

Local Resources for Development, the experience of Somaliland's General Assistance & Volunteer Organization (GAVO)

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At the beginning of the 1990s, a dozen young men from different sub-clans began to meet in Berbera, their hometown of 15,000 in the arid region of the Horn of Africa known as Somaliland, where most outsiders assume civil society to be nonexistent. Their childhoods had been shattered by Somaliland's civil war, and they wanted to do their part to help rebuild. In 1992 they founded the General Assistance and Volunteer Organization (GAVO) in the hope that through volunteer action they might begin to address some of the town's pressing social problems.

They sought the advice of their Koranic teacher, who told them they should try to help the most destitute. The most destitute were clearly the large number of local residents suffering from war traumas who had no adequate care.

GAVO's founders started with the patients at the local psychiatric hospital. Their first activities were simple: cutting the patients hair and nails, taking them out to a cool plateau on Fridays, and washing their clothes. Soon they realized that they had to reach beyond themselves, and beyond the boundaries of family and clan, if they were to raise the resources to meet patients' needs, since the hospital was not receiving any government or foreign funding. Such outreach, they rightly feared, could fuel mistrust among public authorities and in society at large.

But they reached out in any case. First they approached the municipal government, formally in charge of the hospital but utterly bereft of resources to run it. Then to local merchants, some of whom had relatives at the hospital. They took business people to visit the hospital. And the donations began to flow.

Shame and stigma complicated their work. Many in the town associated mental illness with sorcery, so GAVO used popular theatre to sensitise the community.

Within four years, GAVO had managed to improve the conditions of patients at the hospital, to set up an outpatient clinic, to help demystify mental illness, and in the process garner the material and moral support of local merchants and municipal authorities.

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GAVO's impressive local resource base came to include the municipal government, wealthy livestock exporters, butchers and a wide array of local merchants. Food and livestock came from market vendors and exporters and traders, while diesel fuel for a generator came from importers. Hay merchants provided fodder and charcoal traders offered charcoal. And the state too chipped in when the governor, and then the local government provided office space, the electric company power, and the local government water.

It was clear from Oxfam's first contact with GAVO's leadership in 1999 that the organisation's local resource base was a source of strength and legitimacy, which a traditional project package could undermine by discouraging local donations and weakening accountability to GAVO's local constituency, both strategic pieces of their development.

Oxfam could see the organisation lacked financial management skills, English language skills, and exposure to other organisations in the Horn of Africa – small but important things that Oxfam could help provide. Oxfam and GAVO undertook three months of consultations and reflections – a process which GAVO found 'introspective' and somewhat 'disquieting', but which helped the group focus on long-term organisational sustainability.

Funding was not to be the main feature of the relation with GAVO. Oxfam's total financial contribution from 1999 to 2002 (\$44,830) was intentionally modest with a good percentage available on a matching base. First priority was given to the recognition of GAVO's values and principles, which were documented in the organisational profile as a kind of 'live' mirror to reinforce self-awareness.

Second, Oxfam created a series of opportunities for GAVO to share its experience of successfully anchoring its development work in the local economy. It had never occurred to many of Oxfam's partner organisations elsewhere in the Horn of Africa – or to most donors – that a local resource base is not only feasible but also essential for effective social change, because it gives people a stake.

Third, Oxfam offered GAVO exposure to development literature and direct interfaces with some key development thinkers (Alan Fowler, Allan Kaplan, Goran Hyden and Thandinka Mkadawire). Through this process, GAVO gained self-confidence and its membership showed a remarkable ability, both individually and as a group, for internalising and applying some of the concepts they viewed as relevant.

'[These encounters] offered a clear picture of how patience, thoughtfulness and approachability can be more powerful than bullets to achieve change,' said Farhan Haibe of GAVO. 'Rather than bringing new frameworks they tried to give us more fire to think for ourselves. The core principle I learned is that self-awareness and understanding your relations with others is the basis of good development work.'

The organisation expanded, taking on full management of the hospital and launching a programme for street children, which they identified as a second key problem to be addressed. Their local support grew, and they established a membership structure that incorporated both businessmen and local officials as part of the organisation.

At the same time they moved from sensitisation and service-provision into advocacy, because they recognised that changes in government policy regarding child rights were essential if the problems of street children were to be addressed. And they involved both their business and government partners in the decision to move in that direction.

Local groups concerned primarily with the welfare of their fellow citizens, like GAVO, are often viewed by external resource providers as of little significance to 'development.' They are small, usually 'traditional' rather than 'progressive', and distant from the grand challenges a nation faces, as spelled out in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Yet such groups provide opportunities for communities and ordinary citizens to discuss and act on some of the development challenges they are all facing. Their activities may be small-scale and local, but they can be instrumental in the development of a democratic culture, and of skills useful in making decisions on a larger-scale, such as policy formulation. GAVO traveled just such a route – from charity to service-provision to public outreach to advocacy.

In 2000, the Gulf States re-imposed a ban on livestock export from Somaliland. This measure seriously undermined the economy of Somaliland and the ability of the Berbera business community to sustain its financial and material support to GAVO. At the same time, increasing poverty created a demand for the organisation to expand its development work. Hence, GAVO was forced to look for alternative funding both locally and externally.

The organisation's credibility was by then well established and the municipality encouraged it to assist UN HABITAT to rebuild the Berbera market. This was largely a 'make or break' challenge, because markets are the heart of the local economy, and are highly sensitive matters. The potential for disaster was enormous.

GAVO's relational skills and intimate knowledge of its community, both of which emerged from its reliance on local resources, proved to be invaluable assets in meeting the challenge. They engaged religious authorities, held public meetings with vendors and the buying public, made it evident that they had no hidden agenda. Transparency and a capacity to listen were the keys to their success.

In the past five years, the organisation diversified its expertise and expanded its work to other communities of Somaliland. GAVO is now engaged in the promotion of participatory local governance in various localities with a view to deepening the country's democratisation process, and is now advising Oxfam on a programme designed to support the realignment of relations between public authorities and citizens elsewhere in the Horn of Africa.

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