
PRAXIS Interviews Practitioners: Dalya Massachi

Dalya Massachi is executive director of BAIDO (Bay Area International Development Organizations, www.baido.org). She holds an M.A. in International Development and Communications from Ohio University, and has worked with non-profit organizations for well over a decade. She is currently writing a book on Americans becoming globally aware and active.

EXPLAIN THE GENESIS OF BAIDO, THE CONSORTIUM OF BAY AREA DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATIONS. WHEN AND WHY WAS IT CREATED? WHY DO WE NEED ORGANIZATIONS LIKE BAIDO?

The BAIDO network has roots dating back nearly 10 years. It began as an informal grouping of representatives of five to ten NGOs that met to discuss common concerns. As an un-funded group of time-pressed folks, it met infrequently and eventually became inactive.

In early 2000, BAIDO member organizations began to discuss working together more closely. The San Francisco Bay Area is home to the largest number

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of NGOs outside of the New York/Washington, D.C. area. We believe that by networking and sharing resources we can be a model for the nation of how civil society in a local or regional area can work together to reach the wider public. As we work with our neighbors, we can provide information and opportunities to make a difference on issues that affect people living in both the global South and North. BAIDO has already become a key asset for the Bay Area community.

Three problems lie at the core of BAIDO:

1. The lack of deep analysis—and ensuing action—by the vast majority of the general

public about global development challenges and effective ways of addressing them. The U.S. holds vast potential for being a powerful actor in promoting nonviolent, positive global development. But its residents lack the action plan they need to become deeply involved. In the experience of BAIDO member organizations, many Bay Area residents are hungry for information about local-global connections and positive, people-centered solutions to global problems. They also want to be involved in implementing these solutions. Clearly, since September 11, this need is more urgent than ever.

2. The lack of capacity among Bay Area NGOs to communicate effectively on their own with the larger public. The vast majority of international NGOs in the Bay Area are small and low-profile. As a result, most Bay Area residents are either unaware of us, or do not have a convenient, integrated, and low-cost way to learn about our work to build local-global connections.
3. Bay Area NGOs often have only limited knowledge of *each other*. Due to their extremely limited resources, they have very few opportunities to share information, forge collaborations, and thus strengthen the civil society sector working on issues of social and environmental justice.

We believe it is crucial to create an organized, high-profile public presence for a community's existing local-global resources: NGOs, socially responsible businesses, academics, houses of worship, civic organizations, immigrant groups, and so forth. It has never been more urgent—or more possible—to organize and focus the public eye on local-global work.

Many people in the U.S. are eager to discuss how they have the power to make a positive impact on the 'global village.' Their interest and willingness to act on global concerns is at an all-time high and promises to grow. With a network like BAIDO, people not yet involved with these issues can easily plug into grassroots global development movements in their many shapes and sizes.

So far our work has been wildly successful. Thousands of people around the world have joined the BAIDO community, a central place for them to congregate, volunteer, and/or begin sharing information both online and offline. And we have only just begun.

WHAT MOTIVATES YOU TO DO THE WORK YOU DO WITH BAIDO?

I have been interested and involved in global development issues since childhood. Both my undergraduate and graduate degrees are in the field, and I have done extensive travel abroad. I also have a strong background in writing and communications, and wanted to merge the two fields in a way that would

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take NGOs to the next level. I have been frustrated by a lot of duplication, re-invention of the wheel, opportunities lost, and wasted effort on the part of NGOs because there is not yet a solid tradition of collaboration. I want to change this.

Actually, my long-term goal is to make global awareness and action the norm in U.S. communities. Americans will understand and act upon local ties to global issues: they will begin to identify themselves as part of a global development movement whose concerns and actions compel those in power to take notice. I believe that, in addition to more traditional organizing strategies, both the Internet and the mass media are important tools for building and strengthening this social change.

I am writing a book that expands on many of the previously mentioned ideas and will be part of the very movement it will document. In addition, it will explore why the journey toward becoming globally aware and active can be such a challenging—and worthwhile—process.

THE THEME OF THIS EDITION OF PRAXIS IS "DEVELOPMENT IN TRANSITION." IS THE PRACTICE OF INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRULY IN TRANSITION?

I think the practice of international development has always been in transition. In the last 50 years we have seen several models of development take hold only to undergo continuous revisions or even paradigm shifts. This is a good thing, in my opinion, as it shows that our field is learning from mistakes and responding to new challenges.

I will only speak here about the NGO sector in the Bay Area. This is important, because my experience has shown me that there is often a difference between west coast and east coast NGOs. I would say there is definitely a movement away from the traditional 'charity' sense of development into more of a solidarity, capacity-building, and empowerment model. There is also much more emphasis on critical or emerging social issues and how they relate to a society's overall development, for instance, in women's lives, HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation, economic globalization, and so on.

The UN conferences of the past decade have also played an important role in including NGO voices in international policy debates. In addition, the Social Summits held in Porto Alegre, Brazil in the past couple of years have been central to helping mobilize civil society global development movements.

With the Internet revolution has come new questions and opportunities: how can NGOs best use powerful online tools to improve our work, invite others to join us, and boost our effectiveness and efficiency? As a sector, as we become more comfortable with new technologies, I believe we will be able to use them to improve our outreach to both the press and the general public.

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE MOST PRESSING CHALLENGE FACING DEVELOPMENT PRACTITIONERS TODAY?

The most pressing challenges are both old and new.

The long-time problems of the lack of adequate funding, insufficient management capacity, and the tendency to 'preach to the converted' run rampant.

Our sector often gets caught up in competing for funds, press coverage, and the like. I think it is crucial for us to get beyond this traditional stance of exclusively worrying about our individual interests and

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move into a collaborative space, where our shared or related issues will become a central concern of our NGO community. This is what I call "moving from 'me' to 'we.'" In the final analysis, we all want to see a better world and we share many of the same visions for what that will look like. I believe it is time now to work together to create that new reality and invite others to join us.

INTERNATIONAL NON-PROFIT AGENCIES FACE INCREASING PRESSURE TO PROFESSIONALIZE THEIR OPERATIONS WHILE STILL REMAINING TRUE TO THEIR VISION AND FLEXIBILITY. DO YOU HAVE AN EXAMPLE OF AN ORGANIZATION THAT WAS ABLE TO UNDERGO THIS SHIFT EFFECTIVELY?

I think both funders and, to some extent, the general public, are applying this pressure. As budgets become leaner, high efficiency is crucial to success. I think the more streamlined the NGO's work the better for all concerned. For cutting-edge, start-up NGOs like BAIDO, entrepreneurial skills and capital are important. In addition, other business concepts such as marketing, partnering, adding value, and business plans, can go a long way in improving NGOs. We have a lot to learn from the for-profit sector.

However, I am concerned that as NGOs professionalize less and less space will remain for experimentation with new or changing ideas, especially with demands for short-term, concrete outcomes. NGOs operate best when they adopt both short-term and long-term perspectives in their work. With access to only partial, time-limited funding their ability to plan beyond one to two years decreases.

I also think NGOs could use volunteers in much more productive ways, and I am afraid that as they professionalize they will lose sight of this great untapped resource. ■