

## Editorial

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For all the recent talk among Northern NGOs about ‘turbulent’ and ‘chaotic’ environments, the so-called ‘aid industry’ has had it pretty easy for almost half a century. While they will certainly need to find ways to break their dependence on channelling aid, there is little chance of development and humanitarian relief agencies going out of business; on the contrary, the market has expanded massively, and the demand for their services outstrips their collective capacity to meet it. How else to explain the phenomenal proliferation of development NGOs alone over the last two decades? For most of the post-war period, there has been little mainstream questioning about ‘Development’ as such (though fierce debates have raged about how best to achieve it and, more recently, about what criteria to apply). Nor, despite the serious questions often raised by critical aid-watchers over the years (the involvement of certain NGOs in US-sponsored counter-insurgency campaigns being an obvious case in point), has there been any significant doubt in the public mind that aid agencies are basically on the side of the angels. Not perfect, maybe, but better than nothing, and perhaps the best that can be hoped for in an imperfect world.

This complacency is beginning to change. Firstly, the economic and social crises that now engulf even the post-war success stories such as Japan and Southeast Asia, and have brought the near-collapse even of the countries in Latin America, Eastern Europe, or Africa that have obediently taken the structural adjustment prescriptions, are far too profound and far-reaching for aid to be anywhere near being an answer. And it is equally clear to many that Development and the ‘aid industry’ at large are actually the underlying problem, not the solution. In this context, although the honeymoon between NGOs and the multilateral agencies may not yet be over (both sides have too much invested in legitimising each other for that to happen for a while yet), there are signs that the marriage was not made in heaven. Good intentions and compelling sound-bites and television footage from the refugee camps of Sudan or Albania are not enough to fend off criticisms of NGO bungling and rivalry. A long-standing critique of (and also within) NGOs has been that their willingness to act as conduits for official aid compromises their autonomy, and even their integrity and *raison d’être*.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, multi- and bilateral donors are seeking to bypass the conventional NGO sector, which they fear is a self-serving consumer of their resources, and go straight to a wider range of civil society organisations in the South—a course of action that has sent many Northern NGOs into a flat spin, and suggests that they depend on the status quo rather than being an alternative to it.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, agencies such as UNDP are already turning to the corporate sector to guarantee their own survival, with controversial companies such as Citicorp, Statoil, Dow Chemical, Rio Tinto plc, and Asea Brown Boveri high on their list of ‘partners’.<sup>3</sup> Against this background, the voices of those intellectuals and activists who question the very premises upon which the existing development edifice has been constructed are ever more likely to increase in number, and perhaps at last to be heard.

**Helen Hintjens** opens this issue of *Development in Practice* with a witty but damning account of how development agencies—both as policy-making institutions and in terms of

their staff and associates—collude in a complex series of pretences. Rather, she argues, the power behind the discourse ensures that it becomes easier to convince oneself that all is more or less as it should be than to admit that much of what passes as development is little more than an elaborate game of illusion and delusion. It is not, to pursue her re-working of the children's fable, simply a question of dressing the emperor up in proper clothes, but of asking how he came to power in the first place—and, indeed, why we should keep him there at all. **Lilly Nicholls** examines in greater detail the attempts by UNDP to revitalise the definition of development, and to infuse it with more explicit ethical and political substance. She then looks at how an imperfect resulting concept—that of 'sustainable human development'—translates, both within UNDP and within an international NGO, into still less perfect practice. Not that their efforts were wasted, or that they were wrong to have tried. But rather that the gap between rhetoric and what can realistically be achieved is potentially a dangerous one. **Christine Kilalo** and **Deb Johnson** make similar points in their account of an attempt at a tripartite partnership between government ministries, UN agencies, and a small NGO. And **David Sogge** shows how one pioneering attempt to establish a workable North–South NGO coalition (the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, ICVA) met its demise in part as a result of embracing too many agendas, and seeking to bring together too many diverse interests under one single umbrella.

Agendas and organisations evolve over time, and the trick is in knowing how to retain what is central (and to let go of what is not) while also being open to change and to challenge. In his account of the history of World Vision, in financial terms one of the world's largest NGOs, **Alan Whaites** describes an agency that has proven more willing than most to scrutinise its own core values while also developing organisational structures that allow for a more authentic international 'partnership' and dialogue. In addressing that sometimes controversial NGO's ideology head-on, he also demonstrates that it is not only the faith-based or confessional agencies that are inspired by a particular belief-system or revolve around a set of (not always proven) assumptions. Thus **Mahmuda Rahman Khan** challenges the fashionable view that what poor women most want is credit, and that low-interest credit is therefore the best way to help them out of poverty. (Of course, since women have such good repayment rates, giving them credit is also good news for the suppliers of micro-finance.) Her own findings in Bangladesh show a much more complex and nuanced picture of how credit is actually used and paid for; and also suggest that what many women (and, presumably, men) actually want is not so much to become a small and indebted entrepreneur in a fragile market, but to have a reliable and fairly-paid job in a secure, convenient, and congenial setting. Describing work in Nicaragua, **Thalia Kidder** argues that to be gender-sensitive, alternative financial institutions must stop seeing production, enterprise, and growth as the only priorities, and re-focusing their support towards activities relating to social reproduction and food security, while also encouraging participation by and accountability to poor communities. **Sarah Shannon** and **Elena Metcalfe** underline that the choices facing development actors are not primarily professional, technical, or merely pragmatic, but are essentially political.

As a late lamented colleague once said, 'ideology is not dead yet, despite the Cold Thaw'. Let us hope that a greater willingness to question not just what aid agencies and their projects can really achieve, but what Development is actually about, will mean that the current obsession with techniques, measurements, audits and so on recedes, and that political debate is put squarely back on the aid agencies' respective tables.

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## Notes

- 1 For a typical account of this argument, see David Hulme and Michael Edwards (eds.) (1997) *NGOs, States and Donors: Too Close for Comfort?*, London: Macmillan Press in association with SCF (UK).
- 2 The address given by Clare Short of the UK Department for International Development, at the 'NGOs in a Global Future Conference' (10–13 January 1999) exemplifies this position. In his essay 'Collaboration with the South: agents of aid or solidarity' (*Development in Practice* 7(3):175–78), Firoze Manji argues that Northern NGO opposition to 'direct funding in the South' smacks of self-serving hypocrisy.
- 3 Information taken from a strongly worded letter of 12 March 1999, drafted by Corporate Watch and signed by a large number of distinguished scholars and activists, to James Gustave Speth, Administrator of UNDP (see [www.corpwatch.org](http://www.corpwatch.org) for details).

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