

Book Reviews

NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?

edited by David Hulme and Michael Edwards, Macmillan Press in association with Save the Children, 1997, 309 pages, npg

Striking a Balance: A Guide to Enhancing the Effectiveness of Non-Governmental Organisations in International Development

Alan Fowler, Earthscan Publications, 297 pages, Stg£14.95

If there's one thing better than asking a question and then answering it in the course of a book, it's getting a wide range of contributors to answer the question for you. Thus, David Hulme and Michael Edwards raise a central polemic of development in their book, *NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?* And, rather than answer that question bluntly themselves, they as editors have invited a wide range of experts to provide their views.

The cumulative answer that emerges is not quite cut and dried, but it certainly leans towards confirming the authors' warnings against NGOs, states and donors getting too comfortable with each other. To be fair to Hulme and Edwards, they are more concerned to warn against such over-familiarity, rather than depicting it as the current state of play. But the balance of contributions in this volume seem to

suggest that NGOs need to rethink their position vis-à-vis government and donors.

The papers in this volume, which are drawn from a workshop held in Manchester in 1994 (why the delay?), graphically illustrate the size of the "NGO industry". In the North, there were 3,000 registered development NGOs in 1993, spending about £4 billion a year. In Nepal, for example, the number of NGOs registered with the government rose from 220 in 1990 to 1,210 in 1993. Another trend is the increasing popularity of NGOs with governments and official aid agencies, particularly since the end of the Cold War. NGOs are often preferred to the state when it comes to channelling aid flows to the South, and they are also seen as vehicles for "democratisation" and the building of "civil society".

The result is that NGOs are getting more and more funding from governments. In the UK, for example, the five largest development NGOs all get between 25 and 55 per cent of funding from the government. In Ireland, this proportion has increased from 5 per cent to 15 per cent in recent years. So just how "non-governmental" are NGOs if this is the case?

In their own contributions, the two editors are keen to attack the "market plus civil society will yield development" equation currently in vogue. Where does this place NGOs,

they ask, and what are the implications for tackling poverty?

They describe a "gradual hardening of the arteries" in the NGOs as organisation become more bureaucratic and less willing to take risks or bear the costs of listening to those whom they seek to assist? "Vision becomes just another agenda item in an endless series of meetings, sandwiched somewhere between Matters Arising and Any Other Business".

The harshest criticism is reserved for Northern NGOs. "They have singularly failed to persuade their supporters to become active citizens prepared to demand that their governments spend more on aid and spend it more effectively." Lobbying and advocacy by Northern NGOs may even have backfired, they suggest, by fuelling the right-wing agenda of reducing aid flows. This has been achieved by pointing out the very obvious faults of some aid projects – they mention the Pergau Dam – and some aid-financed policies, such as structural adjustment. "In the absence of a much more determined effort in public education, Northern NGOs cannot be surprised when a relatively disinterested Northern electorate continues to see foreign aid as a low priority."

Hulme and Edwards suggest a "charm offensive" is needed to rehabilitate the aid agencies. More controversially, they also suggest that development-focused NGOs should part company with environmental activists "whose highly effective lobbying is often more concerned about the prospects of non-human

species". And then, of course, there is the thorny question of consumption. NGO constituencies in the North seem no more willing now to make the personal sacrifices and changes in behaviour on which the future of the world depends. When large NGOs like OXFAM admit they avoid discussing the issue of lowering personal consumption with their supporters, how much more difficult will it be to achieve these changes in other people's societies (pp.279-80).

The editors suggest that NGOs need to scale down, and concentrate on a smaller number of objectives in areas where they can be most effective. This could mean "alternative trading", specialist advice to Southern partners, participation in global alliances for lobbying and advocacy, domestic development work and development education.

Some of the contributions in this volume are written in the kind of turgid development-speak that ensures the writer's message, whatever it was, is deservedly buried. But other chapters hit you right between the eyes. The provocative contribution of Geof Wood, from the University of Bath, is aimed directly at Western hypocrisy. Wood argues it is wrong to assume we have a strong democratic system in the West. "Our systems are fragile in many respects and when tested quickly resort to the curtailment of people's rights and the suppression of truth." Western citizens have been "managed" completely but subtly through processes of "labelling and ideological manipulation," he argues. Participation by the citizenry in decision-

making in the UK is a "sick joke". If a highly literate, IT-saturated society cannot manage a successful voice, how ethical is it to expect, indeed insist, on better performance elsewhere he asks.

But the book is not all UK-oriented. One section examines particular case studies from the Arab world, China, Sri Lanka, Brazil and South-East Asia. According to Hulme and Edwards, embarrassing those in positions of power has always been a hallmark of NGO activity. "The problem is that many NGOs themselves have now become the powerful, with depressing consequences for their ability to be self-critical, honest and courageous about the future."

One of the most famous vignettes from advertising is the story about the senior executive who asserts that 50 per cent of all advertising works. "If only I could work out which 50 per cent," he bemoans. What would the equivalent percentage for development be? And is it possible to tell good development from bad, projects that work from those that do not? On the face of it, yes. But the picture is not so simple. Even the best-organised interventions can collapse, as external factors change or a lack of core sustainability is revealed. Whatever about individual projects, the overall record of the aid business is less than convincing.

This is how Alan Fowler sums up the record of the NGDOs (non-governmental development organisations) that are the subject of this volume. "Some 30 years of providing

aid involving hundreds of billions of dollars, millions of staff and countless projects, together with major shifts in priorities, strategies and approaches, have not made a substantial impact on the scale of poverty in the countries of the South."

However, this book is not intended as a contribution to the ever-increasing pile of NGO-bashing literature. Fowler has written a primer designed as a guide for anyone setting up, running or working in an NGO. The aim is to achieve effective management, improved links with partners in the North and the South, and a game-plan for surviving what looks like being a difficult future. The style – sober, logical, analytical – owes more to management gurus like Peter Drucker than ideologues such as Paolo Friere. How times have changed! *Striking a Balance* is full of lists – seven features of an NGO, four factors for establishing good governance, and so on – and organograms, and it occasionally lapses into jargon, particularly management-speak.

Fowler says this book is necessary because of the uncertain times for NGDOs resulting from the end of the Cold War. Criticism of the aid agencies has increased, and they are increasingly seen as just one of many civic actors that can feature in development. He also asserts, with some justification, that NGDOs have for too long been reluctant to treat management with the priority it deserves. "Good intentions were perceived as a means of achieving results; the moral high ground put NGDOs above criticism and

continued funding meant that difficult choices were avoided.”

Early chapters attempt to place NGDOs in the context of international development and to explain what these organisations are about. For agency insiders, this may be familiar ground, but Fowler sums up the relevant points with admirable brevity.

Siding with the UNDP and its notion of development as human well-being, he attacks institutions like the World Bank and the IMF for creating the impression that efficient markets can be equated with development itself. Such an impression is, he asserts, both “dangerous and misleading”. (Fowler is a development veteran of over 20 years’ standing and has worked as a visiting fellow with the World Bank.)

In attempting to explain the present position of sustainable development, he resorts to a thinly-disguised and well-worn Irish joke. “A visitor lost in a foreign country approaches a local person on a remote rural road and asks, ‘Could you please tell me the way to Tinaheally (sic)?’ The local responds: ‘Well, indeed I could sir, but if I were you I wouldn’t be starting from here.’” To underline the point, he appends a list of no fewer than 17 common drawbacks of projects, many of which will seem dreadfully familiar to anyone who has tried to engage in authentic participatory development.

Later in the book, he presents a list of acronyms for NGDO pretenders. There’s the MANGO or Mafia NGO; the MONGO, My Own NGO, for an agency which is the personal property

of an individual, and dominated by his or her ego; and the (ComeN’GO), an agency that only appears spasmodically, when the NGO pastures are greener. Any of these sound familiar?

Fowler’s analysis of what characterises NGOs is the stuff of development courses and need not concern us unduly here. But what of NGO effectiveness? The author suggests inconsistency between an NGDO’s vision of the world, what it says it wants to be and what it does, is a common source of ineffectiveness. He points out that OXFAM UK has tried to bridge the culture gap between fundraising and programme staff by employing a system whereby communications officers work in programme departments, helping to prepare materials which fit identified projects.

There are sections on partnerships, capacity building and mobilising financial resources. Fowler attacks the “myth” sustained by many NGDOs that sustainable development is quick, cheap and easy. “NGDOs, especially in the North, are in a bind when it comes to the false image they have created – that development itself is easy and can be done on the cheap. So how do they square the circle? The answer is that they fudge by using creative public financial reporting.” And the author lists the ways agencies appear to reduce overhead percentages, such as by allocating as many administrative costs as possible to “programmes”.

“Whatever techniques are adopted, they are all counterproductive in one way or another,” he suggests. This is

because they leave the NGDO vulnerable to detailed enquiry and negative publicity – as recent examples in Ireland will readily confirm. They also devalue the management function and let donors off the hook. Fowler says it is up to the co-ordinating bodies for NGDOs to confront the issue collectively.

For the future, Fowler sees the tackling of structural poverty and injustice as “a question of political will, economic capacity and the civic strength to hold leaders to task”. The purpose of aid will be reoriented towards capacity *building* and agencies will move away from “the idea and practice that what is learnt in one place can be transported to another”. The future of North-South cooperation, Fowler concludes, will lie beyond aid.

Paul Cullen

World Trade: Toward Fair and Free Trade in the Twenty-first Century

Jo Marie Griesgaber and Bernard G. Gunter (eds.), Pluto Press, London 1997, 149 pages, Stg£9.99

The Globalisation of Poverty: Impacts of IMF and World Bank Reforms

Michel Chossudovsky, Zed Books/Third World Network, London 1997, 280 pages, npg

Since David Ricardo developed the idea of comparative advantage, the costs and benefits of trade have been

vigorously debated. European colonialism shaped comparative advantage, usually to the colonisers' advantage, and today what is traded by the developing nations, and who they trade with, continues largely to reflect what the father of dependency theory, Paul Baran, described as relations between “core and periphery”. The protectionism of developing economies during capitalism's golden age was a reaction in part against existing trade relations as a vestige of colonialism: Brazil, India, Korea, Egypt and Indonesia, all pursued autarchic strategies in the post-war decades. The results were less successful than the *dependencistas* had hoped, but more mixed than has since been suggested. Nonetheless, by the early 1980s, the consensus had shifted away from a commitment to autonomous development behind high protective barriers, towards an emphasis on the virtues of free trade as a route to development. Ricardo and his contemporary acolytes, the economists Stolper and Samuelson, were the vogue in policy circles, and the export-based success of the first generation East Asia “tigers” was held up as empirical proof that open economies work best. The new trade regime agreed at the end of 1994 at the conclusion of the Uruguay Round institutionalised the drive towards a more open international trading relationship, with the WTO (World Trade Organisation) charged with eliminating tariff and non-tariff barriers.

The five essays in *World Trade*, the final book in the “Rethinking Bretton

Woods" series edited by Griesgaber and Gunter, have few obvious shared themes beyond a sceptical approach to current trade orthodoxy, and do not read as a collection except in the sense that they are all bound between the same two covers. They range from country analyses of the effects of trade liberalisation (in India and Sri Lanka) to an overview of codes of conduct in an essay "Rethinking Corporate Accountability". The opening essay, "A New Trade Order in a World of Disorder?" takes a broadly Keynesian slant on the volatility which results from financial liberalisation coupled with trade liberalisation, and the loss of sovereignty which this has entailed for developing countries in particular. A *de facto* re-colonisation of the South has taken place, argues Raghavan: it is typified by the rentier incomes generated for Western TNCs under the Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement. Raghavan argues that an unholy alliance of the WTO, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, in a trinity which is "asymmetric and oppressive of the poor", has filled a vacuum created by the end of the Cold War. The new crusade is against protectionists rather than socialists, and has been spearheaded by the US administration in a bid to preserve its hegemony.

Sleigh's essay on the social aspects of economic integration focuses on the NAFTA (North America Free Trade Agreement) and the question of whether both growth with equity is possible, in contrast to the patterns

of growth across North America in the last decade. Post-NAFTA growth has distributed its benefits so unevenly for two simple reasons, contends Sleigh: the different levels of development between the USA and Mexico, and the implications this has for labour displacement south across the Rio Grande; and the failure to introduce accompanying accords with regulatory bite on labour rights and the environment. The salutary contrast is with the European Union, where membership is contingent on a certain level of development being reached, and where the Social Chapter is a recognition that single markets require standardised labour rights. In contrast, the NAFTA looks increasingly like an act of neo-mercantilism on the part of the US, diverting investment from other destinations in the Americas and doing nothing to further the cause of free and fair trade.

The third and fourth essays are a weak link in the book. Bernard D'Mello opens "Underdevelopment after the Uruguay Round: India" by quoting Baran: "Capitalism on a global scale is a system that engenders wealth in a sea of mass poverty". Well, maybe but there is little nuance in what follows and too many unsubstantiated declarations. India is moving from "degenerated national capitalism" to "neoliberal peripheral capitalism", when all the time what is needed is "genuine socialism". None of these terms is explained, except that "social control of the market" is a component of "genuine socialism". Most of the staff in the Bank would

argue for some social control of markets, and since D'Mello is clearly no supporter of Bank policy, it would be useful for the reader to have some idea of what he means by this. The essay claims an increase in poverty was due to the introduction of trade liberalisation following the IMF bailout rather than the conclusion of the Uruguay Round. A few Indians (capitalist farmers and compliant elites who serve the interest of transnational corporations) have benefited, yet 280 million Indians do not even have their minimum necessary food intake in terms of cereals. While recent growth has certainly increased inequality in India, the great blame for persistently high levels of rural poverty, (the theme of the essay), surely lies with the post-independence political class and their failure to develop a radical rural development strategy. Today, half of India's girl children never even begin school, and in states such as Uttar Pradesh access to health facilities is almost non-existent. Had D'Mello wished to propose a model of "genuine socialism", he might have begun by looking at the exceptional case of the south Indian state of Kerala, where welfare indicators are equivalent to those in neighbouring Sri Lanka, whose development record under neoliberal policy reform is the subject of the fourth essay.

Chapter 4, "Impact of Neoliberal Policies in Sri Lanka" places the blame for the escalation of armed conflict on the island on neoliberal policy first introduced in the late 1970s. Though the Tamil conflict in the north and

east of the country had deeper historical roots in the colonial era Tamil privilege and subsequent post-independence Sinhalese dominance, JVP (People's Liberation Front) violence in the South has in part been fuelled by open unemployment of over 13%. More questionable is the claim that poverty and inequality have worsened over the past decade. Ironically, Sri Lanka's human development success has contributed to discontent amongst young men in the south who have been educated to relatively high standards and then have few income-earning opportunities. Though growth has not been sufficiently labour-intensive to absorb new recruits to the labour force, there is evidence that many of the unemployed, most of whom are under 25, are men waiting to take well-paid government posts. The economic record has in fact been impressive since the late 1980s with steady annual increases in per capita GDP of 2-3% and ongoing improvements in the country's human development index. The claim that new wealth has been concentrated in the hands of a minority runs counter to income distribution figures elsewhere: according to UNICEF and Bank figures, Sri Lanka is about as equal as Sweden or Japan, and exceptionally so by developing country standards.

The final essay in the collection, by John Cavanagh, is a clear and balanced piece of writing, and a welcome relief from the polemical tone of the previous pages. It also begins to "rethink Bretton Woods",

as the series title promises us, in a way that the other contributions fail to do. Cavanagh notes the ways in which the IMF, Bank and WTO agendas have been twisted to meet the interests of powerful lobbies (commercial lenders, agri-business and the potential beneficiaries of TRIPS), as a result of their influence on OECD government and the one-dollar, one-vote system operated in the Bretton Woods Institutions. The root problem argues Cavanagh, is one of accountability and political voice. Which are the countervailing forces to these lobbies, and might these point the way towards a more transparent trade and investment regime? Traditional accountability to shareholders is no longer sufficient in a world where investor portfolios are constantly changing, and increased global competition has created incentives for TNCs to violate employee rights and pollute the "global commons". Three forms of corporate codes are considered as a response: voluntary codes adopted by corporations, regulation enforced by government, and citizens' movements using consumer power to pressure corporations into improving their employment and environmental records.

Codes for corporations and for sub-contractors are considered. While Sears and Levi Strauss are positive examples, the difficulties of imposing stringent conditions on sub-contractors and the ease with which firms can deny direct responsibility – the case of Nike in Indonesia and more recently, in Vietnam (exposed

by a leaked Ernst and Young audit) – suggest voluntary codes are often reduced to PR exercises, with weak enforcement and monitoring. In the case of government regulation, Cavanagh notes that corporations in the US exist through charters granted by state governments, and are conditional on a firm serving the common good. There is scope, it is suggested, for NGOs to press government to make charters conditional on a code of conduct. Firms which persistently flout these codes might be de-chartered. NGOs must play an increasingly significant role in pressing for further corporate accountability, says Cavanagh. An encouraging precedent is the campaign against Nestle's baby formula advertising, which culminated in the WHO/UNICEF marketing code. Anti-apartheid campaigns had similar successes in forcing firms to withdraw from South Africa, helping to liberalise the political system there. If global challenges are to be met the future lies in globalising campaigns.

The lack of a summing up of the essays into a conclusion reinforces the reader's impression that little editing went into producing *World Trade*. Despite the strengths of the final essay, this is not the student's or the general reader's introduction to post-Uruguay Round trade issues for which one would have hoped. Too much of the book treads over the tired and largely meaningless state versus market debate. More imaginative research work is needed which directs NGOs' work towards tackling salient trends in global trade

and investment, and goes beyond this ready dichotomy – one best left to the ideological fringes.

In its current, post-Cold War incarnation, the globalisation debate rages as never before, all too often shedding more heat than light. Dogmatic proponents of global competition celebrate the virtues of free trade: higher growth rates, rapid poverty reduction, the demise of “big government”, and dismiss objections to their case as the last whimpers of an otiose left. For its opponents, the growing mobility of capital and the integration of markets is responsible for downward pressure on unskilled labour costs and labour and environmental standards: jobs are being displaced, communities destroyed, and national sovereignty disregarded in the Gadarene rush towards liberalisation. This agenda is currently being dictated by policymakers and academics in the OECD governments, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Bretton Woods institutions, say the radical opponents of globalisation. The liberal right’s anti-statist ideas remain firmly in the intellectual ascendant amongst the “Washington-based financial institutions”, under whose “tutelage” the poor of the South are being deprived of the opportunity to secure a viable livelihood.

By unequivocally placing the blame for the current “global crisis” of growing inequalities and a deepening of developing country poverty at the doors of the IMF and the World Bank (WB), *The Globalisation*

of Poverty belongs very much to the latter camp. In short, the Bretton Woods institutions are the policemen of the New World Order, regulating the world economy by a process of debt collection. Reliable debtors, in exchange for further credit, are required to pursue macroeconomic reforms which constrain policy manoeuvre. Bad debtors are turned into pariahs, and unable to obtain credit, are forced sooner or later to co-operate with the Bretton Wood Institutions. The process of policy convergence is inexorable.

The book is split into five parts. The first, “Global Poverty and Macroeconomic Reform”, identifies stabilisation programmes and structural reform, implemented under IMF/WB direction, as the two chief culprits responsible for the global cheap labour economy, where “poverty is an input”. Parts two to five offer a series of case studies from sub-Saharan Africa, South and South-East Asia, Latin America, and the transition economies of Eastern Europe, illustrating the role the Fund and Bank has played in perpetuating and exacerbating poverty, inequality and conflict.

The current global crisis, according to Chossudovsky, has its roots in the debt crisis of the early 1980s which exposed so many of the frailties and failures of developing country states, just as monetarism was coming to the fore in Washington policy circles. Suddenly the financial institutions held all the trump cards. A seismic shift in North-South relations took place, as effective power was vested in

unaccountable financial institutions, while developing country governments rubber-stamped macroeconomic policy changes which dismantled the state and impoverished entire populations.

The principal policy changes under stabilisation and adjustment are covered in part one: devaluation, the reining in of public expenditure, and rises in lending rates. The undoubted social and economic damage caused by shock devaluations and cuts in social expenditure is detailed. Price hikes caused by devaluation and the dramatic fall in the purchasing power of the poor this entails, mean that a decade after stabilisation, incomes are usually lower in real terms than before reform took place. The loss of subsidies and preferential credit to the poor is often the loss of an important income transfer, while the loss of health and education provision is a further constraint on the capacity of the poor to meet their needs. The employment effects are marked, as the public sector contracts and a shift towards capital-intensive exports take place. The result is that millions of Latin Americans and Africans have been forced by circumstance to pursue ad hoc survival strategies in the informal sector, while a small minority have gained from the expansion of export markets.

Much of the case study material, which accounts for almost two-thirds of the book's length, adds considerable weight to Chossudovsky's critique of the IMF-WB's gung-ho approach to policy reform. The relationship between macroeconomic reform and

the narcotics industry in Bolivia demonstrates how the Fund and Bank's ill-considered policy recommendations can exacerbate poverty and generate social instability. The long-term effect of reforms in the late 1980s in Bolivia has been disastrous, with no convincing economic recovery in sight and the coca trade a major factor in social unrest and the corruption of public administration. Today, perhaps 40 per cent of Bolivians are directly or indirectly dependent on coca for their livelihood.

Again, in the case of India, the post-1991 economic reform which followed the IMF bailout of the Rao government has had little impact on poverty levels. The Indian rate of growth may be looking more "tigerish", but where are the benefits being distributed? Into the pockets of the Tatas and the Birlas, says Chossudovsky. The subtext of the book is that the motivation behind the reforms is political. Developing countries are being subordinated to the interests of international capital by the Fund and Bank, themselves reflecting the priorities of Western governments. Sovereignty has been eroded and whole populations deliberately recolonised.

While it is certainly the case that for many developing countries, SAPs were offered only notionally, and the alternatives were not even worth contemplating, the impotence of the state when faced with the Bretton Woods Institutions is exaggerated. The Moi government in Kenya has persistently flouted IMF conditions with virtual impunity, and cases from

across Africa suggest there is a marked difference between signing up to and implementing SAPs. In many cases, including that of the Fujishock in Peru in 1992 (used as a case study), the role of the IMF and Bank is distorted. Fujimori's shock stabilisation may have won IMF approval and enabled Peru to begin rescheduling its debts, but the reforms were not directed by the IMF. Nor can the Fund and Bank be held accountable, as the book seems to imply, for Fujimori's duplicitous electoral campaign promise *not to stabilise*.

The analysis of the "Global Cheap-Labour Economy" in part one is also open to question. What is meant by the statement that "consumer demand is limited to 15% of the world population"? Not in transistor radios, bicycles or plastic kitchenware. The possibility of developing a dynamic national competitive advantage along East Asian lines is ignored, and the displacement of labour to low wage destinations from the North is over-stated. Most employment is in non-tradeable services, most manufacturing in the OECD is high-technology and skill-intensive, and few industries are genuinely foot-loose, given the sunk costs involved in most direct investments. Finally, capital-intensive though much foreign direct investment may be, according to the International Labour Organisation (ILO) it provides an estimated 24 million jobs in developing countries. In countries such as Malaysia, jobs from FDI account for a significant proportion of the total.

The Fund and Bank's poverty-

reduction record is a sufficient indictment of their stabilisation and restructuring policies, and the frequent hyperbolic swipes add nothing to the argument. Charges of "genocide" levelled at the IMF trivialise the critique, as do sub-headings such as "The IMF supports caste exploitation". The parallels drawn between German Foreign Direct Investment into Eastern Europe post-1991 and Nazi plans for a Teutonic *lebensraum* will similarly tend to lose the reader's sympathy. The absence of a conclusion of any sort also weakens the book. It is difficult to argue that stabilisation was not necessary where large and persistent budget deficits and over-valued exchange rates were a brake on growth, as they were across much of the South by the late 1980s. What were the possible alternatives, given the need to stabilise and restructure after the interest rate rises of the late 1970s? If the disagreement is over the mechanisms and sequencing of stabilisation and restructuring, rather than reform per se, then a brief discussion of some policy alternatives would have been appropriate.

The book is a committed but not always coherent critique of current trends in the world economy, and the role of the Bretton Woods institutions as the standard bearers of free trade orthodoxy. But the World Bank in particular is changing. Its policy statements sound increasingly like those of a major NGO, and though in practice its policies are often inimical to its stated aim of poverty reduction, it is not the "neoliberal" ogre painted

in this book. The radical left need to recognise that a shift has taken place in Bretton Woods thinking, and that the modified liberalism it has now espoused demands an altogether more sophisticated approach to that pursued here.

Patrick Watt

Empowering Communities: A Casebook from West Sudan

Peter Strachan with Chris Peters, Oxford, Oxfam Publications, 1997, 86 pages, npg

Crisis Response: Humanitarian Band-Aids in Sudan and Somalia

John Prendergast, Pluto Press/Center For Concern, 1997, 155 pages, npg

These two books represent the "little and large" of development work: the first examines a low cost NGO response in an impoverished district of west Sudan which started off as emergency assistance, has since moved onto participatory development, and is now aiming to become self-sustaining. The other book examines an international humanitarian intervention, which at considerable human and financial cost has failed to bring peace and development to either Sudan or Somalia, strategic locations in a region once assiduously courted by the Cold War superpower duo of the United States and the former Soviet Union.

Both books have minor stylistic failings. *Empowering Communities* builds the reader up to expect too much success, perhaps just an OXFAM self-glorification, then unexpectedly introduces a fearful realism, and lays open the fragility of a far from concluded experiment. The core of *Crisis Response* consists of a series of consultative reports written over a three year period to differing agendas and in varying styles, development theory and analysis mixing unevenly with descriptive prose, minute detail with broad brush strokes. *Crisis Response*, published in 1997, although the field work was all completed by 1995 provides no account of subsequent events.

Nonetheless, here we have two works which will repay reading by anyone with a professional interest in development. John Prendergast's book is summed up by its subtitle, *Humanitarian Band-Aids in Sudan and Somalia*. He sets out his thesis in his opening paragraph: "The complex crises which exist in many war-torn, famine-stricken countries in Africa require much more meaningful engagement than they presently receive." In the past there have been too many one-dimensional responses to complex emergencies which are multi-faceted crises simultaneously demanding humanitarian aid, peace-keeping or peacemaking and the implementation of conflict resolution strategies. In Sudan and Somalia, the North has failed in this task.

A more hopeful, albeit micro-level intervention is presented in *Empowering Communities*, where

Peter Strachan and Chris Peters detail OXFAM's efforts to move one of its food aid programmes through the stages of development from consultation and participation to empowerment and ownership, and finally, in the near future hopefully, to sustainability and independence. If the handover to the smallholders of Kebkabiya is ultimately completed, it will be a first for OXFAM. It has been a learning process for the development organisation as well as for the community. But we shall look at that later.

First to the global concerns examined in *Crisis Response*. John Prendergast is an American development specialist who has undertaken extensive research on crises in the Horn of Africa. In *Crisis Response* he gives us evidence aplenty to back up what we already know: that Operation Restore Hope coupled with the UNISOM mission in Somalia was a disaster and that Operation Lifeline Sudan, while serving a humanitarian purpose, has not impacted positively on the political crisis there.

Sudan's civil war now threatens to boil over into a regional conflict. Ethiopia, a strongly multi-faith society, and Arab Egypt both fear Khartoum's fundamentalist inclinations while Eritrea and Uganda in particular, along with the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Kenya, share worries over Sudanese sponsorship of destabilising terror groups.

So, in a chapter consisting of the author's evidence to the sub-

committee on Africa of the US House International Relations Committee, Prendergast proposes making all aid to Sudan conditional on good governance and human rights criteria, building local capacity and supporting civil structures and multi-level peacemaking. He suggests a shift in the aid ratio of food to non-food items, favouring the latter – roads, primary health care, veterinary networks, seed and grain banks – as these are less commercially exploitable by military commanders. He also favours a debate on an energy embargo, selected export sanctions and an air exclusion zone – the type of pressure which brought change to South Africa.

Prendergast argues very strongly throughout on the need to build civil society in order to end abuses such as those carried out by the Sudanese government and the southern rebel forces. Here he recommends that donors and agencies focus more directly on traditional leaders (chiefs), churches, women's organisations, local community groups and other elements of non-military society.

Clearly political, ethnic, military and economic conditions, and even geography in Sudan, have made the development of a strong civil society difficult. By ensuring that aid, as much as possible, by-passes the government and works with an albeit imperfect civil society, the outside world would be making a strong statement. But the question remains to what extent would such a strategy be disrupted by the Khartoum regime which is already displeased with the

way assistance programmes have altered since the late 1980s?

Prendergast is an open admirer of Relief Society of Tigray (REST) and Eritrean Relief Association (ERA), the Tigrayan and Eritrean relief agencies through which outside aid was channelled during the anti-Mengistu war in Ethiopia. He stresses their institutional autonomy and role in building self-reliance and democratic development during that time.

He contrasts this with the human rights abuses of the southern Sudanese forces. A confidential document cited claims: "The SRRA (Sudan Relief and Rehabilitation Association) and RASS (Relief Association of Southern Sudan) are viewed as structures which have compromised their mandate by yielding to the pressure of the SPLA (Sudan People's Liberation Army) factions and thus perceived as concealing a hidden military and political agenda as well as a stated humanitarian one." Not apparently the roots from which a strong civil society will grow.

The proposal to support multi-level peacemaking, i.e. at national, inter-factional and community levels, recognises the importance of healing division as a prerequisite of development, but of course opens a debate about the point at which peacemaking can become peace-enforcement and interference by outside cultures in internal dynamics. This is most evident in the chapters dealing with Somalia.

The question not dealt with in this book is the maintenance of

Sudan as a united country. The Arab-based government has used ethnic cleansing against the Dinka and Nuer black Africans of the south; the Nuer have been attacked by SPLA-Mainstream; the Dinka by SPLA-United and the Equitorians by both government and SPLA-Mainstream, while SPLA-United forcibly recruits them. Increasingly in the region, political talk is of the break-up of Sudan.

Such a future would be bleak if Wal Duany of Indiana University quoted here is correct. "The predominant instruments [of the SPLA]", he claims, "are coercion and corruption. It has not managed to integrate southern Sudanese society around any positive political values. The movement has been able to persist only as long as it successfully coerces and demoralises social groups in the region." What hope for a new state in southern Sudan then? Prendergast concludes that everything the international community has tried so far has failed and a new start must be made. But how?

If he does not argue for the division of Sudan, he is complacent about the effective break-up of the formal state of Somalia. Here the North used a military presence to back humanitarian aid. The outcome was withdrawal by the UN, and to the casual observer, a remaining anarchy under the shifting control of war-lords. But Prendergast, along with Ken Menkhaus, challenged this analysis in 1995, denying Somalia was anarchic, rather "a mosaic of fluid, highly localised polities – some based

on traditional authority, others reflecting hybrid arrangements – that are stepping in to fill the vacuum created by the prolonged collapse of the state, performing many of the most essential functions of day-to-day governance.”

As with most famines, it was more than a failure of rains that turned Somalia into an international headline in the early 1990s. Prendergast explains that “conflict over land ownership played a key role in the outbreak of war and famine.” But as the concerned rode in on their white chargers, this fact was ignored not only by attention-seekers among the relief groups due to their lack of analysis, but also by the UN itself. The result: aid increased the stakes, funded the factions with protection money and worsened a bad situation.

As happens too often, overseas politicians, ill-versed in the issues, preferred to follow the T-shirts of their national relief junkies than to seek professional analysis. Complex emergencies are stripped to headline simplicity. Though perhaps they are not all as naive as they seem. Africa Rights is quoted here saying: “The increase in donor-funded NGO relief operations and Western disengagement from poor countries are two sides of the same coin.”

We can hope that Mary Robinson’s experience of providing headline pictures for competing Irish relief agencies as a nation fractured violently will have helped her conclude as UN Human Rights Commissioner that the serious work is done off-camera, and that the

audience while on-screen is much wider than the charitable in developed countries.

While the world watched the warlords grew more powerful and wealthy, the young guns found power stemming from rifle barrels. This also happened in southern Sudan. It had previously been the experience in Uganda’s pastoralist Karamoja region where the near collapse of central national authority left young herders with nothing to lose but their lives and much to gain from taking the risk. There, the strong government of Yoweri Museveni ended this chaos by formalising a militia in Karamoja, providing its volunteer members with a small monthly income, choosing a Karamojong as minister for the region and another as army commander there. The weapons that once threatened now replace sticks as the props from which to sling the ekichalong, the traditional stool always carried by Karamojong men. Could such a strategy work in Somalia?

First find a central leader. Or else, more likely as Prendergast suggests, give aid to small communities trying to rebuild their lives and link it to reconciliation, hardly an infringement of sovereignty as some suggestions of conditionality can be. And above all, give Somalia time to rediscover, and, if necessary, to reinvent itself. Somalia is a land of small farmers and pastoralists. These are the people so far excluded from peace initiatives which target war-lords, politicians and merchants struggling continually for control of resources.

Meanwhile, as is too often the case the rights and lives of the people were trampled on. The author quotes a UNICEF memo referring to the "sheer inadequacy of providing goods and services without seeking to protect rights." Complex emergencies force us, he argues, to confront "the dichotomy between humanitarian-aid-as-political-charity and humanitarian-aid-as-political-critique."

All aid is political; it affects the balance of a country for good or ill; just as the Khmer Rouge were sustained in the 1970s and 1980s, and the Interahamwe in the 1990s by our-job-is-just-to-save-lives relief groups, so the errors of both the NGOs and the international community in Somalia have exacerbated the problem.

The argument of Prendergast and others that it is time to focus on strengthening civil society is compelling. "States with strong civil societies have greater capacity to rebound from disaster and widespread social strife which can make all the difference between recovery and collapse," says Ken Hackett of Catholic Relief Services.

Similarly, almost echoing the thoughts of Kenyan human rights lawyer Maina Kiai, speaking in Dublin last September, Mark Duffield writing for UNICEF is quoted as follows: "new response would be working below the political level to help reconstruct professional and civil structures and support their adaptation in crisis conditions. This is a much wider program than has been hitherto considered in political emergencies."

Despite the sometimes bewildering detail which will pass over all but dedicated Horn specialists, this book could have been written as a primer for both Mary Robinson in her new post as High Commissioner for Human Rights and aid agencies whatever their record in past emergencies.

Much more digestible for development workers is *Empowering Communities* which presents a case study of development thinking from inside OXFAM. Peter Strachan, who formerly worked for OXFAM in Sudan, compiled the project report for internal consumption; Chris Peters edited it for publication.

Originally, the Kebkabiya project in Northern Darfur province was a response to the 1984-5 famine: the provision of 12 seedbanks to enhance food security. Beginning in 1989 it added a second phase dealing with animal health, animal traction, pest control, soil and water conservation and community development. From the start community participation has been a central part of the project. In 1990 the PMC (Project Management Committee) was registered as an independent body. Later the KSCS (Kebkabiya Smallholders Charitable Society) became a legal entity, a voluntary organisation registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs.

Kebkabiya is a remote Sahel area of 66,000 people covering 120 villages with a slightly atypical rain pattern. OXFAM's work is among the poorest of the poor, the holders of goz land, the rainfed section which, unlike wadi land, does not benefit from the water courses.

The seedbanks were the initial

response to the problems facing the people. But, learning from a failed scheme in El Gencina where Oxfam chose the locations, built the banks and found that the farmers – feeling no sense of ownership – defaulted on their repayments, the dispersed community of Kebkabiya was fully involved with siting, building and organising. The ten borrowed bowls of seed were repaid with 11 after the harvest.

But there were still failures. An attempt to establish water co-operation between goz and wadi farmers ignored the reality of the social relationship and had to be abandoned. Revolving funds were a new concept for the villagers and were made less attractive by the ravages of inflation which grew into hyperinflation. Continuing OXFAM subsidisation will be required for the foreseeable future.

Clusters of villages formed Village Centre Committees with two representatives – one male and one female from each village – who from their midst selected two representatives (again a man and a woman) to join the PMC in Kebkabiya town. Despite outward gender balance the women on these committees sometimes failed to understand, and more often were not informed of developments. One female member of two years standing on the PMC is quoted thus: “Often the men get things from the project and I’m not informed about what’s happening. I’m kept in the dark about many things to do with the project. I don’t ask what’s going on and I don’t expect I’d be told if I did. People would say that I wasn’t being respectful.”

OXFAM is committed to community participation and gender sensitivity. However, sometimes one has the feeling that the pace and direction of the project were forced by the parent organisation. Requests by women for practical help in poultry raising, food processing and traditional handicrafts were turned down. In OXFAM’s approach to the project all participants must be given the same opportunities. Later they softened this approach and a discretionary budget allowed support for women’s initiatives viewed as complementary to, but not distracting from, the core activities.

The book’s main thrust is to examine the handover of the KSCS to the community. This was to take place over a 4 year period followed by a further two years of direct OXFAM support. A threatened shift in Government policy toward NGOs shortened this timeframe to just one year. With hindsight, had this remained the case, the project would have collapsed. But relations with Government improved and the original timetable was reinstated though it now includes some of the more sharply focussed methodology of the curtailed 12 month period. The operational handover was, at the time of writing, almost completed on a component-by-component basis, with the exception of animal traction where the cost of steel is still causing a re-design of the plough.

A management handover is in progress, but the training of a voluntary leadership team so that it cannot be manipulated by paid officials remains a key challenge.

Achieving a full financial handover is however the most difficult issue. The current budget is around Stg£40,000. Membership subscription is three pence. Only the animal health component can be fully self-financing. Either they charge for services or means test for eligibility-which they do not wish to do. Or they fundraise - at which they have no experience. Or OXFAM continues to fund them.

OXFAM has agreed to fund 5 more while new methods of funding are considered. In that period much remains to be done to raise community awareness. An executive committee member comments: "At present it's very low, at times non-existent. There's a need for extensive training of the whole KSCS membership so that the beneficiaries really know the objectives and procedures of the Society."

At the end of this book there are more difficult questions than might

have been imagined at the start. While one can approve of OXFAM's motivation and conceptual framework one is drawn to the conclusion that for true sustainability they must stay in Kebkabiya much longer.

To end with an idea from Prendergast's weightier tome: "A sustained commitment to humanitarian aid might satisfy NGOs and their advocates, but until institution-, capacity-, and peace-building become equal priorities to humanitarian assistance, the donor community will remain in the band-aid business." OXFAM, in west Sudan seems to have recognised this. There are challenges, ideas and many lessons for aid professionals, albeit different ones, in both these books.

Rodney Rice

