

Editorial

Deborah Eade

The role of local government in managing development has been portrayed as a concrete expression of democratisation and ‘good governance’ but is perhaps also viewed as the acceptable face of the much-maligned and now much-weakened state. One of the assumptions that development agencies make about decentralisation is that if local people are able to be more involved in decisions that affect their daily lives, so the local government structures will become more responsive to local priorities. The corollary is that civil society will ‘thicken’, levels of social trust will rise, and people will both feel a greater sense of responsibility towards each other and be better engaged with a more human-level state. One of the dangers, however, is that if citizens are encouraged to focus only on their immediate concerns, they may begin to forget about the broader canvas. It can hardly be said, for instance, that greater decentralisation has had the effect of bringing more people out to cast their votes in national elections, or even to get involved in organised political life. In much of the West, formal elections are an exercise in public apathy. Issue-based global movements are the leading form of contemporary activism, though characterised more by round-the-clock virtual communication than by the messy demonstrations that hit the television screens. It would be ironic indeed if greater democratisation at the local or global level were to allow major national government policy decisions—particularly within the international arena—to be made without sustained public scrutiny. We can draw an analogy here with aid agencies priding themselves on their commitment to popular participation in their development projects, oblivious to the fact that beyond these aid-protected confines, the ‘participants’ may be alienated and disenfranchised, excluded from or indifferent to any semblance of political expression in their own societies.

One problem facing local governments is that their greater responsibility in terms of delivering public services is not necessarily accompanied by the resources—human and financial—to be able to do so. **David Pottie** looks at the complex situation facing local governments in South Africa in the provision of basic housing. Not only is there an enormous unmet need but also the rules of the economic game have shifted in the post-apartheid era, with the result that these governments must depend on various forms of public–private partnership in the hope that private profit can be made to work for the social good. **Lorna Gold** addresses similar issues in the context of NGO partnerships with state and non-state actors, and the values upon which such partnerships need to be based if they are to be regarded as legitimate among the respective constituencies of the various partners. She outlines the experiences in Brazil of ‘The Economy of Communion’, a global project bringing together small businesses

with a philanthropic ethos and church-based organisations whose shared aim is that of eradicating poverty. **Ted Hewitt** looks at how effectively international cooperation may facilitate enhanced citizen participation in local-level decision making through examination of a project involving the city of Charlesbourg in Quebec and that of Ovalle in Chile. The study presents a relatively optimistic account of the role played by innovations transferred as a result of this project in enhancing citizen involvement in local government, but suggests that any such gains may be limited and must be viewed within the larger politico-administrative context in Latin America and attendant factors restricting the establishment of a broad democratic culture at the local level. Turning to local governance in Uganda, **Sophie Witter** and **Jenifer Bukokhe** report on a survey to explore how children perceive poverty, and how they view the effectiveness of local government in addressing issues of concern to them. Children and adults were found to have different perspectives on poverty; but while children had a positive view of their own potential role in mitigating poverty, they were highly critical of the performance of local government in this regard.

While it does not follow, of course, that non-governmental agencies that point to government deficiencies could necessarily do any better themselves, their legitimacy as critics will depend largely on how well they discharge their own responsibilities: the more vociferous their criticisms, the greater the onus on such agencies to demonstrate their own effectiveness. **Susan Dicklitch** and **Heather Rice** examine the role of faith-based international development NGOs with special reference to the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC). They attribute the MCC's success to its emphasis on accountability, its holistic approach to basic rights, and a responsive 'listen and learn' approach which embraces empowerment and social justice. Willing to remain small, the authors argue that the MCC's overall approach is the very antithesis of the 'quick fix' methods associated with the New Policy Agenda. **Linda Kelly**, **Patrick Kilby**, and **Nalini Kasynathan** place the work of the Australian NGO Oxfam Community Aid Abroad under the spotlight, looking at how it has tried to measure the impact of its work in India and Sri Lanka. Though it is notoriously difficult to attribute any social change to the impact of one particular actor or intervention, the authors highlight the importance both of participation and 'downward' accountability mechanisms, and of linking local-level activities within a broad regional, national, and global context. Focusing on the potential—but seldom realised—synergies from collaboration between a research and an operational organisation, such as an NGO, **James L. Garrett** examines the institutional partnership between the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and CARE-USA. In doing so, he illustrates the gaps in organisational orientation that can lead to problems, provides ideas about how to bridge those gaps, and highlights what bumps to expect along the way in constructing a productive collaboration. After these generally positive case study accounts, **Issa G. Shivji** sounds a note of caution, arguing that NGOs and social activists run the risk of following the policy directions favoured by foreign donor agencies to the detriment of their own organisational and moral capacity to act in solidarity with those whose interests they claim to support. In a unipolar era, which holds that the age of politics and international solidarity is over, Shivji maintains that it is vital for NGOs and other social activists to keep alive the belief that an alternative to the existing world is both necessary and possible, and to be consistent and courageous in their defence of basic rights and freedoms.

Finally, two Viewpoint pieces highlight different aspects of communication in relation to social change. Arguing that development activities are about communicating on various levels, are deeply embedded in the cultures of those involved, and entail significant inter-cultural issues, **Daniel Mato** draws both on his own extensive experience in these fields and on the work of influential Latin American thinkers such as Paolo Freire and Orlando Fals-Borda to

distil a set of principles and lessons for wider application. **Morna Macleod** focuses on the importance, complexity, and ambiguity of the symbolic terrain both in everyday life and in social struggle. Taking Mayan women's traditional dress or *traje* as text, she reflects upon the multiple and contested meanings this evokes, and argues that Mayan women are playing a role which has not received sufficient analysis or recognition within the Mayan movement's struggle for indigenous identity and rights. Concluding with a reflection on the challenges facing inter-ethnic relations and the recognition of indigenous peoples in Guatemala, Macleod illustrates how limited the impact of decentralisation per se will be on establishing a culture of democracy.