Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) or Private Voluntary Organizations (PVOs) are non-profit-making organizations. Some are religious, others secular. Some are indigenous, others foreign. Their main objectives are to be involved in the alleviation of human suffering and to aid in the development of poor countries. Many of these organizations are relatively small and have started with voluntary personnel and private assistance for the purpose of being involved in relief work. Development has often been an after-thought in their activities. Northern NGOs have been involved in raising awareness in their own countries to the needs of the poorer nations.

NGOs claim they have the ability to intervene in needy countries more effectively than large government programs. They claim they (a) are good at reaching and mobilizing the poor, (b) use participatory, “bottom-up” processes of project implementation in order to help poor people gain control of their lives, (c) work with and strengthen local institutions, (d) are more innovative, flexible, and experimental, and (e) carry out projects without the host government’s financial input and at a lower cost.

It is not the purpose of this study to support those claims or to disprove the arguments brought forward by many critics that NGOs frequently do not reach the poor but reinforce the rule of the local power elite. The purpose of this study is to describe one specific “community building project” supported by an international NGO.

**Background**

The project under review was implemented by the *Seventh-day Adventist World Service* (SAWS) (now renamed *Adventist Development and Relief Agency, International* - ADRA). SAWS was
organized in 1956 by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists as the humanitarian outreach arm of the church.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, SAWS began to change from being mainly a relief organization that responded to famines, refugees, and natural and man-made disasters to being a rehabilitation and then a development agency. This expanded role prompted the organization to change its name, indicating its additional activities. Today, as both a relief and development agency, “ADRA endeavors to direct its multi-sectoral assistance to the neediest communities in the developing countries by rehabilitating and enhancing the quality of life of the poor without reference to their ethnic, political, or religious association” (ADRA’s “Statement of Mission,” 1986). ADRA’s programs are usually cooperative endeavors with private sector donors, donor country governments, host governments, and other non-governmental organizations. ADRA International today is in the unique position of making a significant contribution in an effective and timely manner. This is due to the fact that it has ready access to an impressive array of health care and educational institutions, along with a well-established infrastructure within the Seventh-day Adventist Church in more than 182 countries worldwide. This fact cannot be overlooked in light of grassroots development programs, because ADRA utilizes personnel that are already in place. These personnel are familiar with the local situation and in most cases are accepted by the residents of the community in which they plan to work. The Sri Lanka project, the subject of this analysis, was funded jointly by SAWS and USAID.

In spite of the growing rhetoric with regard to national development strategies in the developing countries to include primary health care and integrated community development measures, actual implementation and positive results have been less than adequate on the micro level. Common barriers to substantive improvements in the quality of life in the private sectors include concentration of resources and services in urban centers, inequitable allocation of bilateral and multilateral aid, and political instability. Nationwide efforts often lack the necessary flexibility of design, or the
sheer magnitude of the projects place them beyond the possibility of meaningful community participation and sustainability. NGOs believe that smaller projects, locally conceived and initiated, have a greater potential for achieving community participation.

The project at Lakapaha-na Adventist Seminary in Sri Lanka was funded with US$ 94,000 over a three year period. A second grant of US$37,500 extended the project for another two years. The budget figures are listed here in order to give the reader a rough idea of the amount of money involved in the program. The main concern is not to describe the impact of the project in economic terms but to analyze the implicit and explicit forces that were encountered in the program.

Participants

The Project Implementer

In implementing its projects, ADRA primarily (and earlier SAWS) uses the infrastructure of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In Sri Lanka the Adventist Church has a very small constituency. At the start of the project in 1982 it had 1,500 members meeting in twenty-three churches. It operates a Junior College with 250 students, twelve miles north of Kandy. The school was established at the present site in 1951 on a 176 acre estate in the village of Mailapitiya and was managed by an expatriate principal with twenty-three teachers (including three expatriate families). I functioned as the project director in the planning and first year implementation stage.

The Village

The focus of the project was the greater Mailapitiya village located on the main Kandy-Hanguranketa Road. Mailapitiya is situated in the higher regions of the island (elevation 800-900 feet), allowing not only paddy (rice) growing but also vegetable gardening during the rainy season. The coconut tree line was just six miles further up-country.

The population of the village was 800 families living on approximately 500 acres of land. Ethnically, the village was mainly Sinhalese (the population of Sri Lanka is officially divided between Sinhalese, who are mainly Buddhists; Tamils, who are mainly Hindus; Moors, the Moslem minority; and Christians). It has to be pointed out that there are several dividing lines in Sinhalese society that can have an important bearing upon the working relationship in a village society like Mailapitiya. Sinhalese can be divided into “up-country” (or Kandian) people and “low-country” (the rest, but especially coastal) people. This distinction is not due to language or religion (68 percent of Sinhalese are Buddhists nationwide) but to cultural and caste variances. The up-country section of Sri Lanka, around Kandy, had been
able to remain free from colonial influences until 1815, when Kandy lost its independence to the British. The low-country, coastal areas have been influenced by the Portuguese (1505-1656), Dutch (1556-1796) and British (1796-1948) occupations (Ross 1990; Waters 1986). This exposure to the West has made the low-country Sinhalese more Westernized and more business-minded, and many have become Christians (7 percent of the population—mainly Roman Catholics and Anglicans). Up-country Sinhalese look down on low-country Sinhalese, because they feel that they are culturally superior (“purer”) to the Westernized, low-country Sinhalese. In addition to that, Kandian Sinhalese see themselves as the guardians of the Buddhist faith (99 percent of the up-country population is Buddhist) and the keepers of the most sacred of all shrines in Sri Lanka, the Sri Dalada Maligawa, which has the sacred tooth of the Buddha.

The Village Society

The cultural picture of Sri Lanka with its ethnically and religiously diverse groups, can be very complicated, especially on the micro-level of the village. Outsiders will never be able to understand and function properly in such an environment if they do not consider the interactions and dynamics of the society. (In this study I will only discuss the Sinhalese/Buddhist setting. The Tamil/Hindu situation is different but is not applicable to the project area since very few Tamils lived in the project area.)

The majority of the population of Sri Lanka still lives in a society permeated by strong traditional and religious values. Social groups are still influenced and guided by a strong feudalistic principle of order, and in addition to that, the principles of caste consciousness dominate and order many layers of society.

The most apparent influence of caste consciousness can be found among the up-country Sinhalese in the Kandy area. In contrast, the lowland population on the west coast has been influenced in their behavior by Western European colonialism and have shed most caste consciousness.

In addition to caste, family and family relations play an important part in the dynamics of a village. Marriages are arranged, based on closely observed rules...
that ensure that the social status of the whole family will be maintained. Marriage has been described as a “sacrament between families” (Ryan 1953:23). Marriage takes place with the whole family in mind, within the village or the immediate village neighborhood.

The caste system has deep roots in the rural society. Although the socialist government of Mr. and Mrs. Bandaranaike introduced sweeping land reforms in the 1960s and 1970s and replaced the traditional local rulership of the village headman with appointed government officials, many feudalistic patterns and practices are still intact.

Notwithstanding the abolition by the Buddha of the caste system of India, with appointed government officials, many feudalistic patterns and practices are still intact.

N o t w i t h s t a n d i n g the abolition by the Buddha of the caste system of India, Sri Lankan society is strongly regulated through caste behavior. The society can be divided into two groups, the Kulina (farmer) nobility and the Hina (artisan) caste. The Kulina aristocracy of Sri Lanka are the rice farmers (the Goyagamas in Sinhalese or Vellala in Tamil). Far below them are the fragmented artisan castes (the Hinas) who originally served the aristocratic agrarian society through a variety of tasks. Among the Hina caste members, the Karava subcaste (fishermen caste) take a special position among the low-country castes (These are equal to the Goyagama caste of the up-country.) They are followed by the Salagama (or Cinnamon peeler caste). The Durava or Toddy Tappers (Palmjuice Tappers) are still among the “respectable” artisan castes. The lower service castes include a number of sub-castes with various degrees of status: the potters, the calk burners, the Dhobi (the washermen), the Vahumpura or Hakuru, who are the Jaggery or syrup makers (making syrup from the flowers of the Kitul palm). Lower still are the barbers, because they come occasionally in contact with blood. Among the lowest castes are the drummers (who are very important in the Ceylonese religious and social life but belong to a low caste), the dancers, the matt weavers and finally the Rodiya who come close to the social level of the Indian Paria—the outcaste, who are the beggars of the society, the robe and drum makers.

I included this detailed description of the caste system to illustrate that the “most important” or “most appealing” work does not always have status in a village society. People might...
no longer be involved in these jobs, because they have been able to escape a certain profession through education, but they still remain linked to the village caste system through their birth connection.

One of the striking realities of the caste system is the influence it has on the development of certain behavioral patterns in the society. Not only will caste members be able to distinguish caste characteristics according to names and according to where people or their parents were born, but also according to their peculiar behavior. Sri Lankan society functions and operates primarily as a caste society, and only secondarily as a village society.

The Political System

The main part of the project village was surrounded by a number of smaller “colonies.” These smaller sections at the outskirts of the village were formed when the Sri Lankan government nationalized large farms in the early 1960s under the socialist government of the Bandaranaike family. (Mr. and Mrs. Bandaranaike were both Prime Ministers at separate times.) Under that government scheme, landless laborers received between one to two acres of land. These colonies had been in existence for 10-15 years by the time the SAWS project started, but had never received any development assistance from the government partly because the government that created these colonies had been defeated in the 1977 election and was replaced by a government which was not interested in supporting communities of the opposition block.

Robert Oberst has rightly pointed out that if a group belongs to the opposition party in Sri Lanka, it can hardly expect any benefits from the government in power. There is little bargaining or compromise, and the groups either receive what they want from their party when it is in power, or their requests are denied (1985:102).

The Buddhist Monk

The Buddhist monk is the spiritual leader in the community, but he clearly has political influence in many spheres of Buddhist society. In Sri Lanka there are three separate Sangha (order of Buddhist monk) organizations. They are known as the Siamese sect (Simyam Nikaya), the Amarapura sect, and the Rammanna sect. The three sects can hardly be called sects, because they do not differ doctrinally, nor do they differ in the Vinaya rules (code of discipline). The difference between these three Nikayas (sects) is based mainly on differences of caste.

The Development Context

In order to understand and properly interpret the activities and events of this project, this section will deal with some of the principles that guided in the
implementation of the project. (See Maier 1994 for additional principles).

Religion and Development

Accusations are often raised that NGOs with ties to religious organizations have used their influence to be involved in proselyting efforts. These accusations may be justified in a number of incidents. However, outsiders frequently misunderstand the motivation of members from religious organizations, in regard to their so-called “missionary” endeavor. Most members of religious organizations are clearly compelled and motivated to work for the “poor and oppressed” out of religious conviction. The Christian conviction is often based upon the Samaritan principle which, in its purest form, is a selfless service for humanity regardless of any ethical, political, or religious association. In following this principle, religiously oriented NGOs have a tremendous role to play in international development activities.

Religious traditions and motivating issues have too often been considered peripheral by project planners and administrators in the design of programs in the “underdeveloped” or “lesser-developed” countries. Religious belief systems (indigenous as well as missionary belief systems) were viewed as hang-overs from a pre-colonial past or a colonial era. Today, development is no longer seen as value-free, nor can it function properly and independently from ethical norms and traditions of a given culture (Macy 1985:18).

Therefore, it is necessary to reassess the value of our development interventions in the light of the people’s own value systems and ethics. Joanna Macy summarizes the role of religion in development this way:

Development efforts over the last two and a half decades have demonstrated that, however clever or generous the schemes, the local populace will not use them or profit from them unless it is internally motivated to do so. Nor will the intended beneficiaries of any plan carry it out unless it makes sense to them, meeting their needs as they see such needs. Their energies, allegiance, and values must be enlisted if programs are to take roots and sustain themselves on a continuing basis.

Here again we encounter the question of values. To enlist popu-
lar participation and commitment, development programs require a value-base that is meaningful to the people, relevant to their perceived needs, and affirmative of their inherent strengths.

And where are such values to be found? They are present in indigenous religious traditions, which over the centuries have shaped the people’s perception of reality and their notions of what is good and true. Principles of the improvement of their present lives can be culled from these traditions—and re-articulated in ways that mobilize people to take responsibility for social change (Macy 1985:20).

In the Sri Lankan context, Buddhist social principles have successfully been used by the country’s own Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement.

**Development and Partnership**

The first important step in development projects is to treat the local population as partners in a united effort to uplift the living conditions in the village in accordance with their own value system. This approach is important because it encourages village members to continue their own development, even after funding ceases.

Development activities initiated and supported through external funding have to recognize that countries of the “Third World” must be able to take responsibility for their own development. This means that in each development country the people have to be able to decide for themselves where, how, and with what goals development efforts are to take place. This is important because it is absolutely false to transfer uncritically the guiding principles of an affluent consumer-oriented society, or the results of one’s own development in general to other areas of the world. Development workers from industrialized countries, the so-called “developed” countries, have to get rid of their feeling of cultural and technical superiority. There are individuals in every country who are capable of making contributions to the life of human society as a whole, especially their own, with which they are closely acquainted.

**Community Development—A Participatory Approach**

The concept of community participation challenges many traditional assumptions. The primary question becomes one of project ownership and continuation: who owns the project, and who will maintain and even extend it after the donor leaves the area?

In the case of the SAWS project in Mailapitiya the argument was brought forward (by some from within the school) that the initiative should come from the school to establish programs that will “benefit” the villagers. They proposed that the “ownership” will rest within the institution because they were accountable to the funder for the proper use of the funds. This is partly understandable because the partners
of religious oriented NGOs will remain in the area even after funding ceases, and the village people will look for continuous help and maintenance of the project. On the other hand, community development potentials are highly limited when goals, processes, procedures, and decision-making come from outside the community group itself.

The Mailapitiya project followed a participatory approach. This “forced” Lakpahana to leave its isolation and enter into partnership with the surrounding neighbors. Such an approach led to “people’s development” (where villagers would be able to discover and strengthen their own community potential), which was more important than the development of water, health, and housing projects.

Because of deep rooted distrust between Christians and Buddhists, a trust relationship had to be established. One of the first things I did was to enroll as a student in a Buddhist temple in Kandy. My goal was to study the religious doctrines of Buddhism, and some of its religious rituals and practices. It was my desire to understand the villagers’ behavior and to be able to “participate” intelligently in the religious services of the community (not as a Buddhist worshipper but as a respectful visitor).

Furthermore, I attended every public function in the village: funerals, Buddhist new moon festivities, special Buddhist temple ceremonies, weddings, house-blessing ceremonies, etc. It was important for me to learn as well as to identify with the people on their level. For example, it is important to understand the significance of accepting food and drink in a caste oriented society. The offering and eating of food in Sri Lanka (and all over South Asia) is surrounded with ritual, and, if not properly observed, can offend people.

This learning process was enhanced through a close friendship with a group of monks, who were residents in one of the leading temples in close proximity to Mailapitiya. This understanding of the people and their culture became one of the key elements in the successful implementation of the community development project.

To find the most effective village leaders (someone who
could represent and speak for the whole of the community) was the most sensitive aspect of the whole project. The problem was how to avoid supporting the already well-to-do, or be seen as supporting the ruling government party. In order to avoid taking sides, the villagers were asked to select their own leader from each of the colonies. These representatives formed a committee that would work together with SAWS in the implementation of their projects.

Hatbawa Colony (with 31 families) appointed a former Lakpahana teacher (who had married a girl from their village) to be their leader.

Aponzo Colony (with 100 families), the largest of the colonies, selected the local government school’s vice principal (who actually came from an outside village but had married a local girl 15 years before). He became a strong leader because he was able to rally most of the young people (many of them his former students) and their parents behind him.

Finally Galhinda Colony, after they saw the progress of their neighboring colonies, selected one of the Buddhist monks to be their leader. Those chosen leaders needed no training. They were the natural leaders in their communities. It was not their financial status that elevated them to that position, but their past concerns for the communities.

Each one of these groups came up with what they felt were their needs for these were needs driven and not funder or money driven projects. Plans were worked out together to implement these projects with as much local material as possible. With shramadana (voluntary) labor, the people from the whole of Mailapitiya were able to contribute over 24,000 hours worth of labor (totaling SRs 144,497, which was nearly 11 percent of the total budget) to their project.

**Project Outcome**

**Accomplishments**

An often overlooked aspect in Third World development, where expatriate leadership is involved, is the training of national leadership. Projects collapse after the foreigners leave because nobody knows how to continue the initiated process. (Establishing a project involves more than merely installing certain technical artifacts. The program must be incorporated into the village economy and life cycle. W. D. Joseph, the school’s farm (estate) manager, had shown some interest in “doing something” for the community. He had lived at the school since the early 1950s, first as a student and later as a staff member, and was well acquainted with the villagers. The villagers trusted him and he was familiar with Sri Lankan customs. His connections with government officials in the area, including opposition party officials, gave him status among the people. He introduced me to...
many of the village people. His intimate knowledge of the village society helped me to avoid many pitfalls. He gained valuable experience in management skills and exposure to development ideas. He got on-the-job training and attended a number of short international training workshops in India and Singapore that also gave him new skills and additional status in the village.

I left the project after two and a half years. However, W. D. Joseph continued to guide the project activities and was able to receive the second grant.

The project built toilets and provided piped water and it soon became evident that nearly every family had built and were using their new toilets. Hatbawa had piped water into their village twenty-four hours a day. No pump was necessary because a unique gravity fed system pushed the water through two miles of pipes into the village.

Aponzo Colony and Galhinda each had piped water that was pumped into their village twice a day, whereas before women had to walk two to three miles to carry water from the Mailapitiya waterlines.

Two new deep-wells were dug, and the smaller, existing diesel engines had been replaced by stronger ones that could pump 60,000 gallons instead of only 10,000 gallons per day, and in less time. As a result the medical practitioner in the local government health post had not seen any serious diarrhea for months—a respectable achievement for a village of that size. However, these were only the secondary achievements of the project.

The main goal of the Mailapitiya project was to strengthen village initiatives so that villagers could help themselves and solve their own problems even after funding would cease.

**The Village Evaluates Itself**

In November 1987, I was able to return to the project for an evaluation to see what had happened to the project. The lessons were quite revealing, especially in seeing what the villagers saw as the success of their project. I had been gone for five and a half years. Since it was difficult to evaluate a project of that nature alone, I called a group of villagers together so that we could evaluate the project together (there is nothing harder for those of us from the West than to give up control of our development projects).

In recent years some development agencies have been will-
ing to share in the process of planning and implementation of projects by sitting down with villagers to examine their situations and agree on a mutual course of action. This is already an important step in the right direction. But the last step, to also let the people evaluate the success of the program, is often the hardest to give up. We may want to evaluate the program a success, only to find that the people judge it a failure. To give them control of the final assessment is to place ourselves in their hands. But this is the last and most important step in a truly mutual endeavor. If we do not take it, we are not willing to fully trust the people. I was determined to let the people decide how successful the program was.

A group of artists from a wide cross-section of villagers were asked to draw two pictures on two large poster boards. They were asked to conceptualize what the project had meant and done for them. They were asked to draw a picture of how their villages had looked before and after the SAWS project, and how the relationship between the school and the village had changed during the process of development (see drawings next pages).

Yes, the village had cleaner water, the women no longer had to walk for miles and stand in lines for water. The villagers had their own toilets and children no longer suffered because of diarrhea. It was all very impressive what “we” had accomplished during the years. But there were two scenes in the drawing that made me curious. The pictures show excerpts from the two posters prepared by a group of villagers.

Scene 1 illustrates life before the project started—each family lived for themselves. Some had the necessities of life but many were lacking the most basic means. (Each circle represents a family. The furniture is symbolic of their basic possessions.) The second scene is a representation of their present day condition. Through the SAWS development project the walls of separation are gone. The village has been united through a chain of cooperation. The people are now harmoniously living together. Recently the villagers built, as a group, several houses for those that could not afford to do it themselves. The “radio” is their voice, “proclaiming” to the world what development is all about and what it has done for them.

The second set of drawings depicted the relationship between villagers and the Adventist school. Scene 3 shows the well-organized state of the school (see the well defined school boundaries). In contrast, the village organization was in a deplorable condition (the symbolic boundary had no order). A large, symbolic, contaminated “river” separated both places.

Scene 4 on that set of drawings depicts the work of SAWS and how the river had been bridged. There was still a difference. The
Scene 1. Before the Development Project

Scene 2. After the Development Project
VILAGE RELATIONS WITH THE ADVENTIST SCHOOL

Scene 3. Before the Development Project

Scene 4. After the Development Project
school was a Christian place, the villagers were still Buddhists, but there was now communication between both places. The river still existed, but was now cleaned up. In this process of development the nature of both places had changed. The village had been organized and business was conducted in an orderly fashion (see the same orderly border as the school property). But the most significant change had occurred at the school. According to their drawing and explanation, the Adventist school had become a source of power (see electric lines) that was now felt beyond the property of the school.

Social ministries might not produce baptized people, something which people often expect in mission work. The case study of Sri Lanka has shown that community development often brings unexpected results which are just as significant and often more important than conversion. The Adventist institution, which was established to be the light in community (interestingly enough, Lakpahana means “the light of Sri Lanka” in the local language, reflecting the founder’s intention to fulfill the biblical call to be the light of the world, finally fulfilled that goal through this project.

Maybe these are only imaginary drawings, but the actions and activities speak for themselves. The leader of Aponzo Colony has been recognized by the government as a “Justice of the Peace” for the whole village, because of his leadership role. A “Justice of the Peace” is a highly respected, non-partisan recognition in any Sri Lankan village.

The local Gramaseveka village chief went back to school to become a social worker. He requested that the University of Ceylon in Colombo assign him to the Mailapitiya SAWS project for his internship for one year. During that year he was able to initiate a technical workshop for young village boys and girls, funded through government sources.

Today, Mailapitiya has several organized and government recognized committees, which have been able to approach the government for development assistance. The relationship of the school with the community became not only cordial but the community sent many of its children to weekly activities conducted by the school.

Conclusion
Development can work. In Sri Lanka it did, because SAWS was willing to let go of its authority and strengthen the potential of the people to help themselves.

Community Development is development of people. As people recognize and realize their own strength, they will be willing and able to stand up for their own progress. The greatest contribution ADRA made in the community around Lakpahana was not completing a project that brought water and toilets to the community, but helping
people to discover they were able to formulate, implement (that is complete) and finally evaluate development programs. The community was empowered to do all those things on their own. It was through this experience that true transformation of the community began.

Development is not an easy task, because it asks people to give of themselves for the good of others. In this context something has to be said about the life of the development agent. It is important that agents in the development business take their personal lives very seriously, because they will be closely observed and judged by those they come in contact with. It is often our personal and family lives that make the greatest impression upon people. The distinction between public and private many times is not a given. Therefore, in building relationships, it is important that we do so, on a personal level. Trust will be built and relationships will be established if we can communicate with the people effectively on a cross-cultural level and as individuals, not just through our official roles. Such work will lead not only to better relationships between the development agency and its agents, but will also result in the transformation of the community itself, so that people will start to live in harmony with each other.

By letting go control of the process of development, we will become empowered ourselves. As funders and implementers we will discover that we have ourselves reached a true level of maturity, and can now become worthy partners with the people in their process of development.

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