

# Good news! You may be out of a job: reflections on the past and future 50 years for Northern NGOs

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## Introduction

Let me begin by telling you what you already know: NGOs are a *very* popular topic of research these days. There are now dozens of courses on development NGOs offered in universities and training centres, compared with none a decade ago.<sup>1</sup> There are thousands of articles and hundreds of books on NGO work currently available, an increase from a couple of dozen in the early 1980s. There are now officials designated as NGO or Civil Society Liaison workers in almost all the bilateral aid agencies and most of the multilateral ones. And, despite incredibly poor methods of counting, the population of Northern agencies devoted to international development and solidarity work (let alone community organisations in developing countries) has grown in leaps and bounds: from negligible numbers before 1966, it rose to almost 40,000 in 1996.<sup>2</sup> There is even a big 'backlash' literature, offering critiques of the phenomenon – truly a sign of having arrived (see Sogge et al. 1996). In short, non-government development programmes, projects, management styles, and ideologies have been part of a spectacular growth industry.

All of this you know, of course. What we don't know is what will happen next. This article traces the likelihood of one option: that Northern development NGOs have worked themselves out of a job (or, rather, out of most of the jobs they are now doing). Having done a good job so far, most are no longer suited to the world in which we now live. In the turmoil of today's new politics, this obsolescence might actually be a *good* thing for the future of social justice on our planet. In the pages that follow, I try to explain why, and what I think ought to come next.

## War, compassion, religion, and zeal: an opening in history

First, however, it may be useful to skim over (in an admittedly irresponsible fashion) some of the vast history of mobilisation in Northern countries over issues and peoples in the South.<sup>3</sup> Canada is probably a typical example.

### *How missionary zeal first created Northern NGOs*

Many of Canada's first voluntary organisations were offshoots of nineteenth-century missions overseas; connected by an institutionalised church, members of Canadian congregations were made aware of poverty elsewhere in the world. From a country itself dominated by immigrants, Canada's missionaries were sent—and continue to be sent—to developing countries (in particular, to China, India, and Commonwealth Africa). These missions represented often the first and sometimes the only contact by and with Canadians. Indeed, one of the oldest overseas assistance agencies is from Canada; *Les soeurs de la congrégation de Notre Dame*, founded in Quebec in 1653, is still undertaking literacy work in Latin America (Smillie 1995:37).

Today, many of Canada's highly organised and institutionally 'mature' NGOs remain church-affiliated: the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Lutheran World Relief (LWR), World Vision Canada, and the Canadian Catholic Organisation for Development and Peace (CCODP) are prominent examples. While most NGOs are now secular, church-based organisations maintain a stronger financial footing through congregational support, and many have become politically prominent—perhaps demonstrating a relationship of cause and effect. While the churches have suffered from historical accusations of 'rice-bowl Christianity' (selling food for conversion), that perception is increasingly unfounded in the mainline church community. The Ecumenical Council for Economic Justice has been a big player in the debate about debt-forgiveness, for example; and the churches were leading elements in solidarity work in Central America in the 1980s.

Although faith-inspired solidarity work has largely replaced missionary zeal, secular organisations have long overtaken the churches in dollars and numbers. While organisations like the Red Cross became active in Canada early in the century, it was not until the post-war period that secular NGOs surged ahead of their church-based counterparts. Why?

## *Why World War II gave birth to ‘development’ as an occupational category*

The overwhelming moral shock of the two world wars opened up the world to Canadians and others in (what was to become) ‘the North’. It is important to underline this point: a Western consciousness about *international* responsibility was born of the wars and, with it, international institutions like the League of Nations, the UN, the Bretton Woods system, and the now more than 4000 inter-governmental bodies created for cross-border action. Foreign aid was clearly one of these new institutions. In 1950, following the success of the Marshall Plan for Europe, the infamous Colombo Plan for the developing world was put into motion.

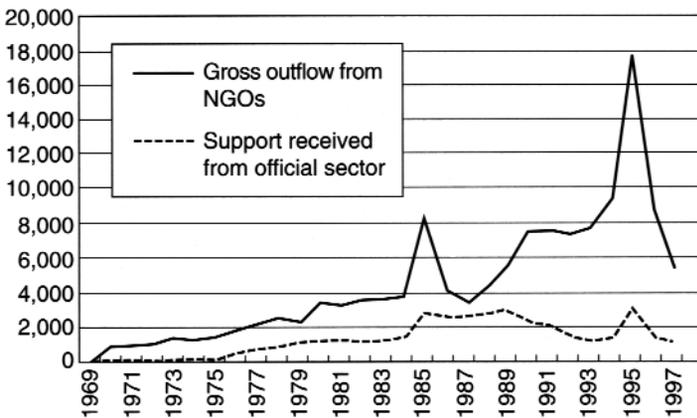
The Colombo Plan to Assist South and Southeast Asia involved Britain, Canada, and other Northern countries in a response to the region’s poverty and the perceived threat of Chinese communism to Korea and Indochina. The Plan was to deliver technical assistance, food aid, and some economic assistance, on the assumption that the creation of a ten-year carry-over period was sufficient to get the region on its feet. Markets were to be built, industry established, and communism deterred; and all of this was to be accomplished as quickly as possible, just as the Marshall Plan had managed to do in Europe.

After ten years, however, disillusionment with the Colombo Plan set in. The UN declared its first (of many) development decades, and countries throughout the North began to expand their aid programmes in other ways. Development, once seen as a short-term quick fix of modest investment, became an established industry.

The activity of Canadian NGOs working overseas during this period was also expanding. In 1964, the precursor to CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) helped to fund the highly successful voluntary agency, CUSO (Canadian University Services Overseas)—the new training ground for young Canadians interested in the developing world. Other NGOs were also established in response to the growing demands in developing countries, and many set up projects and sent volunteers overseas. The experience of the Suez crisis in 1956, the Cuban revolution, growing concern about apartheid in South Africa, US intervention in Southeast Asia, and the Biafran civil war all contributed to a rise of interest and social activism in Canada (Murphy 1991:170). As the first volunteers from CUSO and SUCO (its Québécois equivalent, *Service Universitaire Canadienne à l’Outremer*) returned in large numbers to Canada, that awareness took on a greater political force at home, and the beginnings of a formal aid lobby in Canada took shape.

With that formal aid lobby came an NGO business in Canada that now, 30 years on, numbers about 250 organisations and about 2000 people, spending at least US\$312 million a year. (In 1997, US\$137 million came from official development assistance (ODA) and US\$175 million from individual donations.<sup>4</sup>) In the rest of the donor community, official agencies are less generous; Figure 1 shows that NGOs raise more than twice what they receive in ODA throughout the Northern donor community; but, as Figure 2 illustrates, with wildly fluctuating degrees of support.

**Figure 1: Northern NGOs: patterns of spending and official funding (US\$m, 1969–97)**



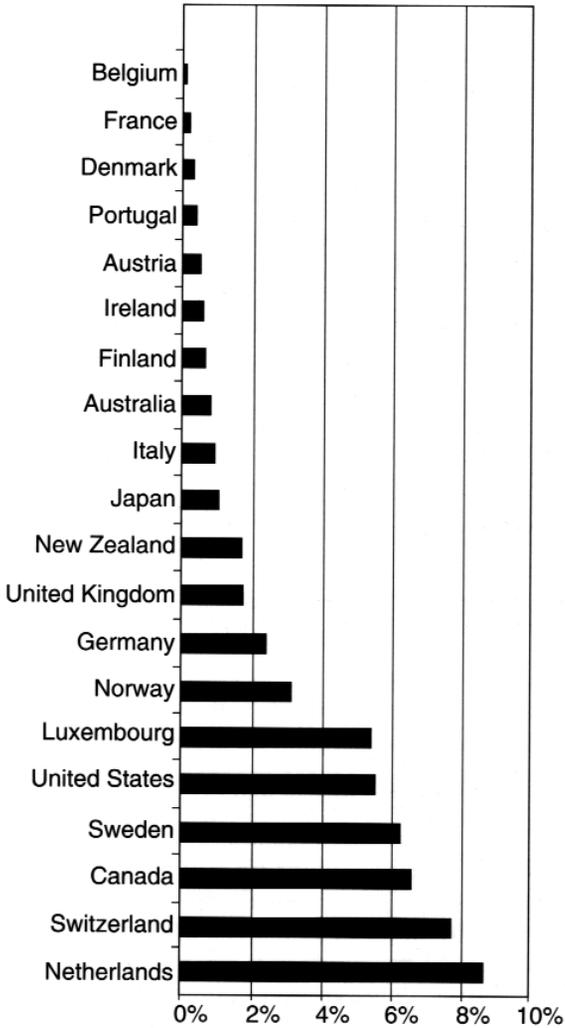
Source: OECD DAC, Development Co-operation, various years.

Many of the leaders of today's NGOs are returned volunteers from CUSO's first forays into West Africa in the 1960s and, now retiring, have spent the whole of their career in NGOs, often hopping among NGOs and in and out of CIDA. This community, and the institutions they have created, now forms an important (though very small) occupational category in Canada. I am one of its members.

## The thawing Cold War: a turning point

It is a truism, hardly novel, that the end of the Cold War changed things for NGOs. Some of the changes were immediate and obvious: large

**Figure 2: Percentage of ODA to NGOs: OECD DAC, 1993-1997 average**



[Source: OECD DAC, Development Co-operation, latest year available.]

Note: For a good discussion of the dilemmas of accounting, see Ian Smillie: 'A note on NGO funding statistics', annex 1 to 'Changing partners: Northern NGOs, Northern governments', in Ian Smillie and Henry Helmich (eds.) (1993) *Non-governmental Organisations and Governments: Stakeholders for Development*, Paris: OECD.]

amounts of cash were made available to East and Central Europe, and a host of NGOs came into being or changed course to serve the new needs of the ‘emerging democracies’ or ‘countries in transition’.<sup>5</sup> Those phrases—full of a sense of change and improvement—indicated the same kind of enthusiasm felt at the outset of the Colombo Plan.

### *Democracy’s enthusiasms*

When the Berlin Wall came down, perhaps the greatest embarrassment for political pundits was the surprising and unforeseen speed of change in Eastern and Central Europe. No one expected that long Cold War to turn so quickly into hot transition (or, for that matter, such lukewarm social development subsequently). The impact on the aid industry, and on solidarity movements, was immediate. Money was made available through aid agencies (although most of it ineligible for ODA status), and a few Northern NGOs and many domestic organisations without international experience followed the flow of cash. New programmes in judicial reform, stock-market regulation, environmental protection, ‘civil-society building’, ‘democratic transition’, all came flooding into the region (see Box A for a typical example). But things had also been changing there.

#### **Box A: The new kind of project**

The Civil Society Development Foundation, established by the European Union’s aid programme in Slovakia in 1993, is now one of the country’s three most important grant-providing foundations. As an independent foundation, it has supported 387 projects in support of human rights and minorities, health, environment, education, social services, and volunteer development. In addition to providing grants, the Foundation’s assistance aims to improve the following:

- awareness of the role and functioning of NGOs in an open civil society;
- the level of information-exchange among NGOs;
- the legal framework of the third sector, by helping to enhance the qualification of NGOs to influence policy-makers and authorities;
- networking and cooperation among NGOs; and
- the organisational capacities of NGOs, by strengthening their infrastructure as well as by extending their activities.

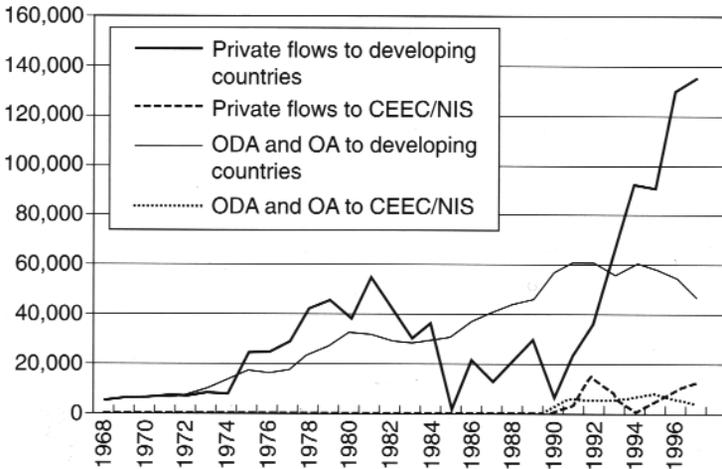
(Adapted from text found at

<http://europa.eu.int/comm/enlargement/pas/phare/pt/civil.htm>)

Certainly, the wars in the former Yugoslavia (along with continuing assistance to Albania) altered the foreign-aid picture, generating vast amounts of humanitarian and post-conflict reconstruction money: an average of some US\$4 billion a year throughout the 1990s—a full 7 per cent of the world aid bill. In 1997, the States of the former Yugoslavia received more than any other country in the world other than China, India, and Egypt.

However, while many felt that there was a drain away from ODA-eligible countries to the hot new areas of East Central Europe, the truth is that over the 1990s there was a drop in the amounts to both, which has been overcome by dramatic rises in private investment (see Figure 3 for a comparison of flows to developing countries (total) and flows to the countries of the Former Soviet Union and Central and Eastern Europe). All over the world, declining conventional aid is being swamped by private flows—but not, evidently, to the same countries and for the same purposes.

**Figure 3: Comparative flows East and South, US\$ millions**



CEEC = Countries of Central and Eastern Europe

NIS = Newly Independent States (ex - USSR)

OA = official assistance; ODA = official development assistance

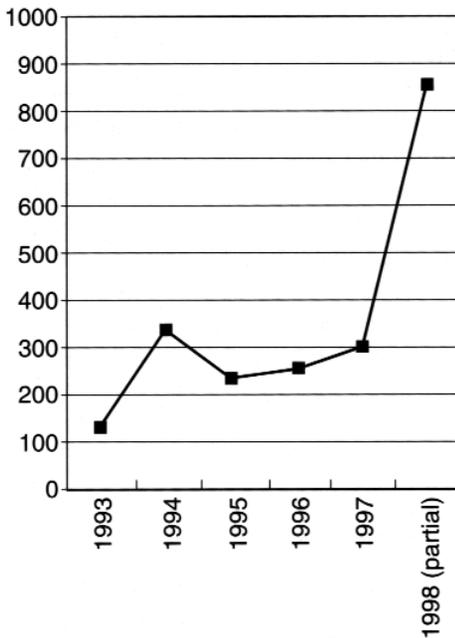
(Source: OECD, DAC, 1992)

### *Third-wave democracies and their critics*

While Western imaginations were preoccupied with Europe in the early 1990s, they forgot what had been big news in the 1980s: the so-called ‘third wave’ of democratic change in the developing world (Huntington 1993). The argument there was that Africa and the Americas were celebrating a resurgence—or, sometimes, the novelty—of more-or-less democratic rule by more-or-less popularly elected rulers.

Certainly, ‘democratisation’ funding began to swell—in 1998, to US\$858 million, or 1.5 per cent of ODA (see Figure 4). Big supporters, not surprisingly, were the USA, Canada, Germany, and the Nordic countries, which created new units for democratic development and, from 1989, for ‘good governance’. That enthusiasm, of course, led to funding for those NGOs that were involved with voter education, specialist training (parliamentary reform, party formation), or—at the macro level—human-rights advocacy.

**Figure 4: DAC funding to democratic development, US\$ millions**



(Source: OECD DAC 1992)

The emphasis on governance and democracy left many of the traditional NGOs out of the loop, but brought in domestic organisations—the bar associations, the auditing umbrella groups, the parliamentary research centres – which had not had an international presence in earlier years, as well as the labour unions, which had long been present. Below, I offer an explanation of why in my view this shift is actually to be welcomed.

### *The civil-society bandwagon*

Another change to affect the NGO star was the rise of enthusiasm for ‘civil society’. How did all this transformation—in Europe, Africa, and the Americas—come about, after all? The explanation most commonly offered was the desire to establish civil society (particularly on the part of East and Central Europeans), arising from the shackles of central control (economic and social) and authoritarian régimes. Indeed, while civil society itself may not have emerged in 1989, that date certainly marks the re-emergence of this term into Northern consciousness, where it now dominates liberal political thinking.

The term has an interesting ancestry in political philosophy (Cicero, Locke, Hume, Paine, Hegel, and Gramsci all wrote about it), but it is in everyday politics that the idea of ‘civil society’ has attracted money, organisations, and programmes to push it along (Van Rooy 1998). The enthusiasm for the term (despite or because of its numerous definitions) arises in part from a populist culture, and an urge to modify the alternate evils of capitalist and communist systems. For East and Central Europeans, at least, the appeal of ‘civil society’ lay in the possibility of a different moral, social, and political future which would rival the emancipatory vision of socialism, yet also embrace ‘this democracy thing’.

The impact on Northern NGOs has been remarkable. For one thing, their role becomes—almost automatically—central to the task of society building, not that of mere helpmates. They become part of the ‘third sector’, the tidy counterbalance now said to mediate between State and market excesses. Far from being underdogs in the world of runaway capitalists and irresponsible governments, the whole NGO world is brought to the table under the heading ‘civil society’. Jessica Mathews of the US Council for Foreign Relations even makes the assessment that, ‘increasingly, NGOs are able to push around even the largest governments’ (Mathews 1997:53). This rhetorical shift is enormous, even

if the reality is not nearly so dramatic.<sup>6</sup> It means that Northern NGOs have new roads open to them, and potential, if not yet real, responsibilities above and beyond project work. I describe some of these new paths at the end of this paper.

### *Social capital! Social capital!*

The shift of attention to NGOs and civil society has been given added weight with the newfound enthusiasm for ‘social capital’. The notion, promoted (but not invented) by Putnam et al. (1993), has the important attribute of sounding like economics—a factor in social and economic production. As financial and physical capital was joined by human capital in the 1980s (thereby raising the etymological value of ‘soft’ stuff like labour standards and education), the idea of social capital has changed the way in which the big players are thinking about NGOs and development.

At its core, social capital is meant to describe the outcomes of trust, the necessary social binding agent. Putnam and his team set out to explain why northern Italy was so prosperous, while southern Italy has been so bedraggled. Their answer was that northern Italians have learned to live together, trust one another, and build up relationships through non-market activities (singing in choirs, playing *bocce*) that *also* strengthen market transactions (you are less likely to sue the tenor in your choir than you are to sue a stranger). This social glue, called social capital, is also described as the strength of family responsibilities, community volunteerism, selflessness, and public or civic spirit.

What does one do to build up social capital, if it is so important for development? A major response has been to invest in Northern NGOs and, more often, directly in Southern organisations working in their own communities or the realms of national policy-making. (Indeed, there is a well-funded World Bank project to study social capital and its implications for Bank planning.<sup>7</sup>) Social capital has meant that the importance of community organisations has been notched up the policy ladder: more than inexpensive service providers, more even than political watchdogs, civil-society organisations (CSOs) are seen to be at the core of society’s workings. What a novel thought.

### *The global NGO jamboree*

A further factor in the rise of Northern NGOs has been their dramatic prominence in the UN world-conference circuit in the last decade. These

jamborees have not only created new NGO networks and skills, but, more importantly, they have generated a new standard of global governance. Now more than ever, it matters what governments say in international declarations, for there are significant crowds holding them to account at home.<sup>8</sup> The November 1999 demonstrations outside the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meetings in Seattle saw more than 700 organisations and between 40,000 and 60,000 people take part: the biggest rattling of swords in recent history. Certainly, the plethora of events in the preceding 20 years also counted: the Stockholm Environment Conference of 1972 and the first Women's Conference in Mexico in 1975 were catalytic. But, by the time of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio, the snowball was gathering lots of NGOs, and *new* NGOs, in its roll down the mountain.

Indeed, while the conferences carved out a permanent role for NGOs in UN governance (Foster and Anand 1999), they had the unintended but foreseen impact of exhausting many small, cash-strapped, and overwhelmed organisations. Conference fatigue took its toll; and while the roll-calls grew, many individual organisations dropped out of the circuit. However, the impact on their own identities and 'global consciousness' was important in pulling issues of trade, finance, and global governance into their own work. Again, using a Canadian case, the (domestic) Canadian Council for Social Development (CCSD) was at the time of writing cooperating with the network building up around the World Bank's Structural Adjustment Policy Research Initiative (SAPRI) to consider the implications of economic reform on social development, prior to the Copenhagen Plus Five follow-up meetings in June 2000. CCSD, involved in the 1995 World Summit for Social Development, has now stretched its policy frontiers further.

## Solid, unapologetic, fundamental success

Given all this transformation, especially in the past decade, can we say anything meaningful about NGO success? Absolutely.

A vast proportion of the NGO literature that has emerged from academia in the past couple of decades has been concerned with effectiveness (see Najam 1998, among others). Are NGOs' endeavours more or less effective than those of donors, or of national governments? In some ways, of course, the effectiveness debate is an hypothetical exercise, for it is almost impossible to compare what *has* worked against what *might have* worked if there had been a comparable programme/approach/organisation run by someone else. The methodological

problem is that there are very few comparable areas; by and large, donor agencies and national governments work in different areas from NGOs (in the fields of meso or macro policy-making and spending, rather than agency-to-Southern-NGO-to-community support, where NGOs are more common).

Still, there are ways of measuring the effectiveness of given programmes or projects against their stated aims (did the health of the village improve?), or in comparison with programmes run by others (was CUSO's administration of relief supplies more time- or cost-effective than Oxfam's?), or against its own internal processes (did the project change to reflect adequately the changes in the community's perception of the causes of the problem?). Many of the studies of NGO effectiveness (reams of which are summarised in an important report sponsored by the Finnish government, Kruse et al. 1997) can say something about this kind of accounting, planning, and management effectiveness, but very little about effectiveness in the larger sense. Have the millions of micro efforts by Northerners, conducted in an often *ad hoc*, uncoordinated, under-financed, and sometimes amateurish and paternalistic way, made a significant difference to the sustainable improvement of the lives of people living in 'the South'?

I think so. Indeed, I think that there has been a *fantastic* level of success at this larger level. Let me explain a few of the reasons why.

### *Equity is on the agenda*

I'm a big believer in the squeaky-wheel phenomenon: those who make noise – especially strategic, credible, well-supported, constituency-based noise – *can* shift the agenda. When I was researching environmental activism around the time of the Earth Summit in Rio (Van Rooy 1997), I was struck by the 'archeology' of issue change. Why do some topics and policy issues get attention, and others not? My unoriginal answer is that sustained debate, particularly over 'low' policy, low-cost, highly salient, and new policy areas, does make a difference. The problem for most activists is that the timeframe for agenda change is much longer than the usual project or campaign, and so success is less immediate and tangible. (The campaign against child labour in the rug-making industry and lobbying in favour of the landmines treaty are remarkable exceptions; see Chapman 1999 and Chapman and Fisher 2000 for more examples.)

Today, concerns about the inequities of globalisation (and governance, and investment, and trade, as well as aid) *are* on the agenda. Equity

concerns *do* matter (although, obviously, not enough). Witness:

- Corporate Social Responsibility is a demand of sufficient importance to Northern consumers that corporations throughout the world are changing their practices: Nike in Indonesia, Shell in Nigeria, and Placer Dome in the Philippines have had to do business differently (see also Elkington 1997).
- The World Bank, assailed by campaigns against some of its large infrastructure projects, has undertaken a *Voices of the Poor* exercise to ask questions about equity goals and impacts of Bank work.<sup>9</sup>
- The new round of the WTO, if resurrected after the NGO demonstrations in Seattle, is to deal with the inequitable barriers faced by developing countries in trading their goods with the North.
- Long-running demands by coalitions like Jubilee 2000 for attention to the debt of the poorest countries have finally been met with (imperfect but promising) action by the G8 nations.

I argue that a large part of the equity battle is won when the problem is set squarely on the policy table—the place where many mistakenly feel that the battle is begun. Getting the debate to go further is easier, of course, if there is broad consensus on the nature of the problem and its solution. In the case of the landmines treaty, which came into effect in 1999, there was evidence of a widespread agreement on both. As Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lloyd Axworthy said:

Perhaps the best example to date of this new diplomacy was the international campaign to ban landmines. Why? Because it showed the power behind a new kind of coalition. Like-minded governments and civil society formed a partnership of equals, united around a common set of core principles. (Department of Foreign Affairs 1998)

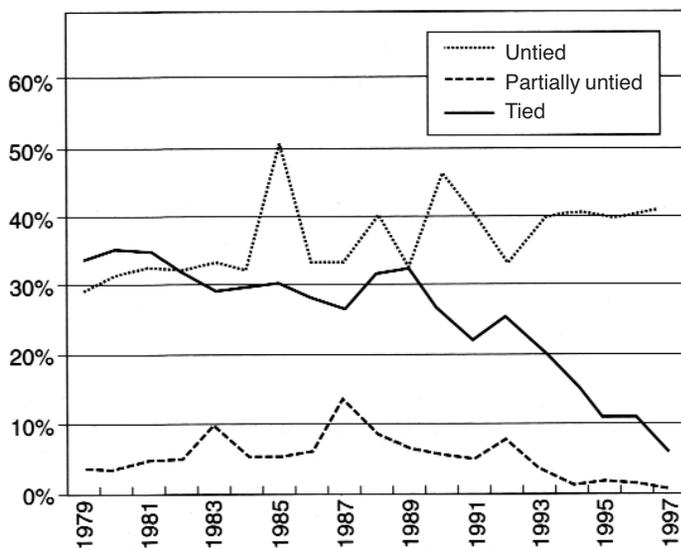
Where battles continue to rage is where that ‘core set of principles’ is lacking. For NGOs concerned about the impact of the over-liberalisation of markets, for example, the mountain is decidedly steeper. Yet even here, the issue is at least debated.<sup>10</sup>

### *Official aid is better*

Practices and priorities for all foreign aid, including that from non-government sources, have improved (see Dollar 1999). ODA, though diminished in volume, is better administered, in the following respects.

- *Tied aid is down:* Over the past 20 years at least, we have seen a decline in the amount and type of aid that is tied to procurement in the donating country—a link that increases the cost of development interventions by a conventionally estimated 15 per cent. Figure 5 shows a long and welcome decline in those numbers.
- *Environmental impact is better assessed:* There are now standards throughout the bilateral and multilateral donor community to assess the potential impact of projects on the physical environment. While intention does not replace action (O'Brien et al. 2000), procedures are a necessary prerequisite (see, for example, OECD, DAC 1992).
- *Gendered analyses make a difference:* Similarly, in both official and non-government circles, there has been a serious, if imperfect, adoption of the notion that development—like all political projects—is gendered: that men and women, for a host of reasons, are affected differently and have differing access to the decision-making processes that shape their lives.<sup>11</sup>

**Figure 5: Tied aid as a percentage of bilateral ODA commitments of DAC members**



(Source: OECD DAC 1992)

- *Participation of NGOs and community organisations in official efforts is up:* An emphasis on participation has changed the practice of aid implementation (if not yet the design) of most of the bilateral and multilateral donors. The World Bank has a *Participation Sourcebook*; the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has a *Resource Book on Participation*, as does the UNDP in its *Empowering People: A Guide to Participation*. While the criticism remains that participatory approaches may be cursory rather than integral, again, the guidelines are an important prerequisite for change.

Many of these trends can be linked to the work of Northern and Southern NGOs in pushing for change.<sup>12</sup> That is a remarkable achievement.

### *More Southern organisations are at work*

Even more Southern organisations are doing even better work at home, in small part through Northern solidarity activity. Of course, there is no way to estimate how many community-based organisations are working in the world; the vast majority are unregistered, local, and in no need of ‘relationships’ with Northern funding agencies. There are some estimates in particular countries, however, that give a sense of the enormous scale of current efforts (see Box B).

#### **Box B: Some sample numbers**

Brazil: Non-profit organisations work throughout the country; there are 45,000 in Sao Paulo alone, and 16,000 in Rio. They employ at least one million people, representing about two per cent of total employment.

Egypt: Non-profit organisations exist across the country; 17,500 are membership-based, 9,500 are charitable, and 3,200 work in development. Included are 22 professional groups, whose members number three million.

Thailand: There are some 11,000 registered non-profit organisations in the country and many more unregistered bodies.

India: At least two million associations are at work in India; Gandhi-inspired non-profit organisations alone employ 600,000 people.

Ghana: 800 formal non-profit organisations are registered, with international groups particularly prominent among them.

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(Source: Anheier and Salamon 1998)

Indeed, there is a rise in the number and influence of international (both North and South) umbrella groups that are trying to take the agendas of Southern 'development' NGOs to the international table: CIVICUS is a prominent example. Set up only six years ago, this international body has worked to improve the regulatory, funding, and tax situation of CSOs worldwide, trying to pry open further public space for domestic and international debates. A great deal is going on; and Northerners can take some of the credit.

### *Humanitarian assistance is quick and effective*

Finally, Northern NGOs should be congratulated for the creation of an international system of humanitarian assistance. We have witnessed *unambiguously* efficient and effective short-term international humanitarian assistance (albeit hampered by political indecision) by Northern NGOs, and through the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement, in support of local efforts. Particularly in instances of natural disaster, as opposed to man-made suffering, Northern NGOs (and NGOs from neighbouring countries and regions) have saved countless lives. In the case of Hurricane Mitch in Central America, for instance, at least 58 US NGOs (let alone those from other countries) sent doctors, supplies, money, medical equipment, and volunteers with spectacular speed, and in concert with a host of international organisations.<sup>13</sup> While there are justified criticisms of the political role of humanitarian assistance in prolonging conflict (particularly pertinent in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide), they do not undermine the spectacular capacity that exists for fast and effective action.

### However ...

These successes cannot be claimed without acknowledging certain caveats.

### *Passive Northern constituencies*

Northern domestic audiences remain, in most countries, passive about global issues of social justice, although they are keen contributors to charity (Foy and Helmich 1996). The reasons? Well, in Canada at any rate, global awareness—let alone knowledge about 'the Third World'—is embarrassingly feeble. To be sure, there is a continuing level of public support for overseas aid in Canada. An October 1998 survey showed that

some 75 per cent of Canadians support ODA (CIDA 1998), a figure that has been more or less consistent for most of CIDA's history. Yet as long-time aid-watcher Ian Smillie says, public support in Canada is 'a mile wide, but an inch deep'.<sup>14</sup> Writing for the OECD about CIDA's polling records, Smillie noted:

When asked which they believed was most important for Canada to provide, after 1991 more Canadians chose aid for emergencies over support for long term development. The majority of Canadians were neutral in their opinions on aid. They did not think of aid very often, did not feel it had an impact on them, and did not consider themselves part of the global community. Of neutral Canadians, 40 per cent tended to support aid while 20 per cent tended to oppose it. (Smillie 1998:55)

Further, the proportion of Canadians who feel that the country spends too much on aid seems to be growing, and a majority feels that the demands of domestic fiscal health justify cutting aid-spending abroad.

The shallowness of this support raises alarm bells both within CIDA, concerned that its domestic constituency already favours high-visibility emergency work over longer-term development efforts, and among CSOs themselves, who share the same constituency. One outcome has been notable timidity on the part of many international CSOs. Fears that policy work or non-spectacular, non-televisable, long-term development work would dry up public support have limited their scope of work to 'safer' projects. John Foster, a former head of Oxfam Canada, argues that a number of organisations have engaged in self-censorship for fear that advocacy work may scare away conventional donors who want every charitable dollar to be spent on relieving poverty on the ground.<sup>15</sup>

To counter the shallowness of public support, there is a clear need to mount continuing efforts to increase understanding of global processes and peoples (including the subject of ODA, to be sure, but as a small part). This lack of public understanding (in Canada, anyway, due in part to a lack of global curricula in the schools) may ultimately be most damaging to CSOs' endeavours to bring about change.

### *Lack of linking*

The experiences of *domestic* equity work—homelessness, child poverty, abuse of women—in the North are not changing what is being done internationally. Northern NGOs have, overall, very little to do with

anti-poverty work in their own countries: witness the well-publicised disquiet when Oxfam GB or Community Aid Abroad (now Oxfam Australia) took up the issue of domestic work. Specialists in someone else's problems, and not their own, the value of their organisational 'learning' and their credibility begin to wane.

One of the outcomes has been growing interest in direct funding—both for Southern organisations, and for Northern non-NGOs (professional associations, unions)—part of a broad assessment by donors that Northern NGOs may not be adding much to the deal (Riddell and Bebbington 1995).<sup>16</sup> Indeed, in the language of many donors, Northern NGOs are merely 'executing agencies', contractors in the overall business of ODA. Sadly, many NGOs, increasingly cash-strapped in an era of declining ODA, have focused on their role as executing agencies above all else.

### *Project myopia*

NGOs, particularly those heavily involved with donor funding, are organisationally designed to do *projects*. That focus is a historical accident, I think, but one that has become anachronistic: it shapes organisations to manage the manageable (an increasing challenge as levels of ODA fall), and so, inadvertently, to ignore the essential. Alan Fowler, a familiar observer of the NGO world, makes precisely this criticism:

As a tool, projects are not appropriate for all but the most technical types of development initiative, such as building roads. Where altering human behaviour is concerned, the less appropriate projects become. Many limitations to NGDO effectiveness stem from this fact. Projects serve the bureaucracy of the aid system ... they are time-bound, pre-defined sets of objectives, assumptions, activities and resources which should lead to measurable, beneficial impacts. (Fowler 1997:17)

Development is more than projects, for sure; but what is the alternative? Sociology may have more to say on this topic than development: the study of social movements shows how women's rights and environmental awareness have risen to the fore of the collective conscience, largely without the benefit of projects, funders, and logical framework analyses.

## *The capitalist challenge*

Another caveat concerns the new situation in which many Northern NGOs now find themselves. As currency speculation, foreign direct investment (FDI), corporate social responsibility, and economic ideology dominate the global debate, some NGOs in the North have followed the lead of more activist Southern organisations in engaging with these non-traditional development issues. Particularly as FDI and trade flows now double and triple ODA flows, even to the poorest countries, the challenge of monitoring mainstream economics is even more urgent.

This monitoring role involves engagement with individual companies (Monsanto, for example), with debate about currency regulations (such as the proposed Tobin tax), and FDI policies (the Multilateral Agreement on Trade, for example), and—an illustration of a still-vibrant ideological debate—the growth-based determinants of developmental success (one programme of Focus on the Global South is concentrated on such issues). However, here too the big contributors to the global capital debate are rarely the traditional development agencies (with notable exceptions, such as Oxfam GB). This is another area where non-NGOs such as unions and universities are taking the lead alongside NGO think-tanks (like the Third World Network).

## Packing up shop

Why, then, do I think that most NGOs will (and probably should) end their operations? Indeed, most of this article has tried to convince you that NGOs *have* made a crucial difference to the way that international social justice is promoted. The argument, however, is that most NGOs have successfully worked themselves out of a job, both by their success at one level and by their organisational obsolescence at another. The world has changed, and we have not changed quickly enough with it. I see at least four symptoms of this coming of age.

### *Zeal without 'roots' has inescapable limits*

- *Rootlessness — the first symptom:* In a fervour of zeal brought on by the real urgency of need (the conflict is beginning, the children are dying), much of the NGO community began life as public expressions of the Do Now, Think Later mentality. The development of NGO work has produced problems that zeal alone cannot resolve:

- *The inescapable partnership paradox*: North–South NGO relations are focused on funding, and so ‘partnership’ becomes a semantic option for Northerners, but a matter of survival for others (Hatery and Malhotra 1997). Of course, there are exceptions (I think that Canada’s Inter Pares takes partnership seriously, for example), and the dependency runs both ways: increasingly, Northerners are excluded from donor-funding loops if they do not ‘partner’ with Southern organisations. Still, the presence of financial support at the core of most North–South relationships makes for a different kind of politics.
- *The funding carrot/stick dilemma*: Much of the time and effort of Northern NGOs is focused on their own governmental or public donors (note: the dynamics governing these two sets of donors are not identical), and this cannot help but distort their own priorities.
- *The existential quest*: Awareness of these debates, but inability retroactively to grow roots, has meant a scrambling for new identity for many organisations. Most of this is only — but understandably — cosmetic.

### *International work demands a different kind of legitimacy*

If the future holds promise for those who do more than projects, for those who engage at the international level or for domestic social justice, then many Northern NGOs are ill placed. Efforts to reform international institutions and norms, let alone those in someone else’s country, bring with them a much higher burden of identity. Except for those organisations that can lay claim to a special knowledge or expertise (particularly in human rights or humanitarian assistance), questions are being asked about NGO legitimacy. ‘Whom do these people represent?’ is often asked of activists from Northern NGOs who are engaged internationally.

Establishment of legitimacy is a matter of far more than proving some simple level of numerical representation. I do think, however, that many Northern NGOs—long engaged in doing projects away from home, chasing development funds from those they seek to influence, and not particularly concerned with internal democracy, in any case—are poorly equipped to meet that challenge of legitimacy. As the stakes are raised at the international level—how trade is governed, how economic policies are set, how borders are protected—these NGOs may not be equal to the challenge.

## *Northern NGO leadership needs a revolution*

Yet another factor of occupational obsolescence is generational. For some countries' cadres of NGO leaders—certainly so in Canada—many have had no other jobs in their professional lives. In Canada, most of today's leaders, now approaching retirement, went directly from university to volunteer posts in Africa in the mid-1960s. Moreover, since the clamp on funding to NGOs in the mid-1990s in Canada, at least, almost no new hiring has taken place. With few jobs, despite a large cadre of development students coming from today's universities, the development NGO community shows distinct signs of ageing.

This personnel profile is particularly relevant if you accept that tomorrow's issues will require different expertise, and different kinds of institution. High-quality economic analysis will be needed by NGO policy units, research organisations, universities, and Southern government bodies. Increased demands will be made on organisations experienced in networking, brokering, and facilitating relationships among domestic and international players. That linking work already takes place in umbrella groups, resource centres, and training units in North and South, but much more will be needed—and will be nearly impossible to fund through the existing NGO funding channels. New skills will be needed in private-sector mediation, interpretation, and negotiation; through the unions, certainly, but also through organisations that can serve as negotiators. The demands for the future are different from the skills that most Northern NGOs, and their leaders, now possess.

## New kinds of NGO

This paper suggests a brighter future for social justice. That future, however, does not mean that the same kinds of organisation will be needed: activists must always adapt themselves and their organisations to the world around them. Indeed, parts of the work done by today's Northern NGOs must continue, but there needs to be a real re-mingling of players and functions. Just as the spinning of a kaleidoscope rearranges existing patterns, a juggling of organisations and people would better suit the social-justice demands of the next 50 years.

At least the following functions need to be maintained and reinforced:

- Northern NGOs will need to maintain and improve their coordination of—and capacity for—quick humanitarian assistance, in concert with multilateral bodies.

- Northern NGOs need to expand nascent work with think-tanks, trade unions, and universities to become credible domestic and international macro-economic policy activists.
- Northern NGOs need to hone their relationships and ‘value added’ as brokers for North–South cooperation, particularly among domestic activists seeking joint purpose at the international level.
- And finally, there is a continuing role for Northern—and Southern—NGOs to maintain a watch on ‘global capitalism’ and corporate social responsibility.

These four condensed functions—immense as they are—nonetheless hint at a world where justice is being advanced, where 50 years of cooperation have given birth to a genuine global society. The reform, consolidation, and re-organisation of the work of Northern activists is a happy sign that the world we so much want to change is, indeed, changing. I think that is good news, indeed.

## Notes

1 One recent example is the Global Partnership for NGO Studies, Education and Training, a consortium of educational centres established by BRAC from Bangladesh, Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP) from Zimbabwe, and the School for International Training (SIT) from USA. The centres organise diploma-level and master’s-level capacity-building programmes for NGO leaders.

2 According to the Union of International Associations ([www.uia.org](http://www.uia.org)).

3 In this paper, ‘The North’ refers to the ODA-providing members of the OECD and OPEC. ‘The South’ indicates all ODA-receiving countries.

4 The estimates of names and numbers come from my own best guesses; the ODA figures are from OECD Development Assistance Committee sources. Actually, the total is probably higher; the number for ODA to NGOs is

what is reported to the DAC, which tend to under-report NGO contributions. A rough guess is that at least 25 per cent of Canadian bilateral ODA—not 8 per cent—goes through NGOs, in addition to what they raise from individuals, a total that would have been some US\$478 million in 1997.

5 Among those are Freedom House (<http://www.freedomhouse.org/>), the Open Society Institutes (<http://www.osi.hu>), and the Center for Civil Society International (<http://www.friends-partners.org/~ccsi>).

6 By way of anecdote: at a recent meeting in Canada of officials and NGOs interested in how CSOs could better be involved in international policy processes, one senior official referred to NGOs as ‘gorillas’ at the table. NGOs in the room responded to the zoological challenge, identifying themselves as ants or as canaries in the mineshaft.

7 See more detail at <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/scapital/bank2>.

htm (accessed November 1999).

**8** For example, the January 2000 consultations held in Canada in preparation for the World Summit on Social Development Plus 5 were full of loud, organised criticism of Canada's failures to apply WSSD commitments in the five years of budgetary cutbacks at home.

**9** More information is available at <http://www.worldbank.org/poverty/wdr/poverty/conspeer.canany.htm>.

**10** The North–South Institute held a conference on this topic, where World Bank Senior Economist Joe Stiglitz, among others, spoke (North–South Institute 1999).

**11** For a host of examples, have a look at the policies, guidelines, and evaluations of gender and development cooperation organised by ELDIS at <http://nt1.ids.ac.uk/eldis/hot/wid.htm>.

**12** A new and careful study about the World Bank agrees with this assessment, albeit with significant caveats (Fox and Brown 1998).

**13** See <http://www.hurricanemitch.org/linkages.htm> for a list of the efforts of US and other NGO and international organisations to soften the impact of the hurricane.

**14** Ian Smillie, personal communication, March 1999.

**15** John Foster, personal communication, January 1999.

**16** Of course, direct funding is also a politically sensitive bilateral issue. The Overseas Development Institute emphasises that 'Donor funding of southern NGOs has received a mixed reception from recipient governments. Clear hostility from many non-democratic régimes has been part of more general opposition to any

initiatives to support organisations beyond the control of the state. But even in democratic countries, governments have often resisted moves seen as diverting significant amounts of official aid to non-state controlled initiatives, especially where NGO projects have not been integrated with particular line ministry programmes' (ODI 1995).

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