

The Role of Non-governmental Organisations in Rural Development: The Case of the Voluntary Workcamps Association of Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The study explains how the Voluntary Workcamps Association of Ghana (VWAG) contributes to rural development by mobilising the youth to provide free services during their leisure time. The paper contends that local non-governmental organisations can play a pivotal role in rural development as a supplement to the efforts of the government. The success of the VWAG offers several lessons in rural development that can serve as a model for other developing nations.

Introduction

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have become an important ally in the development process of the Third World. Activities of NGOs serve to mitigate the cost of developing countries' institutional weaknesses, which often include administrative shortcomings and an inability to efficiently carry out essential development tasks, such as providing social services or protecting the environment. In recent years, NGOs have grown rapidly both in numbers and in the volume of resources they mobilise. In 1987, international NGOs transferred about US\$ 5.5 billion from the industrial to the developing countries – nearly US\$ 1 billion more than the International Development Association (UNDP, 1990:136).

Although the activities of the foreign NGOs in the Third World have received extensive treatment in the literature, the contributions of indigenous or local NGOs in economic development have gone largely unnoticed. The fact is that there are hundreds of such NGOs making positive contributions within their respective countries, but are not known beyond their borders. One unique aspect of these local NGOs is their capacity to tap local human and physical resources to respond to

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problems rapidly and creatively. These NGOs are able to maintain the flexibility needed under changing circumstances (Durning, 1989:82).

This paper contends that local NGOs can and do play a pivotal role in rural development as a supplement to the development efforts of Third World governments. The objective of the study is to underscore the contributions of the Voluntary Workcamps Association of Ghana (VWAG) to rural development in Ghana (1). The paper examines VWAG's contributions to the development process in terms of mobilising the youth to provide free services in the rural areas during their leisure time. Within the 35 years of its existence, the VWAG has contributed significantly toward the social, economic, cultural, and physical development of Ghana. The success of the VWAG offers several lessons in rural development that can serve as a model for other developing countries and also perhaps for the poverty-stricken areas of developed nations.

Whither Development?

The 1960s ushered in a new political era in Africa. It was the decade when the demise of colonialism gave way to new independent nations. It was a period full of hopes and high expectations, and African leaders were determined that their countries would catch up with the progress of the developed world. The new governments drew bold plans and strategies to overcome illiteracy, poverty, disease, malnutrition and bring their countries up to par with western industrialised nations.

The national development plans were based on economic theories echoed by prominent western economists of the day (see for instance, the works of Lewis, 1955; Liebenstein, 1957; Rostow, 1960). Industrialisation was believed to be the engine of economic growth and the key to transforming the traditional economies. Industrialisation, which should have been commenced by the private sector, was undertaken by the governments to compensate for certain believed market failures and the lack of private domestic capital.

It was widely accepted that the governments of the new nations had to give a big push for industrialisation with assistance from the industrialised countries. Development agencies from the industrial nations shared this optimism. They arrived en masse and poured in resources – money, personnel, ideas and development models, new projects and equipment – for development.

After nearly four decades of practising foreign economic models of development in Africa, the verdict is discouraging. The post-independence development efforts failed because the strategies were misconceived. Governments made a dash for modernisation, copying but not adapting western and other models. The results

were poorly-designed public investments in industry; little attention to peasant agriculture; too much intervention in areas in which the state lacked managerial, technical, and entrepreneurial skills; and too little effort to foster grassroots development (World Bank, 1989:3) .

Today, economic stagnation and poverty are on the rise, and African nations are still searching for new models of development. Given the fact that the colonial governments neglected the rural areas, it became the concern of the new nations to expand development to the rural areas that are most in need of development. This is because the majority of the people in Africa live in the rural areas. Most importantly, agriculture, which remains the economic strength of Africa, is principally undertaken by the rural masses.

Every Ghanaian government since independence has been committed to improving the quality of life in the rural areas. However, they have been overwhelmed by economic conditions, most of which they have been unable to control. As a means of combating rural poverty, nearly all the governments have created national youth organisations. The Nkrumah regime created the Workers Brigade; the Busia government founded the National Service Corps; and the present Rawlings government has established the National Youth Corps. However, in examining the achievements of these government organisations, it becomes apparent that their successes in combating the development problems in the rural areas are dismal in comparison to the successes of local non-governmental organisations.

The role of associations like the VWAG must be viewed within the larger context of strategies for development. Having come to grips with the failures of past development models in Africa, development experts have begun the search for new models that can best improve the lives of the development beneficiaries. Some experts advocate direct beneficiary participation, while others advocate decentralisation or devolution of the development process. And yet, there are those who advocate a greater role for non-governmental organisations, either local or foreign.

While the debates continue as to what strategies are the most workable, Third World non-governmental organisations, like the Voluntary Workcamps Association of Ghana, have been operating successfully with very limited funds. Guided by a development philosophy that puts the beneficiaries at the centre, the VWAG participates in projects that have been initiated, designed, and implemented by the beneficiaries themselves. The Association's efforts to reach the rural people is unique in that it employs no design experts, it has no field directors, and it does not finance projects. The main assets of the VWAG are just people – the youth mobilised by the VWAG and the beneficiaries.

The Voluntary Workcamps Association of Ghana

Historically, there has always existed in Ghana a tradition of self-help, supportive relationships and cooperative work. This tradition of self-help is deeply ingrained in the culture of Ghanaian villages. Prior to independence, through the concept of *nnoboa*, villagers helped each other with private farm and building projects by rotating assistance among households. In the same spirit, villages and communities joined forces to construct roads, bridges, latrines, cemeteries, etc, for their own use. They also assisted each other during tough economic times and natural disasters by providing economic and psychological support to their neighbours.

Although independence and government policies on collectivisation of resources have forced the Ghanaian people to become more dependent on the government, the spirit of self-help is still a vital part of the Ghanaian culture. This is evidenced by the existence of many grassroots organisations and rural projects initiated and executed by the rural people themselves. Recently, in the Jasikan district of Ghana, eighteen towns and villages raised about US\$ 200,000 to finance the first phase of a three-year integrated development programme devised by the local people. The programme included primary schools, primary health clinics, and drinking water. Elsewhere, farmers are constructing a feeder road to facilitate transportation of farm produce to the market (World Bank, 1989:169).

In 1954, Gordon Green, an English Quaker Civilist, organised the first workcamp to give students the opportunity to experience first-hand conditions in the rural areas and to combat underdevelopment in Ghana (then Gold Coast). A year later, the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the then Cape Coast College recognised the work of Gordon Green and his small army of volunteers and invited them to participate in the construction of the present Tsito Adult Residential College at Tsito Awudome in the Volta Region. On September 1, 1956, the Voluntary Workcamps Association of Ghana was formally inaugurated. The Voluntary Workcamps Association of Ghana is better known in Ghana and elsewhere as "VOLU".

The vision of Gordon Green and his associates was to channel the leisure time and the energy of the Ghanaian youth into a productive service in the rural areas to facilitate rural development through self-reliance and community work. The VWAG adopted "Service to Mankind" as its motto and committed its members and resources:

"... to give young people the opportunity to use their leisure time in the service of the community by participating in community development

schemes such as building schools, health and other welfare centres and to generally organise and assist local and national efforts in these similar projects"

(VWAG Constitution, Article 2).

Organisation and Operations

Membership in the Association is open to all persons who are at least twelve years old, mentally sane, and without regard to nationality, religion, political affiliation, sex or educational background. The VWAG has an active membership of about 10,000, sixty percent of whom are high school students, thirty percent from the three universities in Ghana, and the remaining ten percent from workers and people of all walks of life.

Additionally, the Association can count on approximately 15,000 inactive members who often participate in the regular or weekend camps. This category consists of people who were once active, dues-paying members. They are classified as inactive because they do not pay dues, nor do they participate in meetings or conventions of the Association. Most of them are full-time workers who limit their involvement only to camp participation. The VWAG strives to maintain a large pool of inactive members, for it is more interested in using the services of volunteers at camps, regardless of whether or not they pay dues to the organisation.

The VWAG is organised on four levels: local, district, regional, and national. A local branch is formed when five dues-paying members in any institution, village or town come together, elect officers and notify the Secretary General. A district branch consists of all the local branches in a particular district. Similarly, the regional branch consists of all the various local and district branches.

At the national level there exists the National Executive Committee which is the policy organ of the Association. This Committee appoints the National Secretariat to undertake the day-to-day operations of the organisation.

The primary source of funding for the Association is membership dues and donations, sale of VWAG memorabilia, registration fees from foreign volunteers, in-kind contributions from international agencies, and grants from the Government of Ghana (for office supplies) and the National Trust Fund (for miscellaneous expenditures).

The main instrument to accomplish the objectives of the Association is the voluntary workcamp. Regular workcamps are organised throughout the country during school vacations. There are special workcamps on weekends during the academic year. All workcamps are opened to members and others who volunteer

their services to help improve the quality of life for the rural masses. Among other things, the workcamp is designed to bring educated and illiterate townspeople and villagers together in a common cause for utilising manual labour in constructive work during their leisure time; and thereby assist poor communities in undertaking projects that would otherwise not be undertaken.

In practice, a workcamp consists of people who are living together in a rural setting and have volunteered their time to perform manual labor aimed at improving the quality of life of the rural masses. Their activities include: building schools, health clinics, water dams, secondary roads; disseminating information relating to agriculture, health and the environment; and planting trees and performing other activities. All these activities are planned, designed and implemented by the rural beneficiaries themselves who invite the VWAG to participate.

In a typical workcamp the direct cost of labour to the local community is almost entirely free. The bulk of the work is done by VWAG members who do not receive compensation for their services.

They pay their own transportation to and from the camps. Workcamps organised during vacations typically run for about four to six weeks. Several camps run concurrently and also in a staggered manner. This format permits individuals to attend up to a maximum of three camps during summer vacations. The Association assumes responsibility for feeding and housing the members. The members are housed in schools or other public buildings, in a dormitory fashion, or in private homes.

The efforts of the volunteers are supplemented by services provided by the local people. The local people normally rotate their services so as to limit the disruption of their normal activities to the minimum. The point to emphasise is that about 98 percent of the labour is provided free. The only monetary cost to the beneficiaries comes in the form of construction materials, the bulk of which are normally provided by the government and donor agencies. The local community bears some additional indirect costs in the form of foodstuffs and facilities donated for use by the volunteers. At any rate, through the VWAG, rural communities can undertake numerous projects with very limited financial resources.

Project Selection

Unlike many foreign NGOs, which identify rural development projects and underwrite them, the VWAG does not initiate projects. The rural communities organise their own projects and submit a request to the VWAG to participate in their development project(s). All requests to the VWAG must be submitted six months in advance through the local executives to the national secretariat.

Upon receiving a request to participate in a rural development project, the VWAG, through its regional executive, conducts feasibility studies to assess the importance of the project. Among the things critically examined are the availability of tools, equipment, resources, and accommodation. No project is accepted if basic tools and equipment are not available. A project selected must meet additional criteria. It must reflect the real need of the community and must impact on the quality of life of the beneficiaries. The rural community must be willing to make a contribution to the project. This contribution can be in the form of equipment, materials, food, money and labour. They must also be willing to volunteer their time to work with VWAG volunteers.

The final test for accepting a project is the willingness of the beneficiaries to see the project as theirs and commit themselves to complete it if the work is unfinished within the initial time frame set by VWAG. A maximum of six weeks is usually allotted to a project. However, the VWAG will accept a second request to return to complete a project if there is the need.

In addition to the workcamps, the VWAG has also embarked upon two other special projects. The Association has initiated a literacy programme, "Education For Development", to stimulate a wider awareness among the Ghanaian public about illiteracy in the rural areas. The programme is designed to complement the "Mass Education" programme which has been in existence in Ghana since 1948 through the Ministry of Social Welfare.

Another significant development in VWAG's activities in recent years has been the gradual shift from short-term to long-term projects. The VWAG has begun long-term projects in oil palm plantation, cocoa farming, livestock farming, and agricultural training. The rationale underlying VWAG's venture into these projects is to help reduce the rural-urban migration of able-bodied individuals whose help is needed in the rural sector. Even though Ghana's economy is based on agriculture, no serious effort was made in the beginning to interest the youth of the country in agriculture, nor was agriculture integrated into the education curricula. As a rule, farming was considered the work of illiterate folk (Boakyé, 1990).

Accomplishments

Since its establishment in 1956, the VWAG has kept its stated goals of utilising the leisure time of the youth in useful and constructive projects to benefit the rural masses. Members of the Association have generously and freely given their time, labour and money as contributions toward the social and economic development of Ghana. To this end, every region in Ghana has benefited tremendously from the activities of VWAG.

Notwithstanding the role of VWAG in social transformation, the biggest contribution of the Association may be evident in economic development. The VWAG has made it possible for the rural towns to utilise minimum financial resources to build capital and physical infrastructure. Ghanaian communities typically depend on government funds for school buildings, health clinics, road and bridge construction, pipe-borne water, etc. With limited government funds, several rural areas have sometimes been neglected or had to wait for years for these basic facilities. Through the VWAG, several rural communities are able to construct projects for less than one-fifth of the cost.

From 1956 to 1990, the VWAG organised over 516 workcamps in different regions of the country (refer to project summary in Table 1). Since 1980, the VWAG has undertaken an average of 21 summer camps per year. The largest category of projects undertaken by the VWAG consists of school building construction. Between 1956 and 1985, almost 50 per cent of all the projects were school buildings. This was followed by health clinics (10 per cent) and community centres (9 per cent). Other areas of active VWAG involvement have been construction of toilet facilities, street drainage systems, bridges, roads, and irrigation dams; reforestation and tree planting; agricultural farming; and spraying of cocoa and coffee plantations.

The 516 workcamps listed in Table 1 do not include weekend and mini-camps organised by local chapters and the National Secretariat (2). However, the weekend workcamps form an integral part of the entire VOLU concept. On any given weekend, it is not uncommon to find the local chapters team up with the educational institutions within a particular region to organise weekend camps in their immediate vicinity. The students will normally spend all day Saturday doing some volunteer work and then return to school at the end of the day. Here also, the cost is almost entirely free to the local community. The local chapter and the participating institutions bear the cost of lunch and transportation.

The Relevance of VWAG in Rural Development (3)

Development may be conceptualised as the process of change consciously undertaken by a people in accordance with their traditions and culture aimed at improving their conditions. This change takes into account human factors and the sociological characteristics of the local milieu. Hence, any development project initiated, designed and implemented for rural people by outsiders which does not take into account the aforementioned factors may be fundamentally flawed.

TABLE 1: PROJECT SUMMARY BY YEAR AND REGION *

YEAR	CR	WR	GTA	VR	ER	AR	BAR	NR	UR	TOTALS
1956	3	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3
1957	1	1	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	5
1958	1	1	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	4
1959	1	1	0	1	L	1	0	0	0	5
1960	1	1	0	0	3	3	2	0	0	10
1961	0	0	0	1	3	0	1	1	0	6
1962	1	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	1	6
1963	2	1	0	1	2	0	2	0	2	10
1964	1	1	0	2	0	1	0	0	2	7
1965	1	1	1	2	3	1	1	1	1	12
1966	0	0	0	3	2	0	1	0	0	6
1967	2	0	0	2	1	2	1	0	0	8
1968	1	0	0	3	0	1	0	1	1	7
1969	1	0	0	2	0	4	0	0	1	8
1970	1	0	1	0	2	2	1	0	2	9
1971	4	0	0	0	2	5	2	0	1	14
1972	2	1	1	2	2	2	4	1	2	17
1973	2	3	2	2	3	2	2	1	2	19
1974	1	2	5	2	2	2	2	0	1	17
1975	1	1	2	2	4	3	1	2	1	17
1976	4	2	4	4	2	3	1	1	2	23
1977	5	4	1	3	2	5	2	1	0	23
1978	2	5	0	6	4	4	2	1	0	24
1979	1	2	1	5	1	3	0	0	0	13
1980	1	7	3	3	1	6	2	0	0	14
1981	2	3	3	1	4	1	0	0	0	14
1982	3	2	1	1	2	2	3	0	1	16
1983	4	4	1	2	3	2	2	1	2	21
1984	4	4	1	2	2	1	1	0	2	17
1985	4	2	4	3	2	3	2	1	2	23
1986	3	5	3	2	1	2	1	2	4	23
1987	4	4	4	2	1	3	2	1	4	25
1988	2	7	8	3	3	4	1	1	2	31
1989	3	7	5	2	2	3	4	1	2	29
1990	2	4	2	2	3	2	2	1	2	20
TOTAL	71	77	53	68	77	46	19	19	40	516

* For administrative purposes Ghana is divided into nine regions as follows:

AR ASHANTI REGION; **BAR** BRONG AHAFO REGION; **CR** CENTRAL REGION;
ER EASTERN REGION; **GTA** GREATER ACCRA REGION; **NR** NORTHERN REGION;
UR UPPER REGION; **VR** VOLTA REGION; **WR** WESTERN REGION

In Ghana and other Third World countries, the significance of developing the rural communities weighs heavily on the national government. It is an obligation with a force deriving directly from the political, economic and social expectation of the masses. Nearly 80 percent of the Ghanaian population live in rural areas under what, by modern standards, may be characterised as harsh and sub-normal conditions. Agriculture, which accounts for about 70 percent of Ghana's Gross Domestic Product, is almost exclusively dominated by the rural masses. The dependence of the national economy on agriculture implies that industrialisation cannot attain any meaningful level until agriculture is fully developed. The development of modernised agriculture also requires development in the rural areas.

Rural communities in Ghana depend solely on funds from the central government for social amenities, infrastructural development, and other physical projects. The local governments and rural communities do not have a tax base from which to generate revenues for development. Even those communities that may have the necessary resources within their jurisdiction lack the necessary legal authority as well as the administrative machinery to tap their own revenue sources. Consequently, the only viable method of financing projects is the transfer of funds from the central government through the regional administrations to the local governments. Thus, given the intense competition for the limited resources at the national level and a policy bias in favour of developing the urban areas, many rural communities have been forced to forgo needed projects or to seek the other alternatives.

This is where the VWAG fills the void in rural development. Although operating with limited funds of its own, the Association makes it possible for rural communities to construct their needed projects at very minimal costs. Thus, the VWAG performs a crucial role in rural development in Ghana. There is no region in the country that has not benefited from the activities of the Association. Thus, the VWAG has been a force in rural development in Ghana. Through its activities, over six hundred villages have been able to erect school buildings and health clinics; construct drainage systems, village dams, roads; undertake agricultural programmes; and disseminate information and knowledge to the rural masses.

Perhaps the most profound aspect of VWAG's contribution stems from the nature of its membership, as already indicated. The VWAG, in a sense, mobilises the youth of Ghana to give something back to the communities or to become role models to the children.

Ghanaian youth receive free education up to the university level. High schools and colleges are located in the cities and urban areas. Those who continue into higher education leave the rural communities behind and most of them never return. The content of the school curriculum exacerbates the situation because it has no relevance to the needs of the rural people.

Moreover, the schools are designed primarily to train students for white collar jobs in the cities and the urban centres. The school system downgrades agriculture and manual labour. The total effect of these forces is that, eventually, the educated youth are completely removed from the rural society (Osei-Hwedie, 1990).

Within this framework, the VWAG has become a social force in the country. The Association provides the youth with the opportunity to go back and give something meaningful to the rural people. Students learn to do and appreciate manual labour and interact with village people.

In order to stimulate, respond to, and support the aspirations of the rural population, the VWAG has adopted a development orientation which utilises the initiative and resourcefulness of the beneficiaries. This approach, referred to as the "bottom up", is in stark contrast to the "top down" approach used by the government (Omer, 1973). Through this approach, the VWAG has unwittingly promoted participation in the rural communities without preaching about it. According to development experts, participation of the poor in their own development programmes is essential since development must mobilise people to be able to stand on their own (see for instance, Berg, 1986; Paul, 1983).

Within the framework of the "top down" approach, a local government identifies local needs and forwards these to the regional government which, in turn, integrates all the local needs into a regional plan and sends it to the national government. Which local project gets funded ultimately depends on national priorities. As already indicated, local needs are seldom given the highest priority. As a matter of fact, the government's record in terms of rural development has been dismal. The process of selecting and funding projects also affects the completion of projects, thereby wasting limited resources. Witness the many uncompleted projects that litter the countryside.

Despite its successes, the VWAG must overcome certain problems and shortcomings if it is to become a dynamic force in the Twenty-first Century. First, the Association must expand and stabilise its funding sources. The VWAG must try to raise additional funds from the private sector in Ghana in order to decrease the over-dependence on foreign sources. The National Secretariat must revamp its internal operations management. Poor record-keeping, improper accounting procedures, and antiquated filing system adversely affect the operation of the Association.

The Association has not developed any systematic mechanism to follow up on projects. Lack of coordination and improper record-keeping make it almost impossible to determine the extent of the Association's successes or failures. Perhaps the most serious shortcoming is the method of recruitment. After 35 years of operation, new members are recruited informally by word of mouth. New

channels of recruitment must be developed to increase the membership so as to maximise the participation in projects.

Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was to highlight the role of the Voluntary Workcamps Association of Ghana and the positive contributions that it has made to rural development in Ghana. The study has shown that the VWAG, with no design experts, no field directors and without financing projects, is able to mobilise the youth and rural people to participate in projects initiated, designed and implemented by the rural beneficiaries.

The VWAG has made it possible for local communities with limited financial resources to build capital infrastructure in the rural areas. Through the nature of its membership, cost savings generated by its involvement in rural projects, and the participation of the rural people in their own projects, the VWAG has been able to create a niche for itself in supplementing the efforts of the government in rural development.

In Ghana, about 98 percent of all students remain unemployed during vacations. The structure of the economy and the national rate of unemployment make it almost impossible for students to work either during vacations or the school year. This means that the VWAG becomes a vehicle to utilise the free time of the students. By implication, other developing countries with economies similar to Ghana can adopt this concept of VOLU. This also implies that the concept may have limited validity in the economies of the industrial nations.

Given similar conditions in the rural areas of most of the less developed countries, we believe that the concept of VOLU as exemplified by the VWAG offers important benefits that can be studied by other countries. The concept is simple and inexpensive to implement. It works well because it recognises the dynamism of the beneficiaries and the youth. As the VWAG has shown, it is possible to work with the government in rural development and remain apolitical. In the Third World, the ability to remain apolitical is crucial to the success of any local NGO. Although it is necessary for the NGOs to cooperate with and complement the efforts of the government, they must not subject their operations, finances, and activities to governmental control and manipulation.

Footnotes

(1) This paper stems in part from the authors' long standing interest in and contributions to the VWAG. From 1966 to 1974 both authors were active members of the Association, participating in several rural development projects during school vacations and weekends.

The paper relies on personal experience in the operations of the VWAG, published data, and results of interviews and discussions from a field study in Ghana from July through August, 1990. On this trip, additional data were collected from the national office and three regional centers.

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(2) It is almost impossible to get an accurate statistic for the number of weekend and mini-camps throughout the country in any given year. Understandably, the National Executive Committee has not attempted any such venture.

(3) This paper is limited to the role of VWAG in rural development projects. It must be noted that the VWAG organises workcamps in the urban areas as well.

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