Managing Success:

Partners for Development Reorganizes its Dongola Office*

When Sharon Smith arrived to head Partners for Development’s (PfD) field office in Dibe, Dongola, she inherited what many at headquarters believed to be among the most successful country missions in Africa. PfD had greatly increased its presence in Dongola during the Sahelian drought of the mid-1980s, growing from what one former staff member described as a “sleepy backwater” office with a few small projects into a major player in the international relief effort at the worst point of the crisis. With the emergency over, Smith’s predecessor had parlayed PfD’s successes in managing relief operations into new efforts focusing on the country’s longer-term needs, winning several large projects in the most devastated areas from major international donors interested in ensuring that the crisis not repeat itself.

Soon after Smith’s arrival in 1989, however, a hard-hitting internal critique of PfD Dongola’s core programs brought into question not only the accomplishments of the projects themselves but the administrative efficacy of the entire mission. As she looked around her in an attempt to redress the concerns raised in the critique, Smith recognized that the mission seemed to have grown too fast in too many directions. Despite the strides her predecessor had made in establishing close relations with the government and donors as well as recruiting a talented cadre of Dongolan staff, Smith knew that major changes in program management as well as overall administration were now necessary. In this, her first assignment as the director of a PfD country office, she wondered how she could begin to put the pieces of the development puzzle back together to build a program portfolio and a mission that met the country’s current needs.

* This is a disguised case with many aspects from a variety of African NGO settings included. It is not meant to represent any country in particular.

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PfD and its Country Offices

Since its inception at the end of World War II, PfD was the world’s third largest non-profit organization involved in international relief and development. In the early 1990s, PfD provided over $200 million in assistance to 15 million people in 40 countries throughout Africa, Asia, Latin America, and most recently, Eastern Europe. With administrative headquarters in San Francisco, PfD’s program operations were overseen locally through “country offices,” for the most part headed by American or other expatriate “country directors,” experienced development professionals who managed operations worth several hundred thousand to tens of millions of dollars.

In organizational terms, country directors were linked to headquarters through PfD’s Regional Management Group in the organization’s Program Division, one of five principal divisions within the San Francisco office. (See Exhibit 1.) A handful of regional managers based out of the San Francisco headquarters had line responsibility for assessing the performance of country directors, reviewing their project proposals, and allocating unrestricted funds for their administrative budgets. Several other units within PfD also worked closely with country directors, from the Program Division’s Technical Assistance Group, which provided expertise as needed to each country’s various projects, to Human Resources and Finances, which established agency-wide procedures and reporting requirements. Aside from required reports, San Francisco headquarters kept abreast of the activities of country directors through field visits, particularly by regional managers whose brief included assessing the management of country missions and regional technical advisors from the Technical Assistance Group who helped country directors design and carry out their projects.

Despite the apparent complexities of their relationship with headquarters, country directors tended to enjoy great autonomy. “That’s one of the things that made it such a fabulous job,” comments Chris Marlowe, former country director of Dongola in the late 1970s and later a regional manager for Africa. Country directors could lay out the programs they wanted to implement, seek donors, oversee millions of dollars in contracts, all with only limited supervision from San Francisco headquarters. Marlowe contrasts the flexibility enjoyed by PfD directors with a corporate counterpart, for example, the manager of Coca-Cola operations:

If you’re the head of Coca-Cola in country X, you’re being told what to do, you’ve got to get your bottom line up or you’re out. You can’t say, ‘Here’s my analysis of the situation. Here’s where we ought to be. We’re going to get money from here, and we need these people.’ It was phenomenal, just phenomenal.

The difficult side of independence from the control of headquarters was taking responsibility for all external relations with government officials and, most notably, donors. To put together a coherent portfolio of projects, a country director might have to juggle as many as a dozen different
sources of funds, each of which might have different reporting requirements and different programming priorities, if not divergent philosophies of development.

But many country directors appeared to relish such challenges. Common wisdom among country directors held that greater autonomy and the possibility of transfer to a more desirable assignment came with increasing the size of a country’s portfolio of programs as well as diversifying the sources of funding for those programs. Shelly Williams, deputy regional manager for Africa in the 1980s, explains, “[In the 1970s and 1980s], success meant growth, new contracts, the ability to expand or at least remain the same size.” Marlowe comments:

The value system in the organization, and to some degree still, but very much more then, rewarded you for the size of your program, mostly in terms of money but also in terms of numbers: people affected, size and complexity of infrastructure; impressive monthly cash flows, that sort of thing.

Some country directors, but by no means all, were motivated to succeed so that they could move up the hierarchy to senior management positions at the San Francisco headquarters. As common among country directors, however, was the desire for a “plum” assignment—a lateral move to a country that matched their interests more closely or that offered potential for greater independence and stimulating challenges. Many country directors were quite content staying in the field; typically, they had been with PFD for eight years or more, working their way up from project staff to assistant country director finally to head their own operation.

The Structure of PFD Dongola

The independence of country directors meant that the size, vitality and organization of country offices might vary as widely as the talents, interests and energies of the director. Nonetheless, each followed a basic structure, usually with a country’s administrative headquarters in the capital city and satellite offices set up throughout the country to manage the daily affairs of PFD’s projects in the field.

Around the time of Smith’s arrival in 1989, PFD Dongola was a typical mid-sized country office. (See Exhibit 2.) It employed 250 people, most of whom were in the field, and had a program budget of $3 million from 8 different donors, a large and diverse portfolio for Africa but small in comparison with the operations of PFD elsewhere in the developing world. In 1989, that budget covered six projects, four of which dealt with improving agriculture and preserving natural resources; one addressed children’s health and nutritional needs; and the last focused solely on improving water resources.
The country director had three people who reported directly to her: a chief financial officer who was Dongolan and two expatriate assistant country directors, one in charge of administration and one who guided and supported the country’s programs, taking primary responsibility for the design, implementation, and evaluation of projects in the field. These managers, in turn, directed the activities of a bevy of others, both at headquarters and in the field. The other headquarters staff, mostly Dongolans, included accountants, procurement agents, and technical advisors, along with an expatriate garage manager and Dongolan mechanics who maintained a fleet of some 70 vehicles that included two dozen heavy trucks.

Outside of Dibe, Dongola’s capital, and the location of headquarters, PFD had four sub-offices that oversaw its six projects. Each sub-office was managed by a project director, or a sub-office coordinator where there were multiple projects. The project directors, four out of five of whom were either American or European, worked with Dongolan assistant directors and field agents. The sub-office in Deville was the largest, with close to 100 staff working on three projects, each of which had budgets of approximately $500,000; staffing at the other three offices varied from 30 to 50 people. (See Exhibit 3: Map.)

Overview of Dongola

Given that PFD was the world’s third largest international development non-profit, its presence seemed inevitable in Dongola, among the poorest nations on the planet. By any indicator of health, welfare or education, most of Dongola’s nine million inhabitants lived under conditions that the average citizen of an industrialized country would consider untenable. (See Exhibit 4.) As of 1991 in Dongola, one out of ten children died before age five and those surviving into adulthood lived, on average, only into their forties, a life expectancy one-third shorter than those of industrialized countries. Only two of five people had access to safe drinking water: less than one out of six to medical services. Three-quarters of adult males were illiterate, and 95 percent of Dongolan women had never been to school.

Working in Dongola presented challenges that development professionals were accustomed to finding wherever they worked in the developing world. At the time of Smith’s arrival, Dongola, a former French colony, was under the control of President Joseph Adébayo, who had ruled the country in relative peace for two decades at the price of repressing all political activity other than that of his own party. According to observers, Adébayo’s rule had “drained and dissipated the nation’s resources.”¹ The country’s lack of basic infrastructure presented an imposing barrier to economic development. Even within Dibe, the capital, but especially in the towns where the sub-offices were located, electricity, telephones, adequate supplies of safe drinking water and functioning sewage systems were often difficult to come by, with interruptions in service common. The country office

itself, with over two dozen staff, had only one phone, and no fax. Nor did the central garage across
town from headquarters have a phone; dispatching vehicles had to be done by courier.

Trips out to the sub-offices were major expeditions. The country was vast, the largest in
Africa, equivalent to twice the size of Texas, and most roads were in poor repair. The closest sub-
office, Deville, could only be reached by Land Rover after six hours of bumpy and dusty travel. To
reach another office in the town of Tukolor on the edge of the Sahara, required two full days of
travel—and adequate supplies of fuel, food, and drinking water in case of breakdown or unforeseen
delays.

Despite the difficult economic and environmental plight of the country, development
professionals held out hope for Dongola’s agricultural potential. Were it not for two severe and long-
lasting droughts, the first in the mid-1970s and the second a decade later, conditions in Dongola
might have been far different by the late 1980s and PdD’s presence less essential. Although the
country was landlocked and mostly desert in its northern half, the southern part of the country held
an important river and its floodplain, as vital to the country and the region as the Nile was to Egypt.
Up until the 1970s, the country had been a net exporter of foods grown in this fertile inland delta,
which supported over 80 percent of the population on less than 30 percent of the land. But lack of rain
through the 1980s repeatedly withered the river, causing the crops to fail and famine to spread.

To the north of the river’s floodplain on the fringes of the Sahara in what was known as the
Sahel, the lack of rainfall proved particularly devastating to the groups of nomadic herdsmen who made
up some 10 percent of the country’s population. These pastoralists lost not only their livestock but
were fast losing an entire way of life that had, in the past, ensured their survival against seemingly
overwhelming environmental odds.

**PfD Dongola Background**

PfD arrived in Dongola on the heels of the mid-1970s famine. By 1976 when the office was
founded, the worst of the famine had passed, and foreign aid agencies, particularly the United States
Agency for International Development (USAID) were seeking ways of preventing a repeat of the
same crisis.

**Relief, Rehab, Development.** The sequence of activities undertaken by PfD Dongola in these
eyears recapitulates the progression of development programs, a supposedly evolutionary
sequence of projects beginning with those that relied on handouts and ending with those that inspired
self-sufficiency. Emergency relief efforts—the direct distribution of food to keep people alive—lay at
the dependent end of that continuum. In this vein, PfD Dongola embarked on some very modest food
distribution efforts in the years immediately after the drought.
As the crisis waned, however, the office’s focus shifted towards projects considered “rehabilitative.” “Rehab” was the next step up from relief, with activities that attempted to rebuild the foundation of self-sustenance by giving people such things as tools, seeds and livestock feed; or by rebuilding the basic infrastructure that sustained normal activities, which, for PID Dongola, entailed refurbishing schools.

All these efforts, in an ideal world, should lead to the penultimate plateau of actual “development” projects (with the ultimate destination being independence from outside assistance altogether). These were projects that focused not on the direct provision of goods and services but on the creation of “local systems and processes,” as one PID staff member puts it, that would lead to self-sufficiency. By the early 1980s, PID Dongola had developed a portfolio of a few small projects that lay somewhere between “rehab” and “development,” involving the promotion of community tree planting to stem desertification and the digging and upkeep of deep-bore wells to give communities new supplies of potable water.

Although the projects were small, they gave PID an important foothold in the country by building goodwill for the organization’s efforts among international donors and Dongolan government officials. “They [government officials] knew that we could get things done in remote and rural areas, and our logistics were really good,” recalls Bill Stern, who helped establish PID’s offices in Africa. Most important, Stern says, “We worked through them, we didn’t work independently of them, and we respected their authority. They saw us as part of their capacity.”

The Second Famine. The reputation PID had established in its first decade in Dongola proved crucial to the office’s rapid expansion during the second decade. Rains once again failed in the early 1980s, and famine became inevitable. The Dongolan government and USAID approached PID to handle a major portion of the emergency food distribution, and in late 1985 and early 1986, the worst period of the drought, PID fed three-quarters of a million people as the country’s largest distributor of free food. Its efforts were particularly crucial in the hardest hit and most remote northern region of the country. Due to the drought, the development-oriented projects came to a standstill as PID built up an emergency capability that included additional personnel, a fleet of two dozen heavy trucks, and a network of garages and warehouses. One PID report estimated the value of this physical infrastructure for emergency response at $1.5 million, two and one-half times the program budget of the mission in the years preceding the drought.

Walker’s Legacy

The person responsible for PID’s success during this period was a country director brought in from Latin America, where he had engineered a far more massive relief effort. According to Stern, the

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2 In terms of the overused Chinese maxim about teaching a man to fish, as opposed to serving up the fish, “relief” was the latter, “development” the former, and “rehab” something akin to stocking the pond and handing out fishing rods. Even this simple example shows that the distinctions among terms are hard to fix.
director, Jim Walker, was "brilliant," "tireless" and "hard driving."" It's Doctor Jim Walker," Stern emphasizes. "He produces ideas." Walker held a doctorate in international relations and was fluent in several languages.

**Back to Development.** Walker proved successful not only in managing the rapid escalation of the relief effort, but also in re-establishing and expanding the mission's development portfolio once the emergency had ended. Walker was able to pull together two necessary parts of the development equation to get projects underway: interest on the part of local government officials and support from international donors. Based on the reputation PID had established during the crisis, several local government officials were eager to continue PID's involvement in their regions. Moreover, in the wake of international concern, both governmental and non-governmental donors rapidly expanded the funds available to the region in order to get development projects underway.

Walker had little trouble finding two major donors to fund new projects: USAID and Denmark's equivalent foreign aid agency, DANIDA. He used funds from these agencies to set up five new projects in the span of two years, 1986 to 1988, as well as to resuscitate another project that had been put on hold during the drought.

While the overall PID-Dongola project budget remained relatively stable over these years, the proportion of funds devoted to relief and rehabilitation versus those for development shifted dramatically. In fiscal year 1987 (July 1986 to June 1987) over 50 percent of the program budget of $3 million was devoted to food transport or the direct provision of seeds and tools. By fiscal year 1989, relief and rehabilitation accounted for only 10 percent of the program budget, with the six development projects making up the remainder of the $2.4 million budget.

At PID headquarters in San Francisco, Walker won high praise for his initiative. He "put PID Dongola on the map" says one headquarters manager. He did so particularly at a time when PID Dongola was receiving little support from headquarters due to major administrative and programming problems in other African countries. The regional manager of Africa at the time was busy fighting fires in other countries, as well as helping to set up a new PID office in a neighboring country. Walker already had a reputation as a "strong country director" and could be left on his own, says Shelly Williams, PID's Regional Manager for Africa. Moreover, he was doing precisely what the organization valued most in its country directors, expanding and diversifying the country's program portfolio.

**Smith Steps In**

Sharon Smith felt herself fortunate to be given Dongola as her first country directorship with PID. She knew the country and the region well from her days as a staff for DEWVO, another NGO.

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3 Most of the Danish-assisted projects were funded by DANIDA.
She enjoyed working with Dongolans, whom she had found to be hospitable, trustworthy, and hard-working. The country was politically stable; although the civil servants went on strike from time to time, the violence that compounded the difficulty of carrying out projects in many developing countries was absent in Dongola. PdD Dongola seemed to be quite stable, too. Her predecessor, Walker, had left her with a broad portfolio of projects—agriculture, forestry, water resources, child health—in several different geographical areas. Perhaps most important in assuring the stability of the mission, the funding base for those projects was equally diverse; because of the Danish involvement, PdD Dongola was not solely dependent on USAID for major support. Moreover, the public focus on the region in the wake of the famine brought with it a steady supply of private funds, not only from donations directly to PdD in San Francisco, but also through organizations specifically established for famine relief that had since turned their attention to development, such as USA for Africa, the celebrity-backed foundation that sponsored the “We Are the World” fund-raising concert in the mid-1980s.

Program Problems

Soon after Smith arrived in 1989, she faced a crisis that would prove a difficult test of her programmatic administrative skills. As she was a new country director, PdD’s San Francisco office began to pay closer attention to activities in Dongola. “People wanted to see how she was doing, to provide her with guidance and support and supervision,” says Shelly Williams. This meant not only visits from her direct supervisor, but also from the Technical Assistance Group, particularly the new regional technical advisor of a section that covered “ANR” projects, or Agriculture and Natural Resources, a category that encompassed four of the six projects extent in Dongola. His evaluation of two ANR projects, an internal report prepared to meet donor requirements, gave Smith a new—and unexpected—view of the operations she had inherited.

The ANR Template. The Salvo project was Dongola’s oldest and incorporated a number of reforestation, agroforestry and soil conservation techniques, which were gaining popularity across the Sahel. After the drought in the mid-1980’s, the same design was used for projects in other areas of the country. “There was a kind of blueprint,” says Smith. “A lot of donors were interested, so we had a kind of template project design.” The ANR template called for supplying materials and technical assistance through a cadre of extension agents to help villagers in three integrated areas:

- “agroforestry” (nursery production of tree seedlings, live fences, and protection of natural regeneration);
- agricultural (vegetable gardening, introduction of new seed varieties);
• soil conservation (contour plowing, construction of small earthworks to preserve water and prevent erosion).4

These activities were aimed at bolstering food production while conserving the “land, water and energy assets against natural and man-made destruction,”5 according to a proposal for one of the projects.6

The regional technical advisor claimed that the ANR projects he examined had run into the same difficulties in each of the main program areas. A later report by the head of the ANR section in San Francisco summarized:

• The projects were too optimistic about what can be achieved in the very marginal environments they operate in.

• Tree planting is not a very viable option in these environments, both because of slow growth and because ... the Government owns all trees (e.g., villagers do not have an incentive to plant and nurture what can never belong to them).

• A number of recommended techniques were commonly practiced by local farmers prior to the project. Thus, some technical packages probably added little to the local knowledge base, e.g. vegetable gardening, and the protection of natural regeneration.

• The projects did not use studies, baseline information, or other feedback to question whether their activities addressed the priority needs of the target population.7

? The projects were successful in measuring outputs of project activities (e.g., number of seedlings distributed, trees protected, or gardens receiving technical assistance), but were unable to measure improvements in agricultural production or in labor efficiency.

The regional technical advisor critiqued not only the premise of the projects but also the integrity of the administrative structure that supported them.8

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4 Project document.
5 Ibid.
6 The two other projects underway in Dongola were more limited in scope, although of equivalent scale.
7 Trip Report.
8 Some at PD's San Francisco headquarters came to believe that if not for the free distribution of benefits to participants, many of the projects would have little to show for the tremendous effort and millions of dollars put into them. Three years after the end of the drought, several of the projects relied heavily on providing free benefits either as compensation for work performed or as an incentive to use the particular approaches advocated in the project design. For the construction of dikes, for example, farmers received 6 kilograms of grain per day. Field agents handed out seedlings from central nurseries, rather than encouraging farmers to establish their own nurseries. (The key indicator of success in this aspect of the project was the number of seedlings distributed, akin to counting the number of fish handed out in the “fish or teach fishing” development dichotomy.) “People were really just interested in food and subsidies rather than the actual project activities,” says Shelly Williams, deputy regional manager for Africa and during Smith's first years in Dongola. “Any participation in the project was shadow participation.”