



Springloop Cooperatie U. A.

Meidoornlaan 6, 8024 AX Zwolle, The Netherlands.

tel: +31 38 338-0865; mob: +31 62 876-3255/ +31 65 245 1414 website www.springloop.nl

email: <anne@springloop.nl> kvk: 52294684; VAT number: NL 850381460B01;

IBAN: NL 18 TRIO 0198 5027 45, tnv Springloop Cooperatie U.A., 8024 AX Zwolle



The Art of Absence, A garbologist's reflection of 15 years working at WASTE in Gouda, the Netherlands. *Presentation Given for CordAid Urban Matters, March, 2011.*

Part 1. Absence as a positive value

The seed for this talk was planted a few weeks ago by a Swiss consultant in in the Les Palmes region of Haiti, where we work on municipal reconstruction with VNGI. The focus of our project is to return the ownership and management of waste and water functions to the four mayors of the municipalities in the region. The Swiss, lets call him Pierre, complained bitterly to our stagiare, Rachel, because of our *absence*. The fact that we don't have a long-term resident consultant for him to talk to and co-ordinate with is a problem for him.

The title for this talk, "the art of absence," came up when I explained this to my husband Hans, in one of the many walks te take to tell about our work and exchange and clarify ideas. In 12 years working at WASTE, on top of 20 years working as a waste management consultant in Europe and North America, I have come to believe that the idea of creative and committed *absence* is critical to supporting sustainable and positive change in development co-operation. In a larger sense the ideas in this talk have been harvested from five years of partnership between WASTE and VNGI, supporting North-South co-operation on waste management. While I don't focus only on urban slums, the topics I cover are highly relevant to them as well.

WASTE was founded 27 years ago, in July 1984, by two returned SNV-ers, Arnold van de Klundert and Jaap Rijnsburger, in response to their perceptions of the problems of *presence* in development co-operation. They noticed that long-term placements – the development co-operation adaptation of the missionary model – may result in measurable results in the short term, but that in most cases both the results and the knowledge leave when the white, middle-class, Northern volunteer returns to their home country. Jaap and Arnold created an organisation with a goal of *absence*, that so that knowledge built up in the host country is anchored and owned locally, and stays *there* when the consultant, volunteer, intern, or project manager goes home.

Why is this absence important? Because as long as "we" are *there*, with the ideas, the technical knowledge, the university education, and the money, then – unless we are very careful – the decisions, the results, and the knowledge all belong to us. We *do* have more of certain kinds of knowledge, and we *do* have good ideas, but they are not necessarily the same as those of our partners and their constituents, who are the reason for our projects in Kenya, Costa Rica, Nepal, or Haiti. When we are *there*, the activity is about us, the politicians talk to us, the mayors listen to our ideas, and we seldom – actually much too seldom – bother to *ask* rather than *tell*. In this situation the chances of local stakeholders in Kibera or Carrefour feeling like the owners of the results are quite small. We are simply too *present*, and our geo-political footprint is rather large.

So what I told Rachel, in response to Pierre's complaint, is that we *choose* to work in a different way. Our organisation works with local partners and organisations who are the owners of the results and the institutional homes for the projects. In Les Palmes it is a young technical bureau called ATIP, owned and directed by Haitians (and supported by Dutch and Canadian project funds). If our partners don't agree with us and we can't convince them, as professional to professional, then we believe that we need to do it there way. And so I explained to Rachel that Pierre's complaint was actually good news. The simple fact that I was *absent* from a co-ordinating workshop resulted in Pierre's organisation designating ATIP as the point of co-ordination

for their project also. If we had been there, they would have asked us to do the co-ordination.

My very first WASTE consultancy for VNGI started when a Dutch municipal waste official – lets call him Eric – called us up in a panic because his city had committed to VNGI to train a sister city delegation on community participation. Could I please help him out because the dates were set, the plane tickets bought and “We have project goals and I am responsible for their achieving certain concrete results in their city in Southern Africa.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Eric,” I said, “but *you* cannot be responsible for what happens in *their* city halfway across the world. *They* are responsible for what happens *there*. *You* have a project responsibility to your city *here*, and to VNGI, but there it stops.” It was a risky thing to say, and I rather thought we would lose the job, but instead it was the beginning of a fruitful long-term co-operation with VNGI with a focus on genuine ownership in the Southern partner cities in LOGO South. So much so, that last year a 16-person meeting planned for East London, South Africa was proposed to one of those cities – and they turned it into a 150-person international conference. We went with the flow, and were able to close the LOGO South programme with a nice event. Our creative use of absence created space for the East London city officials to do it their way, in their municipal building, with the people that they thought needed to come.

Part 2. Ownership, absence, and assumptions in the world of waste management

Absence comes up not only in the processes in our work, but also in the substance, that is, waste management and recycling. In fact if you think about it, the main goal of waste management is to *remove* waste, that is, to create an *absence of waste*, the clean space left behind after the donkey cart or the garbage truck passes, the women sweep the streets, or the “frog” empties the pit latrine and takes the sludge of a year’s worth of one family’s excreta away to a field and dumps it. So the space created by the absence of waste is an important result of working on waste management and sanitation.

This next section explores issues of absence, local ownership and anchoring of technical ideas in waste management. I’d like to start with some bad news stories about what happens to that empty space for ownership when there is too much *presence* of Northern consultants, donors’ ideas, or geopolitically defined best practices. I’ll take you, not to the slums of Nairobi, but instead to the golden rolling hills, small red-roofed cities, and wheatfields of the Kurdish-speaking area in North-eastern Turkey, to city called Bitlis. Bitlis is really poor – the solid waste staff meet in a small office in an apartment house outside of town because there is no space for them in the municipal building – but the staff are extremely dedicated and work hard. Bitlis was chosen by the EU for a pilot project in regionalisation and modernisation of waste management, which financed a state of the art landfill there. and in two other regional solid waste unions.

The EU is not an institution that values absence, and in my opinion it also has little interest in real ownership. EU projects in Turkey are granted under very strict rules, that if those EU rules are not being followed, the Ministry of Finance is liable and has to pay the money back. The projects operate with expatriate consultants who have long-term engagements to train and involve Turkish “local consultants”, to supervise construction, and generally to assure that the EU gets what it is paying for. So what’s wrong with this picture, don’t EU taxpayers have a right to know that they get what the EU is paying for?

The Bitlis landfill is sited at the base of a mountain, directly in the line of flow of a dry river that fills with water in certain seasons. While the landfill itself is beautifully constructed, this siting choice will create water problems throughout its entire useful life – assuming it is ever used. Why might it not be used? When the region signed the contract, the Bitlis region’s staffpersons really didn’t understand that operating this “donated” landfill will require them to collect large sums of money from their member municipalities. The regional landfill will be far away, and cities will have to transport waste to it, raising costs still further. The mayors will have to introduce new solid waste fees, and they fear that they will not get re-elected.

A two-day training on finance in integrated sustainable waste management that I gave appears to have been the first opportunity for these officials to understand and discuss their situation and the project’s implications. The issue of raising funds created such a level of stress, frustration, and fear among the regional and municipal officials that we had to stop the training and send the municipal officials home. Then, on the request of the staff, I spent the remaining 1,5 days actually teaching them how to read through the English-

language consulting documents, re-calculate the spreadsheets, and evaluate the plans critically – as any client would usually be invited to do. In doing so we discovered together that the ex-pat consultant had designed the landfill size based on international estimates and “assumed that 99% of the waste is collected.”

When we projected that sentence on the screen, the staff were stunned: their city is literally built on top of a river and they estimate that less than half of their waste from that city – or two thirds in the whole district – is in fact being collected. Even less is likely to reach the landfill, because there are active private informal recyclers who scavenge the waste cans and the dumpsite and sell the materials to support themselves and their families.

So that landfill is larger and more expensive than it needs to be, because there is less waste than was “assumed.” If the the local experts had owned and managed the decisionmaking, or if the EU had given them the space to decide for a less expensive but still effective level of technology and environmental protection, then there could be more of a balance between what is affordable and what is built. The robust *presence* of ex-pat project manager and expatriate consultants, their strict adherence to deadlines and technical standards, and their “assumptions,” combined to deny the Bitlis staff the space to own and manage their own process. This happens all the time.

I am halfway through with this talk, and now I want to give some examples which might be relevant for our hosts, Cordaid Urban Matters, about the art of absence when it comes to strengthening business models and promoting public-private partnerships in waste management and recycling. One of my first jobs when I came to WASTE in 1999 was working for UNIDO, the UN Industrial Development Organisation, on a recycling processing facility to serve the micro and informal waste and recycling enterprises in Dar es Salaam. We had been working already in Dar es Salaam, so we knew quite a number of these enterprises, and also something about the way the recycling value chains for paper, metals, and plastics worked.

We designed the RPC to be share-owned by these small and semi-formal enterprises, something that UNIDO was quite sceptical about, because here was absence again – the absence of an international owner with connections to business elsewhere. The project was popular and created quite a lot of interest and increased activity in plastics and paper recycling, which translated to local livelihoods for micro and small enterprises and the informal recycling sector. It made good connections between informal recyclers and semi-formal micro collection businesses, and also with the local plastics factories owned by many different Mr. Shah’s. After three years, the project was well-positioned to feed Mr Shah’s various plastics factories and meet their demand for moderate-cost recycled plastics. The competition from Chinese agents buying PET made the business of collecting plastic attractive, promising even more livelihoods.

Then in the last week before the project was completed, an OECD country embassy announced a large grant to one of their home country plastics companies to “create plastics recycling” in Dar, in partnership with a marginal player in the local plastics industry. This grant confused the tiny collection enterprises and made the various Mr. Shah’s very angry. The grant was based on the *assumption* that there was no recycling capacity, and the investor had applied for the grant without bothering to explore the local plastics market, or to evaluate how the chosen partner was positioned within it. They made the *assumption* that their *presence* would create positive impacts. In the process they disenfranchised legitimate local business people and family enterprises who had viable micro business models. It’s not an upbeat story or a happy ending, but it does show the need for absence, in the sense of cooperating with, rather than undermining, a local market and sector. Absence in business development is more challenging and time consuming than getting on a plane and arriving, or jumping in and applying for a grant in your own country. Creative absence depends on building relationships with local actors, checking facts, and working together with local banks and businesses – and the many Mr. Shahs -- to build on existing operations. It is the local situation which has pride of place, and you as investor stay on the sidelines, and avoid assumptions.

Assumptions are usually deadly for poor people, informal recyclers, flood plain gardeners, street food-sellers, and other entrepreneurs in the informal economy. Their economic activity doesn’t show up in national statistics, but it keeps millions of people from starving. In the informal sector in waste management study that we did for GTZ in 2007, we confirmed the general figure that 1% to 3% of the population of most cities in the

developing world consist of informal recyclers – about 75,000 people in only the six cities we looked at.

In the city twinnings there are mayors and city councilors who re-invent recycling in the European model, because they don't know about or "see" the informal recyclers, and their European partners *assume* that if the city isn't running the recycling, then no-one else is either. To assure that they get the recyclables, such city officials may start criminalising and prosecuting their informal sector recyclers, to clear the way for their own municipal recycling.

Informal (recycling) entrepreneurs are economically productive, creating important *positive* environmental impacts for their cities, but they are statistically and politically invisible – yet another form of absence. There are hundreds of examples of multi-national privatisations or private sector deals based on the *assumption* that nothing is happening in a particular sector. I saw it in Penang City in Malaysia where a UNDP-financed recycling project managed to steal newspapers from a Buddhist charity collecting in one slum area of the city, but failed to collect (in spite of considerable investment) in a middle-class area because the IWBs – house to house private sector recycling collectors – were simply taking all the material.

So I am cautious about the potential for North-South business deals, because the *presence* of foreign companies in the local environment may disrupt the activities of authentic local entrepreneurs, causing hardship to hundreds or thousands of families, and creating precisely the reverse impact of the purpose of the MDGs and development co-operation. Delhi, India and Cairo, Egypt are both classic examples of this, if you want to go deeper into the subject.

Part 3. Incorporating absence and ownership in development co-operation

As Robert Chambers teaches us, absence means putting *us* second, taking up less space, acknowledging that our clients in Southern countries have relevant knowledge and experience. I was asked to end on an upbeat note, so I'd like to go from problems of too much presence, to possibilities and positive potentials in the art of absence, by exploring three questions in the triangle of development actors: government, idealistic organisations and NGOs, and businesses.

Is absence always useful? What about disaster situations where the local people are so traumatised that someone from outside is better positioned to make decisions?

Lets imagine that the floods of 1953 in the Southwest of this country should repeat themselves. And that the Chinese government is the first on the scene, with 46 helicopters, and that they evacuate all of us in Den Haag, Rotterdam, Dordrecht, and all of Zeeland to Norway, because they think that's the best idea. What would you think? When the water recedes, how would you get home? Would you want the Chinese to make that decision, or your own government and representatives? It reminds me of my sister's father in law, who is an ultra-orthodox Chassidic Jew, who broke the rules of *te sabbath* when his wife went into labour with their first child on a Saturday morning. He drove her to the hospital, but when she had a safe delivery, it was no longer an emergency. The normal restrictions about not driving on the Sabbath came back into effect, so he had to leave the car and walk 22 kilometers to get home.

I would invite you – us – to think of emergency situations as special opportunities for highly creative interpretations of absence, where being there with financial, physical and technical help is only acceptable when the real responsibility remains in local hands. When the emergency is over, the local officials and communities are in charge, unlike in Haiti where in the aftermath of the earthquake and floods, *10,000 NGOs* are putting up houses, digging wells, and re-settling communities *largely without consulting with the mayors of the territories in which they operate*. A helping hand, good ideas, and financial support are important, but an even more significant impact on local mayors and citizens might be *the experience of being heard*, and having all these high-status international organisations actually do what the local people think should be done. If we are to do good work, we need their opinions, in spite of what we might think we know.

What about faith-based assistance, when someone is motivated to do good out of their religious convictions? Don't they have the right to be present in following their faith?

This is a challenging question, and also relevant in the sister city situation, where rich country municipalities want to "help" counterparts in poor countries, in part because their staff gets a good feeling by sharing expertise and experience. Here the challenge of achieving absence is about looking, listening, and

understanding before taking action.

I would suggest that the real added value in faith-based assistance – as in twinning – might come in the communication and trust-building that comes with discussing and negotiating what kinds of interventions work for both givers and getters. We have developed training materials for VNGI that focus on “educating the eyes,” supporting Dutch representatives “see” beyond their first impressions (I sometimes call it geo-political shock) of places that look poor and dirty. It’s about being able to transfer their knowledge of how systems work, and to “see” what is working and what is not, and build on the successes. Another important aspect is making space for the right people in the discussion, learning what decisions are made by women, men, children, grandmothers, and making space in your own faith-based universe for accepting that people might do things differently and choose to go slower, talk longer, or even, in Bitlis, not build the modern landfill. To hear opinions and respect differences (Latin, ‘consider, regard, observe carefully’) is for us an indication that we are supporting sustainable improvement.

In faith-based aid projects this is somehow more complicated, to balance what your faith says is “good work” with the equivalent in the local culture and society. It takes commitment and practice, but it really does work. And yes, it does mean being present in the negotiation, but pulling back slightly – making a little space for absence – and giving away the ownership when the decisions are being made. If you can take a deep breath and really say to yourself – maybe I *don’t* know better, and maybe they *do* – then you have really made the transition from wanting to help to actually helping.

3. What about wanting to do business? Isn’t it legitimate to have a business idea and establish presence where you can make money? Doesn’t this have some added value?

Cordaid Urban Matters and WASTE share a conviction that *sustainable* means that it has to work for the long term, and that things pay for themselves, and do not depend on transfers from donors. This certainly can mean that there are business models which work and create wealth and livelihoods in a wide variety of local environments. But our practical experience is that these business models differ significantly – and in some ways predictably – in their details between high- middle- and low-income countries.

For example, we know with reasonable certainty (and verified in the research for the UN-Habitat book, *Solid Waste Management in the World’s Cities*) that virtually all households are willing to pay 1% of their monthly household income as a fee for reliable removal of solid waste on a regular basis. In Rotterdam, that’s about €375 per year, which is enough to pay for waste and recyclables collection, street sweeping, litter control, management of household hazardous waste, GFT collection from some households, composting, recycling, E-waste dismantling, incineration, landfilling, and all the associated transport. As a result, in Rotterdam and other Dutch cities, there are viable business models for all parts of the waste chain, although some of them are paid from other pots, like the advanced disposal fee on white and brown goods. As a result, all of the parts of the waste chain exist and are well organised and regulated, and there are enough surpluses for businesses – private ones like Shanks, public like the ROTEB, EPR-related ones like ICT Milieu and PRN, or mixed – to survive over the long term.

In Bamako, Mali, 1% of family income is about €2 per month, which is enough to pay for collection only. There are viable private-to-private models for micro-franchising and collection, and donkey-cart waste collection. The dominant model, small commune-based companies called GIEs, is sustainable when 50 to 80% of households pay this. When there is a lower payment rate the donkeys die from lack of food and the businesses lose money. But there are not, and as far as we know never have been, viable business models for disposal or composting, although both of these are technically feasible and politically desirable. If an EU company (lets call them Eco-Clean) seeks financing to do business in Mali, they will most likely focus on the most profitable operation, which is collection, as the best way to finance the non-profitable but politically desirable disposal. And what happens, they force the GIEs out of business to pick their niches. They bring in shiny new trucks and engineers with fancy diploma’s but they still can’t extract more than €2 per household per month. So after a while – usually it’s between six months and two years – they figure this out, and pull out. But in the meantime the GIEs have been forced out of business, families of their owners and workers are destitute, the system is broken, and the city is dirtier, children play in garbage, and everyone is worse off.

How can we improve this picture with the concept of absence? Suppose that Eco-Clean is required to work with a local partner to analyse the existing system, and engage with local businesses in the sector, as a part of applying for financing. They analyse the profitability of the existing GIEs, talk to the entrepreneurs, and find out what works the way it is and what is missing that could make it better. They might come to the conclusion that a) the GIEs can't borrow money, because they are not considered bankable; b) the waste is 90% organic, and goes to flood plain farmers for land application, but there is demand for energy from biogas but no partners to bring investment and technology c) the only available waste streams that do not find their way to value chains are sludge and excreta from emptying the *puisards*, or pit latrines, and dirty textiles and plastics, which are massively eaten by cattle, and that d) in the 25 years that donors have been looking to finance activities in Mali, no landfill has ever opened because there is no payer in the system who is willing to pay enough to cover costs of transport and operations. If we were consultants to Eco-Clean, we would advise them to explore business opportunities in biogas from waste and excreta, in combination with doing a market failure analysis for why the plastics and textiles are not being valorised as they are in Dar Es Salaam (It's because our friend Mr. Shah hasn't crossed the continent, so there is a very weak plastics sector, and China is on the East side of Africa). So we might advise Eco-Clean to leave the issue of disposal as unfeasible, and collection as already functioning. But our gap analysis shows good potential for doing business in three areas: banking services, bio-gas, and intermediate-scale production of value-added plastic products. Such investment strengthens the GIEs by creating access to finance and strengthening the market for separated plastics. It helps the environment by producing sustainable energy from latrine wastes that would otherwise pollute ground and water, and it helps food security by avoiding death of cattle from eating plastic, reducing disposal, closing the phosphorus nutrient cycles, and bringing safe nutrients to the agricultural value chain.

One can get to absence via the Hippocratic Oath in development co-operation, "in any case, do no harm." What works and what is harmful is highly specific locally; absence is slow work, and requires long returns on investment. It requires being present in asking questions, and exploring, but absenting yourself from the decisions and the answers. In relation to enterprise-based development, it means respecting the local businesses in their niches and spaces, and supplementing, not supplanting.

As I explained to Rachel in Haiti, absence is an *active* concept, comprised of equal parts of skill, commitment and respect. The art of absence does not mean neglect or lack of commitment. It means observing and analysing what works and what is missing, focusing on real information, asking questions, and keeping pre-conceptions, judgements, and assumptions in the background. In all parts of the triangle it involves working with educated eyes, listening, and respecting what is working, in line the American English proverb: "if it ain't broke, don't fix it."