

Northern words, Southern readings

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This paper presents two sides of the same coin: certain words used in the North, and a reading of their effects in the South. First, we summarise the recent evolution of Spanish non-government development organisations (NGDOs), which have gained in visibility and prestige as a response to socio-political changes in Spain. We then present a reading of the work of these NGDOs from the perspective of various Southern actors. We show instances of a kind of perverse inertia that undermines precisely what it is they are seeking to do. Thus, in Central America, recipients of foreign aid identify two extremes which we call *living by the wound* and *the project culture* (also known as ‘projectitis’). If NGDOs want to meet their goals, they must guard against these unintended effects.

Northern words...

Spanish NGDOs

Like other social movements in Spain, the history of NGDOs is tied up with the country’s socio-political evolution. To understand the backgrounds of these social movements, we must take into account the almost 40 years of the Franco dictatorship (1939–1975) and subsequent developments. The dictatorship conditioned the forms, models, and history of social movements, within a highly authoritarian context. Political and social action was thus defined as either conservative, national-catholic, or anti-communist. Following Franco’s death, the transition to democracy was marked by great ebullience. Trade unions and clandestine organisations came out into the open, and new ones were born. These became the protagonists and very core of citizen action. As democracy was consolidated, social movements took on new missions and explored previously prohibited possibilities. The predecessors of today’s NGDOs first had to survive the dictatorship, then pushed for democratisation, and finally came to occupy second place in terms of citizen action during the first decade of democracy.

We can discern two stages in their evolution. The first is characterised by their *social invisibility*. Neither before nor during the 1980s were NGDOs relevant to Spanish public opinion. Their activities were largely associated with missionary fundraising campaigns. This image began to change only very slowly. In 1982, the Socialist Party came to power. This brought about qualitative changes in the government's development aid policies. The term NGO came into being for the first time, though little attention was paid to NGOs. The second stage is thus marked by the achievement of *social visibility*. This was a gradual process. The '0.7% platform' mobilised many citizens (Marcuello 1996a). At the same time, there was more information about the desperate situations in the South. Social invisibility was thus converted into *social prestige*.

NGDOs acquired this social recognition because of three factors:

First, free advertising in the mass media. Second, the coopting of their language and successes by the politicians. Third, their growing presence as sponsors of the campaigns of private and public companies. These are three spaces conquered not by magic, nor by altruism on the part of the newspapers, the politicians and the companies: if they did not have 'social prestige' nobody would be supporting a concert for Rwanda, for example. (Marcuello 1996b)

NGDOs want this fragile achievement to continue, because they know that it has only just begun and that there is still much to be done within Spain. They know that they have come to represent something within the collective consciousness, and that there has been a qualitative change in how NGDOs are perceived. But more remains to be done.

Thus, Spanish NGDOs now face a kind of adolescent crisis, a time of search, internal discussion, and social consolidation. The challenge is more complex than ever, but Spanish NGDOs now have some experience. Most of them, and certainly those which belong to the federation, want to affirm their identity because they know that their greater social visibility imposes greater precision on their work.

The collective discourse

The NGDO Committee was founded in 1986 and brings together about 90 organisations in Spain. It has become a major reference point for NGDOs, public institutions, and society. Admittedly, the Committee represents an unstable balance, given the diversity of its members. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged as the leader of 'joint action in cooperation with the peoples of the Third World'. In the Committee's

own words: 'our general objective is to increase and to improve international development cooperation and to accomplish common actions in response to the interests of the peoples of the Third World'. Its objective is, 'to change the unbalanced and unjust relationships of dependency of the South on the North and to raise public awareness of the need for change'.¹

Its members fight for a model of development that is sustainable, endogenous, balanced, and global; *sustainable*, guaranteeing the welfare of the present and future generations, based on the protection of natural resources and of human rights; *endogenous*, based on the direct participation of the beneficiaries, and where foreign aid constitutes a stimulus to the development, but never a new kind of dependency; *balanced*, based on questioning the social, economic, and political conditions that produce inequality among the countries of the North and the South and among the different sectors of the population; *global*, based on the need profoundly to transform Northern development models, being the principal cause of the imbalances and the relationships of dependency between North and South.

On paper, the general perspectives are very clear. It is a Northern discourse, well formulated, well written. It represents years of NGDO experience and summarises the conventional wisdom on overseas development assistance. But how is this discourse seen by the Southern counterparts? How does it translate into practice? How do the beneficiaries read what is done in the name of these high-sounding words?

Southern effects...

In general, the answers to these questions are positive. But now we focus on the 'perverse inertia' of this Northern discourse. For there are darker sides to all NGDO actions — Spanish NGDOs included. Despite their short experience in the international arena, they have adopted the rhythms and procedures of other Northern NGDOs, repeating once again the same development paradigms and rhetoric about North–South relations.

Perverse inertias

Effects and tendencies that are the opposite of what was intended are what we call 'perverse inertias'. In this case, these are the effects of Northern-funded development cooperation projects, whether non-governmental or official. We look at this in the light of our own work in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, and on the basis of visits by aid recipients from these countries. Their differences notwithstanding,

these three countries serve as a basic reference or model of how international cooperation works.

Our research focused on both quantitative and qualitative issues and was conducted during 1995–1997. Here, we present our partial conclusions on some of the qualitative elements. Our methodology included interviews, discussion groups, and participatory action-research. These techniques allowed us to capture people’s actual words. We then analysed what they had said in order to get a sense of the central elements within their worldviews. Here, we offer a selection of the most significant readings of the Northern aid discourse, by some of its recipients in the South.

Translating words into reality is difficult. Often, development projects do not respond to the recipients’ felt needs — endogenous development — but to Northern NGOs’ own project repertoire. As the beneficiaries said:

We need support, and as we want to ask these people for money, know that we must request it for certain things. Since we’re going to ask so-and-so for money, we have to focus on women and ecology ... that’s the fashion today. Perhaps we don’t really need a cattle-raising project, but we know that they will fund this or nothing. So we get hold of the 25 cows, even though they are going to ruin much of our land.

This happens frequently. The North sets the agenda. The recipients know that neither the rhythms of cooperation nor the cash intended for them are in their hands:

For example, the European Community gives money for rural development, but only for agro-forestry or forestry. So, either you request a project for rubber-tapping or to collect plants for tea-infusions — to give a silly example — in other words, a project which does what they want of you, or you won’t get anything.

But it is not only the macro-policies of government institutions that define the scope and funding of international cooperation. Northern NGOs are also responsible. These have the resources to work with their Southern counterparts, but almost always do so according to their own logic — the plans, standards, and models for action of the Northern NGOs themselves.

Look what happened to us. We were thinking about a reconciliation project. We wanted to begin very gently. But a First World NGO came to say that they, too, were interested in reconciliation, and in a series of similar projects. Their ideas seemed very interesting... but then we

had to change everything to fit in with them. Although we did this together and discussed everything,... the point is that they had funding for projects that fitted in with their ideas, and unless we went along with it, the money would not be forthcoming.

Development cooperation projects are meant to be endogenous and focused on the ‘beneficiaries’, who are supposed to be, or become, the central subjects of their own development: the protagonists. In theory, donors should take second place. But the inertia of almost 50 years of international aid shows us the opposite. It is rare to find cases where the recipients play the leading role. In fact, Northern NGOs are seen simply as *funders* (to say nothing of the official aid agencies, which are more distant still):

Who decides how the money for projects is to be spent? Basically, the Northern NGOs. Some may consult [with us] on the real needs — if only because no-one is going to say they didn’t do so. But in reality, decisions about how the funds are to be spent are more often made according to plans and budgets established in the North than on the basis of reality in the South.

We must stress here that this inertia is known about and fought against. The Spanish NGOs know how easy it is to slip into it, which is why they are resisting this trend. They have done good work in terms of establishing priorities, and ensuring that their projects respond to real needs by spending time in the recipient communities. Despite this, however, another perverse inertia appears:

It is true that there are Northern NGO people who come and stay with us, listen to us, examine the projects we are interested in, on the basis of which they draw up projects to present to their governments. They do a good job. But once done, the situation on the ground changes — and our reality does change a lot — and the project on paper no longer fits our needs. They cannot change it, however, because the funds are approved for fixed purposes. Who is going to mess about with funds from the European Community? But if you can’t change it in the light of new circumstances, then it’s immaterial whether the project has been well-planned.

The bureaucratic, organised, and rigid rationales of most Northern institutions cannot be readily adapted to suit realities that are less structured — or, rather, which are organised in a different way. Most Northern NGOs replicate the procedures of the institutional donors, which they are indeed concerned to follow. They know that they must

answer to external audits, even at the expense of imposing these ‘westernising forms of rationalisation’:

For example, when the refugees were returning, we planned for a project that would start immediately, with a second phase three years later. But as time went by, things changed. The reconstruction work was no longer needed. The project was no longer viable. But since not even a comma could be changed in the project document, the project was ineffective ... so that the aid that was intended to help a community to re-build had the effect of dividing it further. I’m painting a very black picture, but this often happens.

The project protocols are pre-defined in ways that do not allow for adjustments in response to changing circumstances. The need for flexibility in the design, follow-up, execution, and evaluation of development projects is one of the things that beneficiaries most demand. They do need collaboration and help, but they need this not like some kind of yoke around their necks, but as agile and effective cooperation. Experience shows that bureaucratic pressure compromises the optimum use of the resources invested.

The project culture

NGDO action has another kind of impact on the recipient population. Whenever assistance comes from outside, whatever the source, people’s way of life is changed. Where aid policies are effected through the design and execution of projects, this compels people to start thinking in terms of projects and international aid:

You see, people see aid coming in from outside and realise that they must organise themselves if they are to get anything. They see that assistance is given not to individuals but only to groups. So they begin to organise — not only people such as returnees, who are used to it, but also local villagers. In other words, they begin to feel that what they have to do is to formulate projects for funding. They assume that this is why the returnees are better off than they are, for example. So the ‘project culture’ is generated — ‘I have a need, so I must come up with a project to resolve it’. And since neither the state nor the local authorities are doing anything, we have to ask the white foreigners who are the ones with the cash. The result is ‘projectitis’ — the project culture.

This project culture, which aims to resolve problems through projects funded from abroad — either directly by Northern agencies or via their

local ‘partners’ — tends to demobilise local citizen action, firstly because the State is relegated to second or even third place; and secondly, because people’s own efforts are put ‘on hold’ as their trust is placed instead on the benevolence of the ‘friends of international solidarity’.

And that’s not all. After years of being involved in projects, other effects emerge — as in the case of refugees and returnees. In extreme cases, self-help is discouraged: as one respondent said: ‘People see everything apart from looking after the fields or the home — whether building a house or sinking a well — as something that can only be done via a project’. However, those who receive (or endure) development aid are also aware, especially in El Salvador and Guatemala, that this is a temporary thing, that it will only last for a couple of years, so they must make the most of it. So they invent as many projects as they can — even if they are not needed:

Let’s give them poultry, a dozen hens each. Good. Twelve laying hens that you have to look after, and then you’ll get eggs. So the poultry arrive. You have to make a proper coop. But then you have a setting to which the chickens are not accustomed. They get up on the chairs, the tables, they get in the way. They’re aren’t strong like the local variety, so some of them fall sick and die. But the others are such a pest that the people end up killing and eating them. When the agency representative arrives, the people tell him or her that the tiger ate the chickens. The point is that this was not the right project in the first place.

Projects can be useful. When the circumstances, the people, and the resources are in synergy, and things work as they should: success. But it’s quite the opposite when ‘perverse inertias’ are operating. If the project is ready-made, or pretty well decided beforehand without asking people what they really need, it is unlikely to engage them. Yes, consultation does sometimes take place. But it is also true that the pre-formed plans tend to carry more weight than the local realities. This means two things. Firstly, in a descriptive sense, a popular education process is needed to find out what people want and need: ‘People say many things; perhaps some don’t make sense, but out of these we can draw up a list of needs and then ask the community to prioritise...’ Secondly, and prescriptively, projects should be flexible and able to adapt to changing realities: ‘What happens isn’t like this. It’s obvious that there are some with the money, and others without. There are no two ways about it. It’s not that people are stupid, rather they are grateful — and also know that if they are grateful they may get more money. So the project culture is deepened.’

This *projectitis* encourages a mechanical approach to formulating projects: 'People develop the knack of coming up with projects — projects for anything under the sun'. And it also habituates people to the idea that money intended for projects actually gets diverted,

...for the war or whatever, or even for corruption ... Someone who used to be honest gets to manage US\$100,000 then disappears with US\$2,000. So, corruption is generated, along with power struggles, not over how to serve the community, but over access to money.

Living by the wound

The project culture is intimately bound up with living by the wound. It is both a parallel and a direct result:

People think that they have suffered so much and that more will be given to the one who suffered the most. Basically, this is not their fault. They have seen that masses of people have come to hear about their history, how they were slaughtered, how they were killed, and so on...and they see that after these testimonies, projects arrive. This has gone on since 1982... There comes a time when people feel very poor after having returned from exile with nothing ... and they automatically tell the first person who arrives how much they have suffered because they believe this is what they have to do to get help. This is what we call 'living by the wound'.

To live by the wound is to use one's personal narrative of suffering (or that of a loved one) in order to leverage resources, especially money, either via projects or gifts, whether as a means of survival or to meet a particular need. It is a vicious circle created by *projectitis*, and by the bad (or perhaps good!) conscience of the outsiders who come into contact with the reality of suffering.

If we ask what gives rise to that perverse inertia, the answer comes from the people who have lived through it:

Who is responsible for *projectitis* and for living by the wound? They are the ones who do it, but they didn't start it. The guilty ones are the international organisations, not only NGOs, but also UNHCR, the Catholic church and many big agencies that have supported, for example, the Mexican government ... They encourage that kind of dependency, a dependency that has nothing to do with dignity. 'Here's some beans.' And although they are foul, you have to accept them. How can you say you don't want something that has been given to you? But people do recover their dignity at a certain point. 'I don't want any more weevil-infested old beans ...'.

‘Right, you obviously aren’t in need then, that’s why you’re turning them down’, they say.

The challenge to NGDOs, as seen from the South, is to change these inertias. Procedures need to be clarified, and more flexible mechanisms adopted, so as to give the leading role to the beneficiaries and see how they behave. Donors and beneficiaries alike must distinguish between the various approaches to, and types of, cooperation. They need to get rid of the confusion that generates the situations we have described, and which also tends to undermine traditional community networks and to introduce a certain lack of solidarity, as a precondition for entering into the world of development projects:

Before, it took no time at all to build a community structure with everyone’s input, and without any outside help. Now it is very hard to find volunteers to do any unpaid work. NGOs and international agencies pay for everything, including labour. So people say it is impossible to build a community hall, without having a project and without money: ‘we have a lot to do; what will we eat?’ and so on. This kind of aid has generated a lack of solidarity where previously people were willing to work for the common good, and were very organised.

True, without NGDOs, many things would not have been possible. But there comes a time when the NGDO reduces people’s capacity to make political demands, because everything gets turned into projects. In the past, projects were used to support things like revolving funds. But today, the attitude is ‘either you give it to me or I don’t want it’. It is not that NGDOs are solely responsible for this change in attitude, but it is, nevertheless, a natural consequence of the kind of aid they offer.

In emergency situations, such as those afflicting Central America throughout the 1980s, this loss of values is less obvious. But the same approach to aid continues in the name of development — but a development that is seldom sustainable and often creates dependency:

These people ... arrived without any project, but with a lot of external help; enough to obtain land and things ... But after that, all the community houses, cooperative centres, the shops, were all built on a voluntary basis... even the runway, which meant bringing earth from several kilometres away. All this without a single project. Now we need to re-build, but no project means no reconstruction. Without a project and wages for the labourers, the runway will not be repaired. The very runway that is used by the tiny aeroplane that

brings us help. Things are out of sync. But people have become innured to it.

Conclusions

We have explored the dark side of the fine NGDO words. Spanish NGDOs, like all the others, have adopted an impeccable rhetoric. But rhetoric and theory are one thing, practical results are another. Spanish NGDOs repeat the same internationally established development clichés. Development is to be sustainable, beneficiary-led, endogenous, human, participatory — all the best possible attributes. But the interpretation of these claims in practice shows some perverse inertias that should be fought against. The consequences of years of international development cooperation are felt in the two pathological trends explored above; pathological for two reasons. First, because they are an unintended effect of the prevailing discourse. Second, because they embed the intended beneficiaries in a situation that is both alienating and enslaving.

True, development projects have had mixed results. Some beneficiaries will be grateful for generations. But we must recognise that these examples have not helped to improve the living conditions of humanity overall.

The great majority of our interlocutors, who have been on the receiving end of development projects, feel the contradictions of their situation. The clearest among them adopt a bitter-sweet tone: they value others' efforts, their solidarity, but they also claim their dignity as intelligent human beings. Theirs is a fierce critique of the way in which their lives and their expectations of development are taken over by others in the name of international solidarity. They do not need a new set of parents or experts to explain to them how they must develop. The true protagonist is the 'beneficiary' and his or her community, not the intellectual vanguards who seek short-cuts to the 'truth'.

We need to fight against these pathologies, which are both socially demobilising and tend to blunt people's critical capacity — assuming, that is, that NGDOs want to be true to their rhetoric. The staff of Spanish NGDOs are largely aware of these perverse inertias. In trying to turn things around, the question is to participate, cooperate, and help to generate processes in which the recipients of development projects become the subjects of their own history. NGDOs must resist just being bureaucrats, and move towards where they say they want to go: 'To participate as equals with the peoples of the world in the common cause of development.'

Note

- 1 From the CONGD 1997 promotional leaflet 'Participate as Equals with the Peoples of the World in the Common Cause of Development'.

This paper was first published in Development in Practice (9/1&2: 151–8) in 1999.

References

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