

Preface

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Development, in the sense of a body of thinking and practice about why poverty exists and persists, and about how to eradicate it, has a relatively recent history. The development era is said to have been launched by President Truman in 1949, and indeed most of the best-known specialised UN agencies were established at around that time.¹ Development NGOs came into being even more recently, though many of today's familiar names — Save the Children Fund, CARE, Oxfam — began their lives as welfare or emergency relief agencies, and either 'converted' to development in the 1960s and 1970s, or at the very least discovered it. Thousands more were spawned as the development industry really took off. As it became better understood that the causes of poverty and vulnerability were structural, and not 'natural', so it became part of NGO lore that development was the best form of disaster prevention, and that a 'developmental' rather than a 'derring-do' response was more appropriate in emergencies. Of course, a great variety of approaches and activities were — and still are — bundled into the category of 'development', covering anything and everything from building latrines and sinking tubewells through to supporting union education programmes and human rights work. But, whether NGOs took a 'basic needs' or a 'structural change' approach, there was widespread consensus that getting rid of stubborn poverty would require something more than, and something quite different from, humanitarian relief. Civil society, by contrast, has a centuries-long history in Western political thought, dating back to the philosophers of Ancient Greece. It is very much alive and well today, although, as is increasingly obvious, it is a very imprecise term. Like some

of its predecessors in the development lexicon — ‘community’, ‘participation’, ‘bottom-up development’ — it is more often invoked to convey a benign glow than to illuminate debate or practice.

Why is it that these three categories — development, civil society, and NGOs — should have come to be regarded not only as mutually reinforcing, but as overlapping or quasi-synonymous terms? To read some of the aid policy-related literature of the 1990s, and to judge by the recent funding patterns of the major donor agencies, one could be forgiven for thinking that civil society = NGOs, and that NGOs are an essential part of ‘delivering’ not only development aid, but development itself. In other words, that development depends on NGOs. How has such a myth been spun?

There are several different elements that may form part of an explanation. First, the neo-liberal project, as expressed through structural adjustment in the South, and as promoted in the North by its leading political ideologues (most notably Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher), required a curbing of state spending, and a rolling back of social sector investment. In theory, an unfettered market would provide more efficient services and create the jobs that would generate the wealth needed to sustain them. As private voluntary agencies, NGOs could occupy this new niche quite comfortably, particularly, for instance, in participating in the social safety-net projects and social investment funds that were supposed to alleviate the immediate effects of structural adjustment. Hence, NGOs were encouraged to present themselves as appropriate channels for aid to the poorest, for those at risk of falling through the net — or for whom the net was simply never designed to protect. Many NGOs that had previously prided themselves on how little government money they accepted began to raise their self-imposed ceilings as the money flowed in.

Second, the break-up of the Soviet bloc, culminating in the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, was associated with — and, by some observers, attributed to — the emergence of people’s organisations through which opposition to the prevailing political system was powerfully articulated. These included church-based groups, unions, professional bodies, and also a nascent NGO sector. The idea of autonomous civil society organisations holding governments accountable, and at the same time pushing forward a democratisation agenda, was appealing to observers from different points in the political spectrum, pragmatists and romantics alike. The opening up of the centralised economies of Eastern Europe coincided very neatly with the advance of the neo-liberal agenda that was already underway both in North America and Western Europe, and also throughout much of the South.

Third, in Latin America there had been a long tradition of radical social organisation as a form of resistance to military dictatorships, particularly once the space for political dialogue was effectively closed off. NGOs had played a vital role in countries such as Brazil and Chile, often maintaining what little space might exist for debate, or holding on to an alternative vision of society. In Central America, the long-running civil wars that had engulfed much of the region throughout the 1980s were clearly reaching a military stalemate at the end of the decade. With US and EU attention turning to Eastern Europe, the funding plug was in the process of being pulled out, and external support began draining away. US backing for the *contra* in Nicaragua, and for the government and military in El Salvador, was becoming more difficult to justify to a domestic constituency in terms of ‘stemming the tide of communism’, and long-standing EU support for political solutions to the wars was beginning to wane. And the so-called collapse of socialism clearly had repercussions for the kind of future the left and centre-left movements in Central America could envisage. The heyday of *vanguardismo* had definitively passed. As the likelihood of some kind of peace process was taking shape, NGOs and alternative think-tanks began to turn to Antonio Gramsci — one of the most influential modern thinkers on civil society — rather than to Che Guevara in thinking through what their role might be in helping to build a new state, while also maintaining their own independent watchdog function and political protagonism. Similar kinds of debates later took place in South Africa, as NGOs and ‘civics’ had to re-define their role in the context of an ANC government coming to power — something that required some very rapid gear changes (see Pieterse 1997 for example).

That the rise of neo-liberalism should have coincided with profound transitional (but not by now revolutionary) processes that were rooted in their own societies and cultures may have been an accident of history. However, it was one that lent itself to the appropriation — hijacking, even — of these processes by the ideological wing of the Washington Consensus, with its focus on good governance and democratisation in the South and the East. It also led to donors and political commentators uncritically embracing anything calling itself ‘civil society’, NGOs included. There was a flourishing of neo-romantic notions of the self-provisioning and self-regulating community versus the intrusive and normative state. Even such sharp-tongued critics of ‘casino capitalism’ as David C. Korten (who had long stressed that genuine development must be ‘people-centred’²) attributed almost messianic qualities to autonomous ‘local communities’. These were to be the only hope of resistance against

the onslaught of corporate capitalism. Civil society could do no wrong, and there was nothing it could not do. NGOs, for their part, sprang up like mushrooms, offering to be both the channel through which to strengthen civil society, and as civil society organisations in their own right. In some cases, they seemed to claim the divine right to represent or speak on behalf of civil society at large. It was conveniently overlooked that neo-Nazi as well as human rights organisations, that mafias as well as charities, union members as well as strike-breakers, animal-rights groups as well as the fox-hunting lobby all form part of civil society.

The Internet has opened up new opportunities for ‘virtual communities’ of like-minded people to share their ideas. Some civil society networks see the need for more effective states, for market regulation, for taxes on speculative financial transactions, and so on. Others view civil society as the sole guarantor of individual liberties, holding that socialism and the welfare state undermine the family, promote social disintegration, and generate dependency. These diverse groups are not harmoniously working towards the democratisation of public institutions or good governance, nor are they necessarily even tolerant of the others’ right to exist. At best, they represent the interests of their members. Rather than seeing civil society and its multifarious organisational forms as a collective alternative to the state, then, it is clear that only an effective and open state can protect the rights of all citizens, where these might otherwise be trampled upon by others.

As a particular sub-species of civil society organisation, NGOs, as has often been said, are defined as a sector by what they are *not*, rather than by what they *are*.³ They come in all shapes and sizes, and the agendas and actions of some are diametrically opposed to those adopted by others. Some proselytise as a condition of receiving project benefits; some focus on a theme or geographical area; some are specialist operational agencies, while others provide only funds and other support; some concentrate on high-profile international advocacy, others work quietly and unobtrusively at the grassroots. But, more often than not, development NGOs are in some way involved in transferring resources from societies which have plenty to those who have little. Hence, more often than not, NGOs depend on being able to mobilise those resources from their home constituency. It is this, more than any other single factor, which makes NGOs susceptible to following, or at least accommodating, the agendas and fashions set by their funders, be these official donor agencies, religious organisations, political foundations, or whatever.⁴ In terms of narrow institutional survival, mobilising money takes precedence over mobilising people.

The tensions between the ‘development industry’ and civil society organisations are not necessarily negative ones. However, as Jenny Pearce argues in her introductory essay, the problem is that these tensions are often ignored or downplayed, and their changing nature is glossed over. The result is that NGOs may successfully adapt to a changing market in terms of ensuring a continued supply of funds, but at the expense of genuinely facilitating radical social change, or representing real alternatives to the dominant paradigm (see Fowler 2000 for a good discussion on these issues). Worse, NGOs (from South as well as North) can by their actions actually impede the healthy functioning of civil society organisations, as well as undermining the functions of the state. Pointing to the mix of scholar-activist-practitioners which characterises the journal *Development in Practice* from which the contributions to this *Reader* are drawn, she makes a powerful plea for NGOs to engage more energetically and more rigorously in theoretical debates on development, to be more humble in acknowledging the myriad other forms of social action, and to be courageous enough to recognise that unless they are prepared radically to change their ways of working, NGOs may well not be part of the answer to eradicating poverty and injustice in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1 The Bretton Woods Institutions had been founded in 1944, while the FAO was established in 1945, UNESCO and UNICEF in 1946, followed by WHO in 1948, and UNHCR in 1951. Yet UNDP, now one of the world’s largest sources of grant funding for development co-operation, was not established until 1965. The oldest of the UN agencies is the ILO, which dates back to 1919. It remains unique among UN agencies for its tripartite structure, with representation by governments, business (employers), and unions (organised labour): in today’s terms, state, market, and civil society.

2 David C. Korten heads the People-Centred Development Forum and is author of many books, including *The Post-*

Corporate World: life under capitalism (1999), and, *When Corporations Rule the World* (1995).

3 It is interesting that the older term, ‘voluntary agency’, has largely fallen out of use in the international context. In the UK, for instance, the ‘voluntary sector’ is today generally taken to refer to local or national agencies, often sub-contracted by government. Even in the USA, where the term PVO (private voluntary organisation) was standard until a few years ago, ‘NGO’ has become far more common.

4 Even the UN is ultimately hostage to the domestic policies of its principal donor-debtor: by September 1998, the USA owed over half the US\$2.5 billion unpaid dues, despite treaty obligations that are binding on member states. (Its 1998 arrears of US\$197 million were

paid in November 1998 in order to retain its vote in the General Assembly.) The US Congress uses its massive negative leverage not only to insist on internal reforms within the UN (including major lay-offs), but actually to influence the policies of some of the specialised agencies. Committed funds were also withheld from UNFPA on the grounds that it allegedly supports coercive population-control policies in China (UN NGLS 1999: 21).

References

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