

Helping Ourselves

Local
Solutions to
Global
Problems

Bruce Stokes

Helping Ourselves

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Helping Ourselves

Local Solutions
to Global Problems

Bruce Stokes

A Worldwatch Institute Book



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To Wendy

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Introduction

People have lost control over many of the issues that affect their daily lives. The price of energy is set by foreign governments. The economic futures of small towns are often decided in distant corporate boardrooms as a byproduct of company planning. The quality and the nature of social services are determined by impersonal bureaucrats.

Individuals and communities have come to rely on governments, corporations, and professional elites to do many of the things that they once did for themselves. Societies have turned to highly centralized, technologically sophisticated methods of coping with rising energy prices, housing and food shortages, a burgeoning population, and other major problems. We have

forgotten that human problems require solutions on a human scale.

Many of the issues that will dominate public concern over the next few decades—energy, food, health care, housing, population, industrial productivity, and the quality of work life—will only be solved through human action and interaction. These global problems will often best be dealt with by people doing more to help themselves at the local level. For it is at the personal and community level that the consequences of problems are most obvious, the motivation to solve them is most direct, and the benefits from action are most immediate. People can create local solutions to global problems by taking charge of the process of problem solving and by changing their values and behavior in response to today's economic and social conditions. By so doing, they can mold more democratic, self-reliant societies.

This task will not be easy. The power of the state has been expanding for years. In order to manage a diverse economy and to provide necessary social services, the size and the number of government agencies have grown substantially, in rich and poor countries, in socialist and capitalist economies alike. The expansion of the public sector can be gauged by the rise in government spending. In the United States, for example, government expenditures grew from 28 percent of the gross national product (GNP) in 1962 to 32 percent in 1978. In Brazil, they rose from 12 to 35 percent of the GNP during the same period; in France, from 36 to 43 percent; and in Sweden, from 36 to 62 percent.¹

The role that corporations play in modern life has grown at a similar pace, responding to and helping to create consumer demand for ever increasing production of a widening range of goods. In the name of efficiency and profits, most national economies are now dominated by a handful of corporations. In the United States, two hundred industrial firms account for about 30 percent of all private production, and many major sectors of the economy are controlled by a few companies.² In

socialist economies, a giant state corporation is generally the sole producer of a particular product. Multinational corporations have further centralized the world economy. Six grain companies control almost all international grain shipments and seven oil companies now account for most of the massive international flow of petroleum.

As government and business have grown, a professional-managerial elite has emerged to staff public and private bureaucracies. The expansion of scientific knowledge and the technical complexity of modern issues have led to a dramatic increase in the number of doctors, lawyers, engineers, psychologists, social workers, and other specialists. As a result, human problems that were once dealt with informally are increasingly the exclusive preserve of experts. Narrowly specialized knowledge has supplanted tradition and common sense as the criterion for everything from designing buildings to educating children.

These trends toward centralization and specialization cannot continue indefinitely. Bureaucratic, technocratic solutions will not work for many of the problems now facing humanity. Large agribusiness enterprises cannot ensure adequate diets for the rapidly growing populations of the Third World; only by producing more of their own food can the poor construct a buffer against malnutrition and rising food prices. The major causes of death and illness in industrial and developing countries will not be eradicated by more doctors; better health requires improvements in income, changes in life-style, and a cleaner environment. Government family-planning experts cannot slow the rate of population growth; smaller families will depend on the childbearing decisions of millions of individual couples.

Moreover, many private and public institutions have grown so large that they are no longer efficient, sensitive mechanisms for solving problems. Having expanded over the years on the premise that bigger is always better, their size now often inhibits their function. In large organizations, as employees spend more time in pointless meetings and on redundant paperwork,

they have less time to produce quality products or to serve the public. The hierarchical structure of large bureaucracies can be counterproductive when it insulates bureaucrats and corporate executives from the public's needs and feelings. Experience with relatively small businesses and small government agencies suggests that economies of scale can be achieved in organizations of moderate size, so that institutions need never become little worlds unto themselves.

The cost of solving problems in a centralized manner has also become prohibitively expensive. At the national level, citizens cannot afford the growing tax burden of big government. The average American's taxes rose from 19.4 percent of taxable income in 1975 to a projected 22.7 percent in 1981. Internationally, the price tag of meeting the Third World's most pressing problems is more than double the current amount of foreign aid. The World Bank estimates it would cost at least \$47.1 billion a year (in 1975 dollars) to upgrade existing services to meet basic needs for food, water, housing, health, and education between 1980 and 2000; in 1975, foreign aid from all sources totaled only \$18.4 billion. The political will to solve problems by further increasing taxes and transferring resources from the rich to the poor does not exist. As a result, less expensive solutions to many problems are necessary.³

Finally, the depersonalized values fostered by large institutions and elitist professions have begun to alienate many individuals and communities. Assembly-line workers can become unthinking, irresponsible employees when they are ignored and disparaged. Communities whose cultural and social traditions have been trampled in the name of "progress" can turn inward and become reactionary.

State and corporate dominance of problem solving engenders a sense of dependency and helplessness that undermines people's capacity to be active, informed citizens. As social critic Ivan Illich has observed, "Whether the product is provided by an entrepreneur or an apparatchik, the effective result is the same: citizen impotence."⁴ When people lack confidence in