Reflections on 25 Years in International Development

*Powerful Information* (PI) ran educational and community support projects in low-income countries for over 25 years. In January 2018 it rebranded. This flier explains how the charity came into being, what it did and what it achieved.

Mike Flood set up PI in early 1990 following a one-month fact-finding trip to Cote d’Ivoire, Burkina Faso and Ghana when he was shocked by the lack of good quality environmental information available in non-governmental organisations (NGOs), resource centres and public libraries. He visited dozens, and also talked with senior civil servants and government officials. He found it troubling to compare their situation with his own as an independent freelance consultant. This was less than a year after Tim Berners Lee introduced the world to the World Wide Web (in March 1989) and several years before the use of the internet really took off, when few groups in low-income countries even possessed computers.

The Big Idea

The basic idea was to identify and obtain copies of the latest and best environmental literature and provide this free of charge to local activists and resource centres in low-income countries — it would be up to Mike to raise the necessary funds and work out the logistics. *Powerful Information* was awarded charitable status in September 1992 and became a limited charitable company in April 2002. Its Charitable Objects were to advance the education of the public in relation to the production and use of natural resources and support local initiatives that promote sustainable development and strengthen civil society, and especially the efforts of NGOs and key institutions involved in environmental education, conservation, research and regulation in less-affluent parts of the world.

In the early years PI used its network of environmental contacts to help build up a ‘must have’ list of environmental publications and make contact with *bona fide* NGOs and resource centres in more than 20 countries. And it was successful in raising the resources to purchase and send out publications worth over £100,000. One project involved developing a KnowHow Manual and Resource Pack for Environmental NGOs; another, sending over £20,000 worth of specialist books and reports to 12 of the leading forestry research institutes in Eastern Europe.

However, Mike began to question this approach when he found that some activists did not appear to be making use of the material PI was sending — this was an important early lesson in human psychology. And around the same time he identified a far deeper problem that wasn’t being addressed: many grassroots activists had real difficulty knowing how best to tackle

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1 Mike studied science and sociology at university. In the 1970s he worked for the *Friends of the Earth* where he campaigned for a saner energy policy and helped FOE develop its renewable energy strategy. In the 1980s he wrote course units for the *Open University* and tutored the OU’s Technology Foundation Course.
environmental problems effectively. So we stopped sending out publications and began engaging directly with local partners to design and carry out practical projects in the community. This work gradually broadened out to cover a range of related social and human rights issues. PI also started taking on volunteers, including interns keen to find out about working in international development.

PI’s new focus involved understanding local needs, locating appropriate information and knowhow, and then facilitating programmes that informed and empowered local people, helping to build social capital, promote social justice and raise awareness. This was not a question of abandoning the environmental focus, rather accepting that most environmental problems are in essence people problems, and that if you educate, inform and engage local people they will look after their environment far better than anyone else.

**Regional Focus**

PI’s community work in **Eastern Europe** was carried out primarily in Albania, Lithuania, Moldova and Romania, with initiatives also in Latvia, Russia, Slovakia and Ukraine. Apart from local capacity-building (common to all projects), our main focus was on environmental education and community development. The award of a *Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship* (in 1991) enabled Mike to visit environmental groups in the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria. This was shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall (Nov.89) and the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Dec.91) and establishment of a *Commonwealth of Independent States*. PI subsequently benefitted from the UK Government interest in helping these new fragile regimes convert to Western-style democracies through initiatives like *Charity KnowHow*. We were able to capitalise on this and also win grants from private foundations.

A decade or so later, when a number of our target countries joined the European Union, funding grassroots community projects became more problematic. It was as if joining the EU meant that their problems would now be dealt with. But the reality was that in rural areas there were high levels of unemployment and people were struggling to make ends meet. (Those with skills and qualifications had already moved to the cities.) After completing around 40 education projects in the region, we reluctantly had to withdraw as it became impossible to raise the funds. We completed our last project in 2014.

Our community work in **West Africa** was carried out mainly in Sierra Leone and Ghana, with various projects in Nigeria, Benin and Senegal — in 2016 we also investigated linking up with disability groups in Zimbabwe. Many Africans struggle to provide shelter, food and clothing for their families, and pay for their children’s education; and their plight has lately been made worse by increasingly unpredictable weather patterns. Again, the problems are particularly acute in rural areas, where there is extreme poverty and high levels of illiteracy, especially amongst women, and many go hungry between harvests. So this is why in Sierra Leone we chose to run programmes for women (on adult literacy, healthcare, citizenship and livelihoods), and later, gender-based violence — we started in 2002, the year a peace treaty was signed bringing to an end a brutal rebel war. We also

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2 Youth and environmental groups had been permitted under the Soviet system, and this is where many young activists and politicians honed their skills.
helped set up programmes for people with disability. And in Ghana, we homed in on subsistence agriculture and pesticide misuse/abuse.

We adopted these specific themes following our research into need, and also in response to pleas made to us during monitoring visits — we initiated our disability programme after a blind man approached Mike in Rokonta village where we had a women’s learning circle — Samuel asked for help, and much to Mike’s surprise emailed him one month later, and this was the beginning of a decade-long collaboration with Sam and his blind colleagues (Vision for the Blind). We started the GBV work after being lobbied by a young woman, Aminata, who had herself been a victim of violence. One of our main projects in Ghana arose when an American foundation asked us if we could evaluate a proposal that it had received from rice farmers in the Volta Region.

**Organisational Development**

In 2000 PI moved its base from Mike’s house to an office in the City Discovery Centre, in Bradwell Abbey, Milton Keynes. By this time the charity had a Board of six and a staff of three, and it was using specialist consultants on a number of projects. We were also managing a small team of volunteers. Project management took up the major part of our time alongside fund-raising, outreach and mentoring. But despite our efforts, we were unable to attract larger grants for much of the work because of our small size and modest annual turnover (it wasn’t for lack of trying!) This meant a great deal of effort had to go into researching and writing funding bids, and also reporting, as funders’ deadlines would come round at different times of the year, often out of phase with natural project cycles.

Much of this work would not have been possible without the sophisticated databases that we developed inhouse to facilitate project management and reporting, keep a track of bids and expenditure, and run regular cash flows for PI’s Board.

We set up our first website in 2000 and produced a newsletter for many years (‘Practical Information’); and from 2010 we ran a blog (‘What’s New?’). We joined Facebook in 2011 and posted regular contributions there too. Throughout this period we kept the charity’s overheads to a minimum by careful housekeeping and drawing only modest salaries. This ensured that the bulk of the money that we received from trusts and in public donations was used for project development and implementation.

**Our Legacy**

Whilst it was operating Powerful Information raised over £1.5 million and resourced and managed over 120 grassroots projects, and we helped build the operational effectiveness of dozens of indigenous groups, including six that we nurtured into being. With and through local partners we helped build or strengthen the capacity and effectiveness of over 60 not-for-profits in Russia and eight former Eastern Bloc countries (most notably Albania, Lithuania, Moldova & Romania) — in one 3 year project we helped 10 indigenous NGOs develop new environmental project proposals, and six were successful in obtaining funding (grants totalling $205,000).

In Russia we brought together key people involved in environmental policy-making and campaigning to share information about improving public education programmes; and
we worked with women farmers in Lithuania to help 15 disadvantaged communities design and implement 34 local projects to improve water and healthcare services, building social capital and directly benefitting 700 individuals — over 2,000 villagers attended our seminars, workshops and public meetings. One novel project in Albania investigated lead recycling; another demonstrated how medicinal herbs could be cultivated successfully, helping change public attitudes to uncontrolled wild collection, which had done so much to damage biodiversity (controls were relaxed after Enver Hoxha’s death). We also trained over 300 school teachers and supported 80 student environmental projects — 12 in Romania went on to win regional or national prizes. These are just a few of the projects we ran in the region with and through local partners.

In Sierra Leone we set up and supported more than 40 village learning circles and provided non-formal basic education for over 4,000 women and teenage girls; and we provided skills-training for 165 blind adults — including developing a novel, low-cost computing course and training 35 blind professionals; and we contributed to the introduction of inclusive education in mainstream schools by training 24 teachers in Special Educational Needs and setting up two visual impairment units. We also supported a small NGO which helped and advised over 50 women and girls who had suffered sexual assault/domestic violence and took a number of the perpetrators to court.

In Ghana, we partnered NETRICE and empowered 1,025 subsistence farmers in the Volta Region with the knowledge and skills to protect themselves from poisoning, increase yields and reduce their environmental impact through integrated pest management; and our colleagues spoke with some 14,000 high school students (and 550 teachers) to warn them of the dangers from pesticides — in some schools we found 30-40% of students involved in spraying; and we catalogued over 170 victims of pesticide poisoning in 45 villages, including some 35 suspected deaths. We also lobbied over 60 local stakeholders to put pressure on the government to implement its regulations and legislation and crack down on widespread pesticide abuse.

Of course, none of these achievements would have been possible without our partnership with local groups who supervised and managed projects on the ground (around 40 partners over the years): they spoke local languages, understood people’s mentality, politics and culture, and had the trust and respect of local people. We found this way of working to be highly effective, enabling us to get to the parts that much larger organisations often fail to reach.

Mike was 70 in March 2017 and stepped down from Powerful Information in December, and the Board appointed PI’s Financial Director, Jill Chinn, as Executive Officer. PI rebranded as Grassroots Action and is continuing the work — there’s no shortage of things that need to be done in this increasingly polarised and troubled world.

Dr Mike Flood [Feb 2018]

Mike’s Address: 21 Church Lane, Loughton, Milton Keynes MK5 8AS, United Kingdom

Tel./Mobile: +44 1908 666275; 07989504233
Email: mike@powerfulinformation.org
Website: http://www.powerfulinformation.org
Facebook: www.facebook.com/pages/Powerful-Information/152393268108861

Powerful Information: charitable company limited by guarantee [company: 4337551; charity: 1091516]