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Intermediate-Scale Technology

Kevin Carson

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Aid to tsunami victims, and who is giving how much, has been a big source of contention lately. But the kind of aid to be given is at least as important.

According to “Plunkett’s Law,” formulated by energy technologist Dr. Jerry Plunkett, governments have an “almost incurable habit” of choosing large-scale technologies over smaller-scale, decentralized ones; when there are two alternative solutions to a problem, equally viable technically, government will inevitably choose the one most amenable to centralized, bureaucratic control. [Kirkpatrick Sale, *Human Scale* (Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1980), p. 215]

The Intermediate Technology Development Group takes the opposite approach. The ITDG is providing relief on its own nickel, which is important. But even more important, it’s providing reconstruction aid in the form of human-scale technology that local people can control for themselves. The ITDG, sounded by the late E.F. Schumacher, operates on the following philosophy:

ITDG has a unique approach to development – we don’t start with technology, but with people. The

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tools may be simple or sophisticated – but to provide long-term, appropriate and practical answers, they must be firmly in the hands of local people: people who shape technology and control it for themselves.

Another worthy effort, based on a similar philosophy, is the *Appropriate Technology Sourcebook*. The *Sourcebook* is an index to thousands upon thousands of books and technical articles on the kinds of appropriate technology that can be integrated into the life of a small town or rural village. For a few hundred dollars, the *Sourcebook* comes with a fiche or CD-Rom library of those articles and books—dollar for dollar, probably the best form of development aid imaginable. The literature provided includes countless simple and user-friendly technologies that can significantly increase the productivity of labor and improve the average person's quality of life, while promoting rather than hindering local self-reliance.

By the way, if you're a fan of Schumacher and of attempts like these to implement his philosophy, you could do a lot worse than to pick up a copy of Karl Hess' *Community Technology* (Harper & Row, 1979). In it, Hess describes his involvement in human-scale technology experiments with the Adams-Morgan Organization, a largely black working-class community organization in Washington, DC. Among other nifty things, they successfully designed: basement trout farms, with jury-rigged pumps and filters, that produced protein cheaper per pound than anything available at the supermarket; a working passive solar heating system made from empty cans; and lots more—read it yourself!