


October 2017

## Book Review: Smart risks: How small grants are helping to solve some of the world's biggest problems

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### Recommended Citation

Appe, Susan (2017) "Book Review: Smart risks: How small grants are helping to solve some of the world's biggest problems," *Gobernar: The Journal of Latin American Public Policy and Governance*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.  
DOI: [10.22191/gobernar/vol1/iss1/8](https://doi.org/10.22191/gobernar/vol1/iss1/8)  
Available at: <https://orb.binghamton.edu/gobernar/vol1/iss1/11>

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## **Book Review: *Smart risks: How small grants are helping to solve some of the world's biggest problems*<sup>1</sup>**

DOI: 10.22191/gobernar/vol1/iss1/8

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For those of us who research and teach about international aid, we have come to learn about its many challenges and shortcomings. *Smart risks: How small grants are helping to solve some of the world's biggest problems* is a compilation of essays by practitioners with experience in (and opinions about) the international aid system. It provides a welcomed take on how we might better support local grassroots organizations and communities in the Global South.

The book is organized around the idea of “smart risks,” that is, the investment of comparatively small amounts of money to grassroots, local civil society and community-based efforts. This is in contrast to designing, implementing and evaluating larger-scale donor-funded projects that are commonplace in the international aid system. The larger-scale, donor-funded project model includes prioritizing objectives, with activities implemented within determined timeframe. However, this model, as argued by the contributing authors, overlooks local knowledge and capacity. As explained: “The ‘risk’ the authors take is trusting in local leadership” (Lentfer, 2017: 9). The book is organized around five ‘smart risks’: (1) investing in local expertise; (2) being non-prescriptive and flexible, with a long-term outlook; (3) looking to the grassroots for innovation; (4) rethinking accountability; and (5) practicing vulnerability. I came across this book because of my recent research on small-scale development initiatives that centers on nonprofit organizations in the U.S. providing resources to international causes. At the time, I was also exploring how to integrate more perspectives about so-called development for a graduate course on nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that I was redesigning.

The book is the result of a call for learning through writing, which eventually came to be a writing collaborative. Many of the contributors have worked in the international aid system in different capacities but have sought to be more responsive to the people they serve and fund. Some further key takeaways follow.

### **Recognizing and leveraging local knowledge and capacity**

There are more and more advocates for giving attention to local, grassroots organizations. Local grassroots organizations have the capacity according to funders like Spirit in Action International, Trickle Up and Thousand Currents who all provide small grants to recipients that include families, grassroots organizations, local leaders, and social movements. The small grants seek to be responsive to specific local community needs. Local grassroots organizations are voluntary and represent the “interests of a broader constituency” which emerge to respond to community needs. Motivated by caring relationships, these efforts spring up often when there are “inadequate or non-existent public services in resource-poor settings” (Lentfer, 2017: 19). They

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<sup>1</sup> Lentfer, J. – Cothran, T. (2017). *Smart risks: How small grants are helping to solve some of the world's biggest problems*, Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishing.

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are close to the community they serve, and seek long-term social change (Lentfer, 2017). From the perspective of this kind of funder, co-editor and contributing author Cothran (2017) explains: “Our grants might be small, and our costs may be low... it is our agile structure that allows us to be flexible. This perfectly situates us to be a support of community efforts, rather than implement our own programmes” (p. 21).

Many of the essays illuminate key ideas through experiences in specific locations, like Ruairi Nolan’s piece based on his work in Pakistan in peacebuilding. He posits: “Why doesn’t the international community invest in local peacemakers?” He further explains: “Agencies tend to favour organizations that have a reputation and a history of working with the international community. Small organizations may require additional support in reporting, including on finances, and donors are reluctant to make sufficient allowances for this. This does not encourage new talent, and tends to lead to large capital-city based “local” NGOs that mimic INGOs and lose the very ‘rootedness’ which is key to their success” (Nolan, 2017: 28). Given experiences like this, the book’s contributors intend to propose new ways to think about local knowledge and capacity. For example, Nolan (2017: 31) describes the Local First campaign that as a first step seeks to identify and support local capacity. The campaign advocates listening to local voices in order to brainstorm how to respond to community needs. Through the process, donors and the community can aim to create funding mechanisms to “support (not distort) local civil society” (Nolan, 2017: 31). The campaign encourages local actors to work together for collective impact. While this seems intuitive, it actually is in contrast to the competition that the traditional international aid system generates through its funded project model as several of the contributing authors reference in their essays.

### **Best practices? Best for whom?**

Before reading *Smart Risks*, I had already started using the term ‘promising practices’ in lieu of ‘best practices’ as I recognize the challenges (and irresponsibility) of promoting universal applications across community and development practices. Practices cannot be universally implemented and the idea of purported ‘expertise’ should be viewed more as “the sharing of context and experience and mutual support” according to the authors (see Lentfer, 2017: 39). Expertise in development converts itself into specific jargon and its own language, using terms such as scaling-up, pilot projects, accountability, monitoring and evaluation. The contributing authors call for new understandings of development jargon, for example co-editor and contributor Lentfer (2017) asks: “What if scaling-up meant being deeply networked with peer organizations, and local government, and private sector entities? What is scaling-up meant influencing change at higher policy- or decision-making levels? What if scaling-up meant collaborative efforts demonstrating shared, collective impact?” (p. 69).

Another term and idea that is redefined is microcredit. Cothran explains that because microcredits are loans which center on financial institutions making money for shareholders, she argues for microgrants. In the case of the funder Spirit in Action, it has a Small Business Fund that provides \$150 to groups of 3-5 people in regions in Africa. As a microgrant, the first 150 of profit can then be reinvested in their members or microenterprise. Later recipients of the microgrants are asked to share a gift with others which might include supporting other groups with financial or in-kind gifts or supporting broader community projects (Cothran, 2017).

## Shared learning

The book itself of course is the result of a writing collaborative, which sought to create a space for shared learning, and this idea of shared learning is a lesson learned throughout the contributing authors' lived experiences working international aid. Lentfer (2017) explains the need for more shared learning exchanges, she states: "...from my previous experience in international aid, I had seen countless capacity building activities, training, consultants, seminars, etc., go to waste. The teaching methodologies and the imposition of 'best practices' were often ill-suited to the problems faced by grassroots organizations. I was a big fan of exchange visits and mentoring between organizations, which can offer the most relevant and supportive assistance through sharing on-the-ground experiences" (Lentfer, 2017: 65).

Perhaps the most eye-opening contribution for me is by Nora Lester Murad of the Dalia Association in Palestine (Murad, 2017: 152-155). Her piece is a very candid dialogue of interpretations between a grassroots organization and a funder. It is brilliant. After a lot of back and forth among the grassroots organization and the funder, the organization secures funding from the funder. The dialogue of interpretations continues:

*Grassroots organization: When the money came, we used every penny to help the refugees from the war. Even though it was a very small amount of money, no amount of information was good enough for them.*

*Funder: I spent so much time trying to get better reports from them, I couldn't support as many other local organizations as I wanted to. I even tried to give them extra visibility giving them the chance to be highlighted in our annual report, on our website, in press releases. But getting information from them was like pulling teeth.*

*Grassroots organization: The donor kept sending emails asking for more and more statistics, case studies and articles.*

*Funder: Do they really think we just give money without any accountability? Don't they know that I am being held accountable?*

*Grassroots organization: Do they really think we just survive to give them reports? Don't they know we are busy trying to meeting the increasing needs of our community? (Murad, 2017: 154).*

As someone who partners with grassroots organizations in the Global South, I would be lying if I said I had not taken a similar perspective of the funder at times. However reading the perspective of the grassroots organization truly illuminates the need for "honest exchanges and principled practices" (Murad, 2017: 155) that can better understand power dynamics and the situations of all parties. Shared learning and more authentic interactions will build the trust needed for the smart risks that the authors advocate.

## Conclusion

This volume can be used in many ways. It can help scholars, practitioners and students of international development think about the aid system differently. It allows scholars, practitioners and students to understand better the need to leverage on the ground community-based efforts.

This compilation comes at a good time as we encounter a shifting international aid system (see, Appe – Telch, 2016; Appe – Pallas, *forthcoming*; Pallas – Anderson – Sidel, *forthcoming*; *Development in Practice* 2016 volume 25, issue 5 and *Voluntas*’ Special Issue on Aid Reduction, *forthcoming*). Donors are experiencing fatigue and at times budget constraints (Pallas, 2016; Parks, 2008). Domestic politics and changes in regulations targeting NGOs and foreign funding have influenced the aid architecture in many locations (Appe, 2017; Hayman, 2016). In addition, there is a general lack of political will to tackle challenging global public problems and in other instances, donors may actually shift aid and withdraw staff because the country has achieved so-called development goals (Heideman, 2016; Kanbur, 2012; Pratt, 2016; Vogus – Graff, 2015).

However, there is still a need for solving global public problems and eliminating poverty. Small-scale development initiatives propose an alternative to respond to shifting international aid, however, skeptics to the risks involved with supporting smaller, local grassroots organizations in the Global South are likely to be concerned about issues of accountability. The contributors know this, as Lentfer states “With foreign-aid budgets under fire in many donor countries, accountability perhaps becomes even more important” (Lentfer, 2017: 110), however, she continues by stating that currently we look at accountability mistakenly, she writes: “Accountability will never be found on the pages of a proposal or financial report. And if we continue to look only there, we’re looking for it in all the wrong places” (Lentfer, 2017: 110). This underlines main ideas of this book-smart risks are about garnering trust through relationships.

As contributor Astone (2017) articulates, even as aid is changing, “In a world of big-dollar philanthropy and impact investing, global small grant programmes attract little attention” (p. 172). My own research has explored small, volunteer-run U.S. nonprofits giving to international causes. The founders and board members of these organizations explain that it is the personal dimension that motivates them and that motivates their donors. Many of the founders and board members tell me that they are confident in the work because they know that the money is going to the people on the ground. These people are not only local leaders but have become dependable partners and trusted friends to the U.S.-based organizations. It is these small-scale development initiatives that might help to redirect the course of international aid. However, these small, volunteer-run U.S.-based organizations and other aid actors would do so better if they took into consideration the lessons learned from the contributors of *Smart Risks*. Small risks recognize and leverage local knowledge and capacity through small grantmaking, create not best practices but context specific community-based solutions, and engage shared learning.

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