into urban life, instructing him in metropolitan custom and sustaining him in times of need. In the late fifties a novel approach came from the Manchester School of Anthropology. Although a study of ethnic associations *per se* was never undertaken by them, their contributions were significant in that they argued for a circumstantial or situational approach and ceased to regard the urban dweller as primarily a tribesman, seeking instead to analyse his behaviour in the urban setting (Gluckman, 1945, 1960; Mitchell, 1956; Epstein, 1958). To some extent the study of the self help voluntary associations in Ethiopia has mirrored the arguments in the broader arena, both in the context of so called 'westernisation' and occupational prestige (Salole, 1979), and the study of self help voluntary associations.

Fecadu (1972) has pointed out that until the fascist invasion of the 1930s, Addis Abeba remained essentially a military camp. Emperor Menelik awarded large estates or *sefers* to his military commanders, each of which was a separate, minor camp. As Shack (1973) points out, areas in Addis Abeba are known, even now, by the name of the general who was awarded the *sefer*. According to Fecadu, the Italians drastically changed the composition of the city by confiscating the property of the aristocracy and dividing the city into zones, building squares, markets,

residential quarters, parks and offices. Thus many areas of Addis Abeba, even in the post-revolutionary period since 1974, still carry their popular names: the *piazza*, *markato*, *casa popolare* and *casa inches*. They altered the land tenure patterns of the towns to make available large tracts of urban land for sale to individuals. They released *corvee* labourers, craftsmen and domestic servants who had served under the elite. All weather roads to the capital were built, migration to the city was positively encouraged, and industries and businesses were set up. A modern police force was established and a system of taxation introduced. When five years later the Italians were forced out of Addis Abeba the people of the city had to maintain and take over much of the daily administration of the city.

Self help associations in Addis Abeba

It is against this setting that Fecadu (1972, 1974), Markakis (1974), and others, trace the rise of self help voluntary associations in Addis Abeba. Clearly, after the exit of the Italians in 1935, the growth of such organisations was inevitable, as many of the institutions established by the Italians disintegrated. Fecadu divided voluntary associations into two basic types: traditional and modern. Firstly, he lists *Edir* (neighbourhood mutual aid associations), *Ikub* (rotating credit associations), and regional and ethnic associations, and secondly, the modern associations such as sports clubs, professional associations, the YMCA, and so on.

The self help voluntary associations found in Ethiopia evolved from traditional and rural forms of rotating credit, mutual help, burial and other associations, which are still in existence today (Salole, 1988). Shack and Fecadu have argued that these were traditionally indigenous to the *Gurage* (an ethnic group in South Western Shoa, one of the most urbanised populations in Ethiopia), but Markakis (1974), Last (1973) and Levine (1975) have noted the close relationship between *Edir* and *mahaber* and the Orthodox Church activities and have argued that it is more likely that these were either northern in origin or indigenous to all Ethiopian people. In any event these established forms of association are widely found throughout rural Ethiopia.

The original purpose of the *Edir* was the burial of the dead, but the term has been used by many writers to refer to all urban self help voluntary associations, especially 'ethnic' ones. Thus Fecadu constantly describes the Alemgena-Wolamo Road Construction Association (AWRCA) as an *Edir* (1972, 1974). Markakis (1974), however, wishes to restrict the term to burial societies and opts to use the term *meredaja mahaber* (literally self help associations) for the type of association that Fecadu is concerned with. Markakis claims that *meredaja mahabers* are new types of association that are primarily concerned with developing the rural hinterland and that they are associated with particular regions or ethnic

groups. However, Markakis's distinction is not supported by Koehn (1975) and others. *Edir* is, therefore, the term in common usage and shall be used this paper.

Shack (1973:271) maintains that *Gurage Edirs* have "no specific urbanising role to play for recent migrants" and they serve only "to represent a partial social and psychological detachment" of a substantial number of individuals from the urban society. He insists that *Gurage Edirs* are not established to better the urban conditions of the *Gurage*, but to improve the conditions of the rural tribesman. It is interesting therefore, that he should cite Fecadu (1972) in support of this position, since Fecadu is at pains to point out that the *Soddo gurage* are urban oriented and that their major reason for forming the AWRCA was to gain prestige, recognition and credit in the capital. In fact, he claims that *Edirs* were proliferating, and that they were becoming increasingly heterogeneous and polyethnic.

This notwithstanding, it is possible to suggest that there are several roles which are played simultaneously by such institutions, each of which may, in fact, be mutually incompatible but which serve the interests of different members. It is, therefore, not inconceivable that these associations allow both processes to take place (cf Salole, 1982).

Fecadu's (1965, 1972, 1974) interpretation of the role of *Edirs* is strikingly different from Shack's. As he puts it (1974:72)

"Many scholars have argued that one of the major functions of urban voluntary associations in Africa has been ethnic cohesion and articulation of ethnic boundaries. This paper takes the opposite view that some voluntary associations cross-cut ethnic divisions and thereby function as an instrument for national integration".

Fecadu's view is that during the 1950s the *sefers* in Addis Abeba became populated by people from various ethnic categories and so the neighbourhood *Edirs* gradually became polyethnic *Edirs*. Last (1973) and Levine (1965) support this and stress the institutionalisation and proliferation of *Edirs* in every walk of life. *Edirs* are essentially *coping mechanisms par excellence* which have evolved in the urban and rural context, and played a crucial role in the *building of social infrastructure* in the absence of family, ethnic group and government *security* or *social welfare systems*. The *Edir* institution provides, therefore, a safety net which especially protects the vulnerable.

Markakis (1974) remarks on the semi-political potential of *Edirs*. The 1950 Constitution provided for the election of members to the Chamber of Deputies and this encouraged the advancement of *Edirs*. The competition to be elected chairperson (*dagna*) of an *Edir*, increased as it became obvious that men who held these posts could wield considerable voting and organisational control (Fecadu, 1974:74):

"When permanent urban settlers developed an interest in bringing modern amenities to their neighbourhood, *Edir* was used as a development association to achieve these aims. This function gave *Edir* a *raison d'être* and with the realisation that it should become an instrument for urban development activities, *yestiane godina* (literally road to civilisation), *Edir* as an institution achieved a new level of dignity."

The government thus began to take a direct interest in the *Edirs*, seeing them as agents to be used in developing the country. The bulk of the money for various projects that were jointly undertaken by government and the *Edirs* was collected by the association members. This was perceived as an inexpensive and rapid way to bring necessary infrastructure to the urban areas. Moreover, the *Edir* provided an excellent vehicle for direct access to the urban public.

This was, of course, a double edged sword, since the *Edirs* were also perceived as a potential threat. Markakis (1974) and Levine (1965b) discuss the government's reaction to the *Edirs*. Markakis argues that the spontaneous growth of neighbourhood *Edirs* led to the growth of similar associations at the work place. These were initiated as innocuous burial, mutual aid, and rotating credit societies, but inevitably they became (174) "concerned with labour matters" and began to function as "incipient labour organisations". The government was profoundly antagonistic to this development and at this juncture there appears to have been a split in the associations *raison d'être*; some *Edirs* overtly complying with government, and others reverting to their original informal role as burial associations. The official *Edirs* began to play a crucial role in the policing of the city. As Koehn and Koehn (1975:400) forcefully corroborate:

"*Edirs* also perform important socialising functions for the new migrant to the city, they teach him punctuality, by applying sanctions, such as fines for late attendance, unexcused absence from meetings, or lack of participation *Edirs* are important as agents of social control, ensuring the conformity of members and non-members residing in the same neighbourhood, [and those] who threaten peace and order may be punished by *Edir* officials by means of fines."

Edirs had to be officially registered. They were required to submit formal constitutions specifying their aims and objectives. A total of ten confederations of the 395 *Edir* associations in Addis Abeba were created. Each confederation was composed of the official *Edirs* in a precinct. Fecadu argues that over half the population of Addis Abeba became members of these formal *Edirs* and thus the *Edir* or mutual help ethic was something that permeated the city and influenced living conditions significantly as the urban population learnt the value of interest free credit and the contacts that the *Edir* network provided.

Edirs, Ikubs and meredaja mahabers as Development Agencies

As noted, in the past one of the most significant *survival strategies* or *coping mechanisms* adopted by the Ethiopian urban population has been recourse to *Edirs* and *Ikubs*. The institution evolved to such an extent that prior to the 1974 revolution it performed many duties and tasks that have been taken up by formal Urban Dweller Associations in post revolutionary Ethiopia (Salole, 1979). However, it is clear that in the eighties the institution still thrives. For example, a significant and growing number of urban dwellers who are out of work or who experience fiscal difficulties of one kind or another rely very heavily on *Edir/Ikub* funds to purchase commodities, meet obligations and generally make ends meet.

The literature on these indigenous, thriving and energetic institutions is very sparse, however, and nothing of any significance has been written on them since the mid-seventies. This is, of course, somewhat ironic since the relevance of these institutions has escalated proportionally with the growth of the city and the increasing stresses that accompany major urban centre living. In informal discussions with urban dwellers in several development projects it is clear, for example, that these associations have lost none of their importance in the daily life of urban Ethiopians. It is difficult to find an office in Addis Abeba which does not have an *Ikub* which is functioning. *Edirs*, originally burial societies but now providing a kind of indigenous insurance to both rural and urban poor, are even more prevalent. People from all walks of life seem to be members of these institutions: university lecturers, civil servants, merchants, salaried employees, domestic servants, and even street children, peasants, artisans, craftsmen, village leaders, and, perhaps especially, women.² Even more crucially, the reciprocal obligations and ties that are established are somehow expanded to include functions which are not strictly covered by the *Edir* function. Thus one can borrow; share problems and disputes; and even arbitrate within the *Edir* assembly. In fact it seems that cliques are formed that possibly share several *Edirs* and *Ikubs*. For certain, more affluent, sectors of the urban population, *Ikubs* can even be instrumental in purchasing a car or building a house. People who are poorer and who have no access to banks or credit learn to rely on *Ikubs* and *Edirs* for practically all levels of support: the bulk purchase of *teff* (a staple food) when prices are high; the cost of materials for the repair of eroding houses; the equipping of school children; for information and contacts; and lastly for solace and companionship in difficult circumstances. Indeed, even if one were to take the primary, most elementary function of an *Edir* (as a burial society), it is obvious that the Ethiopian poor are forced to rely heavily on the institution in order to meet obligations which are vital for them. There can be no question of being unable, at the minimum, to purchase a coffin or pay for the burial feast.

What is of interest is, however, that, despite the abundance and vitality of these institutions. The NGOs and development agencies, in particular, appear to have overlooked them as partners or agents in their work. Indeed, the very intimacy and familiarity that the average urban Ethiopian has with these institutions appears to have resulted in a situation in which the *Edir* and *Ikub* are so much a part of the social fabric that they cannot be identified or recognised *even by their own members* as an integral part of the development process. In some cases these institutions are regarded as archaic and redundant even by individuals who themselves are members of an association. Perhaps it is a case of being so close to the phenomenon that people cannot see its value nor focus on its potential: like being lost in the forest in search of timber.

This is particularly the case in development programmes that aspire to co-involve and get community participation in the development dynamic. It appears that, despite a rhetorical and symbolic dependence on the concept of participation, there is no attempt to understand the coping mechanisms and survival strategies which are chosen by the poor and vulnerable in times of crisis or stress. Even less is there any sense of the usefulness of knowing what it is that people rely on and depend upon. Somehow the relevance for development of these strong living institutions is lost. Lamentably, there is often a tendency to accept and even reinforce the outsiders view that the poor and vulnerable need to be *taught* how to cooperate. It is common, for example, to find project proposals which imply that people have no experience whatever of pooling funds, paying debts, arbitrating disputes and managing funds. This position, often adopted by the International Development Agencies, has been systematically challenged although enough evidence exists to suggest otherwise (Chambers, 1984). African development workers who know first-hand of the existence of such institutions should be the best placed to mount such a challenge.

This is somewhat problematic in that development workers seem to be imposing a very narrow view of what 'development' is and simply put aside activities and energy that is consciously being expended by ordinary folk in their daily struggle for survival. In part this is a reflection of the fact that *Edir* and *Ikub* are somehow perceived as institutions that belong to the past and that ensure only the preservation of the *status quo*: a form of association that has no relevance at all to the world of social change and development³.

This is particularly ironic if one considers that, today, one of the principal tenants of *Community Based Integrated Responsive Development*⁴ is that one bases development work not only on felt needs (Chambers, 1984) but on what people are actually doing themselves. Thus even if these institutions were to be ultimately regarded as being obsolete and redundant the fact that they exist at all and that large numbers of ordinary people have recourse to them should make them, at the very

least, objects of interest to development workers. Surely a case does not have to be made for the importance of trying to understand the most significant bottlenecks that exists in people's lives. Why do people feel the need to invent their own credit and insurance schemes? What are the major hazards that they are trying to guard themselves against? Are they insuring against routine 'accidents' or are they gambling? What do they use unexpected (or expected) and relatively large cash donations for? How do they manage credit and debt? Are there ways in which they arbitrate disputes? How are defaulters controlled? Do they have recourse to law?

These questions are, I believe, fundamental and I would argue that even if the institution were ultimately to be discarded as archaic, it remains imperative to the improvement of development projects to obtain the answers to these and other questions. My point here, however, is to stress that no institution which is invented and kept alive by people themselves can readily be dismissed as irrelevant and uninteresting to development work.

Even when *Edirs* and *Ikubs* are mentioned in the development literature the references are dismissive. One recent example in the Ethiopian context will serve to illustrate the problem (Cohen, 1987:59):

"Although a number of community organisations were found in Chilalo, none were undertaking the kind of developmental activities that caught the attention of sociologists elsewhere in Ethiopia. Four types of voluntary associations existed: religious, mutual aid, savings, and labour services. *The principal thread running through all these was that of self interest.* The main force behind religious associations was the psychological desire to ensure that one's funeral was well attended and honourable. Savings associations were *merely* a way to build funds and their meetings rarely took on any social connotations ... Based on an awareness of these behaviour patterns, *the designers of CADU did not envision these groups being mobilised for community development interests*" (my emphasis).

The implications of this passage are remarkable. It is assumed that since the 'principal thread' of *self interest* permeated these associations that they were *ipsum factum* motivations that could not serve any purpose for community development interests.

Indeed, the fact that these were psychological and purely economic interests is regarded as further proof that no useful or legitimate development goal could be arrived at because there were no social connotations in the *motive* for interaction. This is patently absurd. Surely it is naive to expect the most vulnerable and threatened parts of a community to behave purely in an altruistic fashion. Indeed, the whole concept of reciprocal obligations is such that the self interest is transparent. It has, however, been harnessed as a positive force by self help voluntary associations.

It must be argued, therefore, that people must abandon a naive perspective which dismisses the potential development impact of indigenous voluntary associations simply because membership is motivated by self interest. One must look beyond a purely subjective and individual focus and adopt a perspective which allows one to recognise that the institution is alive and well, not only because it serves individual interests but because it also serves the interests of the community. The two are not mutually exclusive.

Building on what already exists

It is clear that there are many different strategies which are adopted and perfected by the poor and vulnerable in order to spread risk and maximise economic advantage. Whilst it is true that *Edirs* and *Ikubs* are not the only strategies that exist, they are probably the most widespread institutions which share some of the basic premises that development workers promote and champion. Take the case of a particularly disadvantaged group, street children who are engaged in shoe shining, car washing and tending, and the sale of confectionery, sweets, cigarettes and the like: these children are so crucial to the basic survival of their families, and such an integral part of the 'informal' infrastructure, that development workers are somewhat at a loss as to what to do cheaply, effectively and realistically for them.

Schools, training institutions, skill-upgrading centres, shelters and dormitories are often suggested. The scale of the problems, however, is such that these are not viable solutions. Any such response would be perceived by marginal families as an additional resource or option, a magnet to attract yet others onto the street. In any case such solutions are not replicable.

These youths represent a significant part of the economy and, more critically, are vital wage earners for families and dependents. They cannot be totally severed from their work. At the same time, from the perspective of these children, how is the necessary credit obtained in order to purchase the first tin of shoe polish or the first brush? Living from hand to mouth, as many of these children do, they have had to develop strong interdependent credit links with shopkeepers and suppliers, and they have done this mostly by forming *voluntary associations* amongst themselves. These associations do not stop at merely providing credit and a network but actually play a role in arbitrating turf battles and boarder disputes between different groups of children engaged in rival activities. What we have, therefore, is a dynamic, complex, functional, creative and living institution which can almost certainly be used to good advantage if it becomes an integral part of the plans and objectives of the project and if it is not pushed aside, both figuratively and practically, as something archaic with no relevance.

It is in this context that clear avenues for the intervention of development agencies in the identification and strengthening of living institutions, and in the injection of small amounts of credit, training or equipment, exist, in order to:

- a) facilitate what is already going on
- b) actually improve skills and enable the slow self improvement, which is already taking place amongst this and other similar clusters of urban poor, to be accelerated
- c) better understand the survival strategies and coping mechanisms of the bulk of the urban population.

There are essentially three different approaches to the *Edir* and *Ikub* that already exist from a developmental perspective. Firstly, it should be possible to assist them in whatever it is that they are already in the process of doing. Secondly, it is possible to use the *Edir* and *Ikub* as models from which to build other similar self help and mutual help associations with *different functions*. Thirdly, it should be possible to build on the bonds and reciprocal obligations established by the *Edir*, *Ikub* or *meredaja mahaber* and use these as a basis for true bottom-up participatory development activities that have as their basis an indigenous, evolved and matured system.

- 1) To assist these self help voluntary associations to *do what they are already doing* is of great importance, as they represent conventional and traditional responses that have evolved naturally and that people feel comfortable with. There is no need to *import* alien concepts and still less to *invent* new ones. These are institutions that work and, therefore, they can be assisted. This is, of course, quite a limited intervention, since it is obvious that one cannot modify or change these institutions externally. To change or modify is not, however, the point, since the intervention would merely be to strengthen and to learn more of what is going on.
- 2) Assisting them in this simple way through education, credit or encouragement has the advantage of allowing us to understand the mechanism better and to become familiar with responsibilities and bonds that exist. This will enable development agencies to promote mutual help and self help models which are triggered, and then configured, by preexisting, traditional, indigenous and viable associations. What is being suggested is that what exists should be blended with some creative, innovative, and fresh ideas so that original community-anchored development activities can be arrived at.

This is an important point and is worth stressing. If one can use concepts and premises that are already understood and well-anchored in the community then the external intervention, albeit dealing with different developmental issues than the conventional associations, has a better chance of succeeding

than an intervention which totally ignores the strength and vitality of the conventional enterprise. It is sad, for example, that instead of recognising that people do have a tradition of cooperation and mutual aid (in fact, that their lives and that of their dependents depend upon it), that it is often suggested that people have to be taught to cooperate and work together.

This second model-building approach is essentially an experimental approach which requires time, patience and much flexibility, since it involves a delicate business of borrowing from existing structures without damaging them. In many ways it must be combined with a thorough knowledge of the social structure of urban life.

- 3) The third approach is derived from the major pillar of anthropological technique and methodology of *participant observation* or *total immersion*. For anthropologists it is axiomatic that human society does not develop institutions and customs in isolation and that the many parts explain the whole. Thus close observance of one dimension of human activity should 'speak volumes' about that society and should provide the observer with invaluable keys with which to understand the society. *Put simply, one cannot go far wrong if one is building on institutions which have been dreamed up, erected, modified, maintained, improved upon and put up with by the societies themselves without outside pressure or assistance.* It is hard to conceive of any working development activity or process which does not rely ultimately on strong and vigorous activities which people choose for themselves. It is arrogant to ignore these and seek to replace them by interventions or imports which are untested and have not been fashioned *in situ*. It is a waste of energy to attempt to invent structures which resemble bad copies of what has evolved naturally.

FOOTNOTES:

1. In this paper the term voluntary association is used to refer only to mutual aid, burial, rotating credit, self help and other indigenous agencies.
2. Women, especially poorer women are sometimes driven to rely almost exclusively on *Edir* and *Ikub* when their husbands die or become unemployed. Indeed, there seems to be an escalation in the frequency of membership which is directly proportional to economic condition and sex. I would argue that voluntary self help institutions constitute a significant part of the female domain in Ethiopia. Indeed, there is a case for regarding the strength of *Edir* as being partly due to the influence of a female world view which rarely emerges in monographs or articles. This is an area which is seriously in need of some focused research.
3. This is so deeply rooted that often the developmental or social change role that *Edirs* have played in the past is explicitly denied by people who are members of *Edirs*.
4. CBIIRD is now recognised as an approach identified with Save the Children and Redd Bama (Norwegian Save the Children) in Ethiopia and elsewhere. It is practised in similar forms and called other names by many developmental agencies (eg participatory democracy by OXFAM).

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