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Sampson, Steven

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

THE DONOR TRIBE

By Steven Sampson,
Social anthropologist, Lund University, Sweden

Donors are often surrounded by an aura of mystery. For local NGOs seeking funds or inspiration, donors may seem “divine”, being the source of all that is good, wealthy, interesting and powerful. They can do no wrong. For other NGOs, especially when disappointed for lack of funds, “The Donors” are “diabolical”, considered the cause of all our problems; they are accused of being cynical, hypocritical, dishonest or even corrupt.

In fact, donors are like the rest of us: they are people with good intentions. But they are also people who work in organizations and who have their own interests. Donor organizations, and the people who represent them, frequently operate with unclear mandates and even conflicting goals. Donors may make mistakes, many of them avoidable, but they are by and large mistakes which are unintended. Donors, like the rest of us, operate in a real world of inadequate information, utopian goals, and poor coordination. In short, donors are neither from heaven, nor hell, nor from outer space. They are people. People with specific kinds of resources, goals and interests. While donors may speak of themselves as a “donor organization” or refer to themselves as a “donor community”, it ultimately comes down to how individuals act in specific situations.

There is no accepted wisdom about donors. Everyone has their own opinion about what a good donor is. My own view in this essay comes from having worked as a low-level, free lance consultant for international donors and with local NGOs in Romania, Albania, Bosnia and Kosovo. I am an American social anthropologist living in Denmark, working at a Swedish University, with some knowledge of how civil society organizations work here, “up north”, where the main donor is the government.

To be a donor is to give. No gift is ever “free”. The receiver is usually obligated to give back something, sooner or later, in some form or other. We have to learn to say “thank you” in the form of public displays of prestige or respect. In the world of modern day NGO projects, donors and recipients are always talking about “partnership” or “coordination”. It is worth considering these ideas when we think about the so-called “donor community” or about the continuing problems of “donor coordination” and “sharing of information”.

1. Donors give more than money. They give out ideas, strategies, language training (the language of projects!) and network connections.

2. Donors consists of several “clans”

These clans have Donors are as different in their goals, interests and organizations as are local NGOs. While there may be talk of a “donor community” and there may be held “donor coordination meetings”, the reality is that donors may have very different and even opposing interests. There is nothing wrong with these differences. What is wrong, however, is for local citizens or NGOs to assume that all donors have the same views, perceptions, interests, strategies and organizational operations, and that donors (“they”) somehow act as a single unit against the local society, “us”. Despite common languages and slogans such as “Let’s coordinate”, the normal situation for donors is that there are fundamental differences between them. These differences may disappear briefly, during a humanitarian crisis, but they always return.

3. Every donor has a donor.

Although donors give money away, they almost always are searching for money as well. Every donor thus has two faces, one facing downward where they give, and one facing upward where they “beg” or “lobby” for funds from governments, ministries or foundations. Even the biggest donors, EU, USAID, GTZ, DANIDA, also have *their* donors: Governments/ministries. This double face means that donors tend to choose partners who can make this second job easier. That is, donors will tend to choose “partners” (recipients) who make them look good to *their* donor back home.

4. Donors are everywhere.

Donors are not simply large international organizations, governments or foreign millionaires. They can also be right under our noses. Members of an organization who pay a membership fee each month can operate as donors, with corresponding rights and obligations. Donors can also be local businessmen or groups of businessmen, or as is often the case in the West, the wives of businessmen. And donors can donate things instead of money... In the West, people often donate children’s clothing or old computers. Donors are not just large organizations far away. They may be closer to us than we think.

5. Foreign Donors always leave

Donors have strategies and priorities. This means that these will change with changing conditions. One of these conditions is to be “relevant”, to be where the action is. This is how donors impress their own donors. Humanitarian donors leave, and may be replaced by development donors. And they may not. This is a natural process and need not be interpreted as a “betrayal” or broken promise. An effective donor has a strategy when they *enter* the country, and if they are doing their job correctly, they also have a schedule of priorities when they operate, and an *exit* strategy as well.

6. Donors operate with inadequate information.

Donors, and the people who work for them both in the home office and in the field, are like the rest of us. They have a vague idea of what is going on, a general idea of a problem they want to address, and a certain amount of resources---people, money, equipment, knowledge, time, experience---in which to do their job. Some donors think they can operate everywhere in the same way: what worked in Peru or in Bosnia, should also work in Kosovo. This may or may not be true, but the important thing is that some donors *think* it is true. Donors can see what they want to see: the “cup” of possibilities can be either half full or half empty. A donor who sees another donor leave (for whatever reason) may think, “Well, maybe we should leave, too”. Donors are as *subjective* as the rest of us, and they are under pressure to disguise their subjectivity as objective evaluations.

7. Much of donors’ inadequate information comes from locals.

One often hears that “donors talk only to each other”. In fact, it often happens that donors obtain ideas about a country from their local staff or from those they meet on a field trip. Very often these local staff, leaders, activists or citizens are unclear about what is going on in their own country. The locals, after all, have their own “clans” or networks. It is often the case that a donor will hear from a local partner: “We are a good NGO, all the others are opportunists”. If the donor representatives hears this from everyone, it leaves the impression that all local NGO people are opportunists or jealous.

8. Donors and recipients are not “partners”.

Partnership is based on equality. But the donor relationship is a power relationship. Donors may want to give money to local NGOs, but they also want to ensure that their own interests are being served. The donor-recipient relationship is unequal. We evaluate them, they don't evaluate us. Donors and NGOs can certainly have very different interests and still achieve good results. But partnership in the sense of equal partners it is not!

9. Donors are often naive

There are some donors who tend to criticize local NGOs for being inefficient, slow or ineffective. Often these criticisms are based on a comparison of how things work in the Third World and how they *imagine* that things work back home in Western Europe or the U.S. This comparison is inadequate for two reasons. First, in the West we have infrastructure, electricity, phones that work, jobs that pay real salaries, and we do not have to worry about aging parents, sick children, bribing doctors, cousins from the village, banks that do not need cash, lack of air-conditioning, and all the rest. Second, the proper comparison is how things *really* work at home and how things *really* work in the field. At home in Denmark, where I happen to live, people do not return phone calls, faxes get lost, money takes weeks to go from one office to another, a few centimeters of snow can close down the transport system, e-mail systems can break down, secretaries are out to lunch, chiefs are traveling abroad, people go home because their kids are sick, no one works after 5pm, reports never get read, money has to be used by December 31st, and no decisions are made from December 15 to January 5th, or during the entire month of July. All too many projects are overpriced, underused, or money wasted. Things in Denmark also work on personal networks of friends, family, school friends and political affiliations. And then there is the waste of money. It is not money paid as a bribe to a police officer or customs official. It is, instead, money wasted in waiting time for grants, useless expensive trips, unread assessment and unused evaluations.

Advice for dealing with donors. Donors are important people who should be treated correctly and honestly. They spend a lot of their time with people who are asking them for their money, so donors are understandably suspicious. This is normal and should be acceptable.

10. Fundraising Rule 1: donors like engaged people.

Donors have their own projects, some personal/private, others official. Donors like to deal with people who resemble themselves, who have the same interests and passions. In meeting and dealing with local NGOs, donors also need to get “good vibrations”, good feelings that they are doing the right thing. Donors are looking for passion among NGOs, even if the passion cannot be measured.

11. Rule 2: Nothing replaces a personal experience

Donors have many meetings, and meetings are almost always about money. So instead take a donor to a project and let them experience real people doing real things and meeting real needs. Create that personal experience that the donor will remember.

12. Rule 3: Donors like people who speak their language.

Donor representatives usually speak two languages: English and “project speak”. English is important because the donor can relax, and can use the many technical terms like “civil society”, “NGO”, “capacity building”, “training of trainers”, “fund raising” or “cofinancing”. This is not really English. Most English-speaking people do not walk around speaking this way. This is “project speak”, and it is knowledge of these terms which releases money. It is important to know not only what these terms mean, but also how to use them without being

superficial. The trick here is to focus on what the donors need and their priorities, and explain how you can match these. YOU are doing the donors are favor.

Conclusions: It would be nice to say that it is the donors who need the “capacity building” courses. But unfortunately, they are the ones with the money. Understanding the “donor tribe” however, can help us achieve our own goals for development. All things are possible.