

Date: 30 October 2010
To: Colleagues and Researchers
From: Terry Bergdall
Re: **Learning from the Past for Shaping the Future**

Background: These thoughts are based on reflections I had during a long 15-hour flight from Delhi to Chicago following the General Assembly gathering of ICA International (ICAI) in Talegaon, India, 20-26 October 2010. It was a creative meeting attended by twenty-five people representing ten national ICAs. Eight other national ICAs participated in daily real-time virtual participation sessions that occurred through voice conversations, chat interaction, and review of draft documents. This was an unprecedented global consensus process for ICA. Along with almost everyone who was involved, I am encouraged by the conclusions reached and feel that immediate contradictions have been addressed. However, while we have some helpful protocols and good will for “peer-to-peer” support, our global network of national ICAs largely consists of organizations that are long on ambition but relatively short on capacity to deliver. This certainly includes ICA-USA. The truth is, regardless of the underlying quality of our programs, we are on the front end of some very modest undertakings.

Rather than a lament, I consider this to be a fair acknowledgement of our current situation. As a primary promoter of “start small and grow organically,” I am pleased that we made significant decisions to move forward in this manner. Still, I also feel that we have not yet truly reflected upon the fullness of our collective journey over several decades of service nor have we garnered all of the insights that might be had about our past experience. As someone who is driven by a desire to oversee an institutional transition of ICA to a new generation of leadership, I seek ways to push our reflections to a deeper level.

Proposition: Though it was not the only one (many antecedents can be found), I think ICA was 10-15 years ahead of the times with its pioneering work in bottom-up participatory development during the early 1980s. Indeed, such an approach has now become the norm of best practices among most mainline international development organizations. This includes large NGOs like Mercy Corps, CARE, and Save the Children, etc, as well as multi-lateral and bi-lateral projects funded by international development agencies.

Question: Why has ICA been unable to institutionally bring its edge work to scale? My intuition tells me that answers to this have to do with our internal culture as an organization. I think about the incredibly emotional struggle at Talegaon to agree upon a way to symbolize consensus. Most organizations simply do not suffer from such angst. What is going on? Are there unconscious elements at play? What does this, and other cultural dimensions, reveal about taking programs to scale? Some might argue that our unique culture is precisely what is needed. Perhaps ICA’s true gift is to play a prophetic role rather than a high profile public role in the implementation of large expansive programs. I, however, would like to think that there is a way to combine the two. I also think that unless it can successfully take some programs to a larger scale, ICA is not likely to thrive in the future.

I am sharing this with people who have been familiar with ICA over the years and who bring an analytic perspective to the discussion. What views do you have on my question? What are possible ways of digging to a deeper understanding? Is there external research that might assist us? I would greatly appreciate any thoughts that you might have to offer. Thanks, and take care.