

1. Topic of research and countries visited.

With this research grant I extended my research and analysis of “best practices” in community participation and the complexities that confront international development organizations as they transfer community participation models abroad. I explored the dynamics of US-funded humanitarian aid and development agencies fostering parent-teacher associations (PTAs) in foreign contexts and the subsequent ability of these associations to pursue political opportunities. My research was conducted in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

2. Relevance and contribution to field: For policy Research and Development Scholars, please provide a brief description of the scholarly impact and policy significance of your research.

As the importance of nongovernmental organizations and emphasis on civil society has risen dramatically in the past decade, support for local civic organizations has also increased, particularly among international NGOs (INGOs). This trend has had an especially strong effect on the sector of education. An interest in education is believed to motivate political participation among parents, particularly women, committed to improving their children’s welfare, and it is therefore seen as a focal point for building civil society and increasing tolerance within and among communities. Most major international emergency and development organizations now include an education component in their programs for countries in conflict and transition. In this context, parent-teacher associations have moved into the spotlight.

Social scientists and humanitarian aid practitioners alike consider small civic associations such as PTAs to be ideal units for the building blocks of civil society and to hold particular promise for repairing social fabric that has been damaged by conflict. As a result, many international organizations administering aid in foreign countries promote PTAs as providers of multiple benefits for school and society. These are high praises for small organizations. Few studies have examined whether parent teacher associations provide the benefits to civil society in the ways that prominent theorists claim that they do.

This study contributes to the current research on social capital and civil society, civic engagement, and political opportunities in countries in transition by adding data and analysis from programs fostered by international nongovernmental organizations. Although much is made of PTAs and their social and political benefits, the corresponding scientific analysis is limited at home and abroad.

This study examined the conventional wisdom regarding community participation by mapping and analyzing the roles and strategies played by INGOs in transferring best practices abroad and by PTAs in adopting or adapting these models. Although their good intentions may be genuine, INGOs must cater to donors and other interested parties in order to realize their programs. The resulting mixture of activities, priorities, and short-term projects can prevent INGOs from

engaging their local counterparts in lasting community mobilization. Making deals with donors and restricting themselves to prescribed timeframes, decreases the INGOs' legitimacy in the eyes of program participants. In the case of education reform models that focus on community participation, if decentralization occurs without empowerment, without links to the global polity, it poses a danger for local communities. When INGOs move on to the next project, a layer of local field staff facilitators (animators, sustainability trainers, fund-raisers) may disappear along with them, leaving isolated, autonomous community members, without lasting links to functioning networks, frustrated and often devoid of resources. This research addressed critical issues necessary to begin to fill that space and provide grounding for reforms in aid policy to improve civil society building efforts.

3. A concise summary of your approach and research methodology including a list of research sites.

The IREX summer travel grant provided support for the final phase of a multipart, qualitative research study examining the issues listed above. The research started in 1999 and continued through summer 2002. In previous phases of the research, extensive interviews were conducted with parents and teachers who participated in the program in eight urban and rural locations throughout BiH. The data was analyzed using qualitative methods to first, aggregate the categories looking for themes to emerge, then code the data, and search for patterns. I used process-tracing to analyze particular sequences of events. With this travel grant, I reviewed the current state of civil society development and educational policy in BiH with colleagues at international agencies and with local educators, and discussed my findings with these colleagues.

4. A summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions.

Assumptions about the importance of parent-teacher associations in the US underpin their design in most of the humanitarian programs carried out abroad. My research shows that their performance is mixed. Simply fostering and maintaining an organization focused on providing a service is not sufficient to produce the multiple benefits described above, they must also maintain links to political power. In addition, since most members of PTAs are women, gender politics further exclude them from policy decisions and political representation. Yet many international organizations continue to promote parent involvement in schools without analyzing whether PTAs provide authentic or symbolic participation and without thoroughly cultivating these political links.

This case study of parent-teacher associations formed to support a preschool education program in Bosnia-Herzegovina shows that INGOs may be successful at satisfying the short term emergency needs of their program beneficiaries, but the long-term goals of social mobilization and transformation may continue to elude them if they do not focus on cultivating political links for program participants.

5. Suggestions for future research agendas in your field for the scholarly community.

This study provides critical insights into these issues as well as background for expanded quantitative research to explore the impact on transitions to democracy in the future, and the link between an emphasis on community participation and empowerment.

6. Any recommendations for the US Policy Community.

As many policy-makers know, long-term social change and local participation that is linked beyond the confines of a single village is rarely accomplished by outsiders organizing brief training sessions to train poor, disenfranchised people to create civic associations. Some INGOs are beginning to change their work style. Instead of building field offices abroad and transferring educational models and best practices, they form lasting, rooted partnerships with local citizens and organizations. These local educators may request innovative approaches to education from their foreign counterparts. The linking of local educators and organizations to international groups can be a powerful advocacy tool for local groups to use to promote their own vision of their education systems. Networks among international and national NGOs can provide local educators with essential information to form future education policy. Given these conditions, it is possible to foster the equivalent of highly functioning PTAs and increase social mobilization as a result.