

## Development and Patronage

Edited by Deborah Eade, Introduced by Melakou Tegegn

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### Preface

Deborah Eade

The nineteenth century liberal historian, Lord Acton, famously observed that 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men'. At the time, European imperial power was at its height, and assumed - by its rulers, merchants, and missionaries - to be both a natural right, and a moral duty. In the words of Cecil Rhodes: 'I believe it to be my duty to God, my Queen and my Country to paint the whole map of Africa red, red from the Cape to Cairo. That is my creed, my dream and my mission'. History - and the liberation and anti-colonial movements that gained momentum after the 1939-1945 war - were to lay to rest such imperialist dreams. However, their legacy remains in conflicts and structural problems that can be traced back to the cultural and political cleavages that subjugation entails, whether in Central America, Central Africa, or even Central Europe.

And yet, in so many ways, the transfer of formal power has been a hollow victory for people in the South, where almost one-quarter of the world's population survives in conditions of abject poverty. With economic restructuring proceeding apace at a global and not merely a national level (notwithstanding the World Bank's belated change of heart) millions are seeing their incomes and security collapse: the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) reports that the accumulated *net* wealth of the world's ten richest individuals equals that of one and a half times the combined national incomes of the world's 48 poorest countries - who together represent about ten per cent of the human race. A world which can deliver fizzy drinks and hamburgers to anyone on the planet who can afford to buy them, and yet cannot guarantee millions more simply enough to eat.

It is against such a morally obscene background that the Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar writes:

It is clear to most people that the post-World War II dream of development is dead. Asia, Africa, and Latin America are no closer to becoming *developed* than in 1945 when the powers of capital and technology were summoned to make them clones of the First World. The question is: what comes after development? (1)

The dream of development might as well be dead: certainly, it is more like a nightmare for the millions of babies and children who will die of avoidable causes - namely, poverty - before the end of this century. As it is for the many thousands of women who die each year in childbirth, or in seeking not to bear more children. So wherein, then, lies the continuing power of this collective dream? Is the challenge to reclaim and redirect an alternative form of development or - as the Mexican scholar and activist Gustavo Esteva argues - to create alternatives to it? (2)

While the multilateral and regional development banks, and the major official donors, wield actual power over the policies of governments and the well-being of people, the development dream is also conveyed more insidiously: ideologies, discourses, dogmas, myths, and metaphors can be so seductive, and so all-encompassing, that they come to be taken for granted. Cruder language such as 'the triumph of capitalism', or 'the defeat of communism' reveals the struggle for ideological as well as economic hegemony over the direction that dream should take. That entire nations are classified as 'developed', 'developing', or 'least developed' (but never 'over-developed', and seldom 'mal-developed') further implies that there is a one-way ticket to development which all nations and peoples must buy; and that progress can be hastened by a blend of (Bretton Woods-approved) policies, international cooperation, and diligence. Advance is necessary, and there is only one way to do it. The struggle then becomes a semantic one to 'name' development: 'sustainable' or 'exclusionary', 'people-centred' or 'market-led', 'gender-fair' or 'gender-blind', 'trickle-down' or 'bottom-up', concerned with basic needs or with basic rights. It is rather like blind-folded children pinning ever more awkward qualifying tails onto the donkey. Ditching the concept becomes impossible, since the development industry 'has a way of shaping the world and its 'needs' in its own interests'. (3)

Influential Southern thinkers have argued that without removing William Blake's 'mind-forg'd manacles', and breaking out of all forms of patronage, we cannot conceive of the world in a liberated and liberating way (4). That suggests that we should indeed forget about looking for 'paradigms' and focus our energies on other ways of exploring and experiencing human potential. Yet these writers are also acutely aware that material and political inequality will not evaporate just by wishing away dependence or internalised subjugation, nor by being more benign in the exercise of power.

Nonetheless, development agencies, and particularly NGOs, *do* set themselves the task of building North-South 'partnerships' that are morally based on solidarity and egalitarianism, but are in fact mediated through the one-way transfer of resources. In trying to balance these competing (and not always compatible) agendas, it is fair to ask whether the aid-dominated nature of any such partnership makes it impossible to ask the big questions about development: most organisations (and individuals) find it painful to ask the big questions even of themselves! But given that development agencies exist, and show no signs of being about to self-destruct, they must seek constantly to improve the quality of their development partnerships. That the whole mission of development may be misguided is not a reason for development agencies to adopt less than the highest achievable standards of integrity.

Most of the papers in this collection are written by experienced practitioners who have also been in one way or another both on the receiving, as well as the giving, end of the aid chain. They speak of the race to keep up with their funders' (or employers') changing fads - environment one year, gender the next; decentralisation today, impact assessment tomorrow - and thus of how financial dependence limits their scope for intellectual and political autonomy. They show how vested interests, be they of patriarchal institutions or just financial survival, introduce a gulf between rhetoric and practice; these are the

hidden undertows that ensure that power does not shift. They speak too of how an NGO that has a distorted self-image will inevitably generate conflicts as it goes about its work; such as NGOs that, by taking on overtly political roles, thereby disempower and depoliticise the people's organisations that gave them some measure of representational authority in the first place; or participatory projects that can rely on participants' good behaviour only when a respected authority figure is present, and which are otherwise largely unresponsive to them; or agencies that impose on others their own worldview and ways of working, in the name of empowerment and partnership.

In various ways, contributors underline the importance of mutual transparency, especially when financial dependence is a reality. This goes as much for the NGOs who depend on official sources of money as it does to the Southern recipients of their funds. Being clear about where power lies will not dispel inequality, but may allow for critical feedback and negotiation. At present, the picture is of development agencies who feel free to pick and choose their 'partners' and to change their agendas at will. Fine. But then their language of partnership and solidarity is revealed as so much pious humbug.

Transparency calls for better insights into the powerful undercurrents that conspire to pull an organisation off its intended course. All human beings are the product of the web of beliefs and social structures of which they are a part, and of the experiences that have marked them as individuals. There are, however, ways in which people can learn to understand and recognise the forces that drive them, and so be freer (not necessarily free!) to make choices about these. Development agencies perhaps need to undergo a similar psycho-therapeutic process every now and then. It is not enough to have a policy that says that they are committed to, for example, gender equity and equality. Techniques and training can help. Affirmative action policies can shift the centre of gravity. Steps can be taken to 'engender' the public agenda. Battles can be fought. But the real changes need to happen at the most intimate level - within, as it were, the very heart and mind of the organisation. The process of change is not easy. It takes time and often a lot of trouble.

An honest and open partnership also demands a high level of mutual accountability. Paraphrasing the British Labour politician, Tony Benn, there are five key questions: Whom do you represent? Where do you get your money from? To whom are you formally accountable? To whom are you morally accountable? *How can we get rid of you?* It is this last question that so resonates with what our Southern contributors have to say. How can local people get rid of NGOs and other external actors whom they regard as intrusive or dangerous; who are obstructing communication between the relevant actors; or who are making harder to pose the big questions? Is there a real need for Northern NGOs to act as middle-men in channelling government aid to Southern NGOs? If so, whose needs are being served? And what does this mean about mutual accountability and trust, especially if the demands on Southern 'partners' are changing 'in part as a result of the demands for accountability from those who provide the NGOs with their funds and in part as a result of the growing resemblance of these NGOs to commercial organisations'. (5)

We shall end by returning to Lord Acton. A leading scholar of his day, he believed that liberty was 'the marrow of modern history'. As a practising Catholic, his major battle was with the doctrine of papal infallibility. His argument was with dogma - the idea that truth comes always and only from one source - rather than with the pope's preachings as such. Similarly, as **Melakou Tegegn** argues in his introductory essay, the old development paradigm should be turned on its head. Immense positive achievements have been made in the name of development. But that does not mean that the direction that has been followed until now is the right, the best, or the only one. If it were, the gap between rich and poor would be shrinking, not growing. Nor is the alternative to retreat into the micro-universe of local realities, or into what a former colleague once called 'ProjectWorld'. Humanity needs to find new ways of communicating, of dreaming together, of generating political spaces; what **Tegegn** calls working for 'globalisation from below'. This is too important to be left to development experts in New York, Paris, Geneva, Washington, or London. Given the parlous state of the world, cross-cultural partnership is not just an option for the privileged few, nor simply a way of transferring resources from the North to the South. It is a political and moral necessity, a question of survival.

## Notes

1 Arturo Escobar (1997), 'The United Nations and the End of Development', reprinted in *Development: The Journal of the Society for International Development*, Volume 40, Number 1, p. 136.

2 Gustavo Esteva (1992), 'Development' in Wolfgang Sachs (ed) *The Development Dictionary: A Guide to Knowledge as Power*, London: Zed Books. See also Gustavo Esteva and Madhu Suri Prakash, *Hope at the Margins: Beyond Human Rights and Development*, London: Zed Books (forthcoming, 1998).

3 Mike Powell and David Seddon (1997), Editorial, *Review of African Political Economy*, Number 71.

4 See, for example, the following entries in the Annotated Bibliography to this volume: Franz Fanon, Paulo Freire, Rajni Kothari, Julius Nyrere, Vandana Shiva, Ngugi wa Thiong'o.

5 Powell and Seddon, op.cit.