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Editorial

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International development assistance, whether official or administered through non-government channels, is premised on the belief that, given the right mix of political will and resources, it is possible to achieve positive changes in the lives of disadvantaged social sectors or population groups. Concerted international efforts, epitomised by the Millennium Development Goals (MGDs), are based on this assumption. The popular movements associated with the World Social Forum share a belief in the possibility of change, and they would agree that change is urgently needed. But the perspective encapsulated in the slogan *'Another World Is Possible'* is profoundly suspicious of aid-directed development, viewing it as at best a Trojan Horse for neo-liberalism and cultural homogeneity.

The processes by which changes are brought about and sustained, and the very direction that change should follow, are not merely the subject of polite debate among policy makers, researchers, and activists, but are literally issues of life and death. As Alejandro Nadal (2006), Professor of Economics at El Colegio de México, wrote in the Mexican daily *La Jornada*:

> *The technological package of the Green Revolution caused severe salination of the soil, indiscriminate exploitation and choking of aquifers and intense pollution with all types of pesticides. More seriously, it sowed an economic, social and environmental crisis in the life of poor farmers that takes more lives every year. One example is that of Anil Khondwa Shinde, a small farmer of Vidarbha district in Maharashtra state (in mid-western India). He killed himself two months ago, consuming a powerful insecticide. He was 31 years old and died within minutes. The difference between the production costs and the retail price did not allow him to pay back to the providers the credit extended to him for the inputs.*
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> *An isolated incident? Not at all. The Indian Ministry of Agriculture admits to the following figures: there were 100,000 suicides by farmers between 1993 and 2003. And between 2003 and October 2006, there have been some 16,000 suicides by farmers each year. In total, between 1993 and 2006, there were around 150,000 suicides by farmers, 30 a day for 13 years!*

Many now regard climate change as evidence that modern civilisation is heading for self-destruction unless the course of development is diverted, while others maintain that crisis itself will trigger 'smarter' technical solutions that will allow progress to continue without a hitch. More often than not, this results in a non-dialogue even about the factual evidence, let alone how it should be interpreted, each side accusing the other of putting its head in the sand in the face of the inevitable.

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Aid agencies characteristically span both positions, on the one hand advocating overarching policy change, while on the other hand focusing on what they believe can be achieved in the here and now. Donors are increasingly impatient to see results, which reinforces a preference for small-scale projects that produce (or at least promise) tangible outcomes. But pragmatism also carries the danger of depriving practice and decision-making processes of any theoretical foundation, and even dismissing theory as an irrelevant intellectual pursuit for those who live in ivory towers, remote from the 'real world'. It can also lead to erratic funding patterns as different approaches or regions become fashionable – and subsequently drop out of fashion. **Thomas Parks** describes the damaging impact of such fluctuations on local organisations that depend on external assistance, in this case advocacy NGOs in South-East Asia. Ironically, the potential impact of the donors' considerable investment in building NGO capacity is often undermined by their own decision to withdraw support before the NGOs are ready to function without it. This explains the importance of the efforts of some members of staff in Oxfam GB, as related by **Rosalind Eyben, Thalia Kidder, Jo Rowlands, and Audrey Bronstein**, to debate theories of social change as a means of improving practice, and as a way of being more explicit about the basis upon which strategic choices are made. Yet **Annapurna Mamidipudi and Radhika Gajjala** start from the opposite direction, arguing that development theory needs to be grounded in and emerge from lived experience and knowledge systems, an argument that they illustrate by describing the relationship between traditional handloom weaving and modern technology. They argue that the assumption of objectivity that is embedded in mainstream development is implicitly colonial, exclusionary, and ultimately bound to fail. **Graeme MacRae** reaches similar conclusions in his account of the disjuncture between the large-scale international humanitarian response to the May 2006 earthquake in Jogjakarta and a small local-level initiative. Rather than repeating the tired conclusion that the best way to acknowledge a successful initiative is to replicate it on a grand scale, MacRae suggests that it is more important to understand, assimilate, and scale up the deeper lessons that it offers.

Susan Pick, Martha Givaudan and Michael R. Reich also address the issue of scaling up, this time in relation to efforts to get a Mexican NGO's sexual-health education programme for adolescents adopted at the national level. Establishing a partnership with the relevant ministries was clearly the only way to achieve this, but the NGO had to find a balance between making tactical compromises in order to sustain an asymmetrical partnership and meeting the needs and expectations of the intended audience – without sacrificing its own values. **A. Kumar and K. M. Joshi** consider the interplay of factors affecting the uptake or discontinuation of a range of contraceptive methods by tribal communities in south Gujarat, concluding that it is the quality of the services rather than provision as such that is of the utmost importance. In a third article on reproductive health, **Rick James and Brenda Katundu** examine the impact of HIV and AIDS on civil-society organisations (CSOs). Their case study of four CSOs in Malawi found that overall performance declined by an average 20 per cent as they struggled to deal not only with high rates of absenteeism, attributable to staff members' own illness or their obligation to care for family members or attend funerals, but also with the emotional and financial burden of the illness and death of colleagues and their families. While CSOs may recognise that the responsibility for developing a viable workplace response lies with them, donors also need to accept that higher overhead costs and reduced outputs are likely to be part and parcel of working in an HIV-prevalent context.

Other contributors to this issue focus on issues of methodology. **Philippe Villeval** explores the theoretical and practical challenges posed by NGOs' adoption of a rights-based approach, and what this means in terms of their relationships with social movements. **Sandra Schrouder** reports on research on educational performance in five Caribbean countries and finds that in the absence of other measures to address the efficiency and appropriateness of the school system,

it does not automatically follow that higher public expenditure will lead to better outcomes for the majority. With particular reference to Cameroon, **Jean Claude Saha** makes the case for participatory governance rather than more aid or more social expenditure *per se* in addressing the exclusion that accompanies poverty. In his re-evaluation of a DFID-funded project in South Africa, **Alan Terry** describes the less-than-conclusive long-term impact of its efforts to foster local capacity to generate indicators of sustainable development, in the expectation that this participatory approach might in turn improve local governance. Finally **Bejoy K Thomas** sets out the broader move in poverty studies away from artificial dichotomies between qualitative and quantitative to an approach that recognises the value of integrating both perspectives. He thus looks forward to the emergence of a 'participatory qual–quant' approach which might indeed help to ground the efforts to measure the outcomes of a given development initiative in terms of how it is valued by its intended beneficiaries.

Reference

Nadal, Alejandro (2006) 'Monsanto y los suicidios agrarios en India', *La Jornada* 20 December, translated as 'Monsanto cereal killer GM and agrarian suicides in India' and posted on www.zmag.org/content/showarticle.cfm?ItemID=11790 (retrieved 26 November 2007).