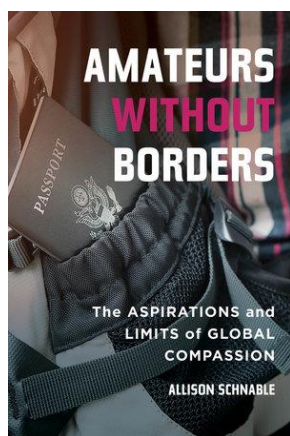


BOOK REVIEW

Amateurs without Borders: The Aspirations and Limits of Global Compassion

By Allison Schnable

Reviewed by Carrie A. Miles



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\$29.95

The audience for whom this book will prove most useful is also the one most likely to be offended by the use of the word “amateur” in the title. But author Allison Schnable does not intend “amateur” to mean incompetents bungling around the developing world. Rather, she uses the word in its original meaning for one who loves, or people who engage in a pursuit from *amor* (love) rather than on a paid, professional basis. Schnable contrasts the organizations such amateurs create, which she calls “grassroots” international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), with more formal INGOs staffed by development professionals. Run by volunteers whose motivation is primarily personal and expressive rather than result-oriented and technical, these small, amateur groups comprise a rising tide in international development.

While this new breed of volunteers is made up of amateurs in the sense that they are neither trained in development nor part of organizations like World Vision or the Peace Corps, the term is not intended to imply that they are unskilled in the services they provide internationally. Indeed, participants in grassroots INGOs may be, among other things, water quality engineers, educators, businesspeople, or doctors by

profession. Unlike employees of professional INGOs, however, who are paid and likely live in the countries where they serve, amateurs “remain embedded in their careers and communities in the United States” (4). While the much larger professional INGOs have grown into impersonal bureaucracies run by professional managers, grassroots INGOs rely on personal relationships with both supporters and recipients.

Schnable identified grassroots INGOs from the U.S. tax rolls of international 501(c)(3) organizations. The book reports on (1) what Schnable finds from those rolls, (2) a content analysis of the websites of a random sample of 150 of them, and (3) her in-depth case studies of five. The number of INGOs with tax-exempt status, both grassroots and professional, has grown rapidly, from 1,000 in 1990, to 13,030 in 2015. Most of these organizations are small, with annual budgets of \$25,000 or less. Among the examples of grassroots INGO projects in developing countries are those that provide clean water, solar energy, medical equipment and requisite training to use it, vocational training, scholarships, markets for arts and crafts, schools, orphan projects, and sanitary products that allow girls to attend school.

Given that opportunities to participate in professional efforts are extremely limited, and that the cost of working internationally has been dropping rapidly, Schnable’s study provides the important insight that grassroots INGOs are likely to play an increasingly large role in international humanitarian outreach. In addition, for practitioners, her observations about the limitations of amateur organizations offer relief from the pressures of trying to be what they are not. For example, leaders of amateur agencies can be overwhelmed by suggestions for marketing and fundraising offered by enthusiastic friends and growth consultants. Yet Schnable finds that amateurs’ funding and labor come “almost exclusively [from] individual donors within the leaders’ personal networks” (160). This suggests that amateurs may do better to focus on developing those relationships, rather than wasting time creating Instagram or Facebook appeals that no one outside their network will ever see.

Because most grassroots INGOs focus on personal relationships and providing goods and services, Schnable considers them to offer charity rather than actual development programming. Lacking knowledge of the practices of development, as well as any in-depth knowledge of local culture, language, and previous development programs, amateur efforts, Schnable argues, can be inefficient. On the other hand, her discussion of the goals of professional development suggests that professional INGOs are not efficient either. Citing the inside-back cover material from the 1991 volume of *World Development*, Schnable finds a statement of development goals that lists

improving standards of living, and the human condition generally, by examining potential solutions to problems such as: poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, disease, illiteracy, lack of shelter, environmental degradation, inadequate scientific and technological resources, trade and payments imbalances, international debt, gender and ethnic discrimination, violation of human rights, militarism and civil conflict, and lack of popular participation in economic and political life (“Aims and Scope”).

In answer to the question of what development professionals “actually do, day to day, to bring about” their goals, Schnable replies, “Mainly, they talk.” Meetings and trainings are their primary activity (79). In the meantime, Schnable admits, too much of the delivery of the kind of aid originally offered by INGOs, such as wells, food, and education, which seem to be what recipients really want, falls to the amateurs (80).

Schnable includes a chapter on the role of religion in these organizations, noting that many grassroots INGOs are associated with churches and that recipients of their services are usually local congregations (Chapter 7). Religious networks provide support for amateur organizations on numerous levels, including providing the conceptual framework for understanding what they offer, initial contact in the host country, financial support, volunteer labor, and, finally, ongoing supervision of projects in the Global South. One item CRDA readers might take as a caution is her observation that as religiously-motivated INGOs become more professionalized and dependent on government grants, they lose much of their religious identity and begin to operate much like their secular counterparts. In general, however, when Schnable discusses the role of religion in amateur agencies, she seems to get things backwards, implying a deliberate intent on their part to “use” religion in service of their charitable goals. Such an attribution overlooks the possibility that the motives

driving these amateur aid-agencies are not a thing separate from religion, but an integral part of it.

If there is a weakness in Schnable’s analysis, it is that by attributing amateurs’ dependence on personal relationships to their personal preferences, she misses the better explanation found in the structural constraints amateurs face by virtue of being amateurs. Amateurs have, by definition, no established infrastructure to give them entry into their target country. They must, of necessity, rely on personal contacts even to get started. In addition, because grassroots INGO volunteers do not live in the country they serve, any project that continues in their absence requires the involvement of nationals, who also participate in the project through personal relationships. Without marketing departments, advertising budgets, or grant-writers, amateurs must, once again, rely on personal relationships for financial support and volunteer labor. Although Schnable later notes that religious amateur groups “use” religious networks to replace the infrastructure of professional agencies for initial entry and for sustaining action in the host country, she appears unaware of the extent to which these connections themselves spring, by necessity, from personal relationships.

Schnable continues by describing grassroots INGOs as “supply-driven with strong expressive characteristics,” writing that amateur organizations “emerge from the entrepreneurial initiative of a founder whose own tastes and energies play a determining role in shaping the organization” (184-5). She is certainly right, to a degree; yet being supply-driven does not necessarily distinguish amateur from professional, and expressive needs ultimately have little to do with how amateurs operate. Schnable offers clear evidence that professional INGOs are also very much driven by taste, not that of their staff, but of their funders. She cites Monika Krause (2014), who writes that professional INGO employees spend much of their time on the look-out for “good projects” - i.e., new programs that meet the demands of possible funders rather than the needs and interests of the recipients. It may be that one of the problems is that in some cases the “goals of development” are abstract/intangible, and the programs funders support often lack practical value for their intended recipients. Unable or unwilling to miss a day of work to attend a program of no perceived value to them, potential recipients may be understandably reluctant to attend. Schnable probably did not come across this practice in her case studies, but in some countries, professional INGOs motivate attendance at their programs by paying participants a “per diem” stipend (Jones 2006; Ribakare n.d.). Grassroots INGOs, however, do not have the resources to get away with offering services that their national partners do not want. Those that survive beyond the expressive

enthusiasm of an initial trip abroad must balance what they want to provide with what their intended recipients would like to receive. Otherwise, nothing happens on the ground. Having the flexibility to work with recipients to meet these needs is, in my opinion, the strength of the amateur INGO movement.

Despite this quibble, *Amateurs without Borders* offers valuable information and insights. I have already recommended it to several friends who run such “amateur” agencies and I recommend it to the *CRDA* community.

References

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