

# The missionary position: NGOs and development in Africa

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Africa in the closing years of the twentieth century will be remembered for two historic events. One was the rise of the popular movements that led to the end of the colonial empire and the downfall of apartheid; the other, a human catastrophe of immense proportions involving the massacre of nearly a million people in Rwanda. If the one was achieved through the mobilization of the majority for the goal of emancipation, the other was fuelled by pressures to comply with an externally defined agenda for social development. These events represent the extremes of hope and despair that came to characterize much of the continent in the closing years of the millennium. Every country in the region contains, albeit to varying degrees, the mixture of factors that can lead to either outcome—a future built on respect for human dignity, or one torn apart by conflicts such as those seen in Sierra Leone, Liberia, Angola and in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Development, it seems, has failed. In many post-colonial countries real per capita GDP has fallen and welfare gains achieved since independence in areas like food consumption, health and education have been reversed. The statistics are disturbing. In sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, per-capita incomes dropped by 21 per cent in real terms between 1981 and 1989.<sup>1</sup> Madagascar and Mali now have per capita incomes of \$799 and \$753, down from \$1,258 and \$898 25 years ago. In 16 other sub-Saharan countries per capita incomes were also lower in 1999 than in 1975.<sup>2</sup> Nearly one-quarter of the world's population, but nearly 42 per cent of the population of sub-Saharan Africa, live on less than \$1 a day. Levels of inequality have also increased dramatically worldwide. In 1960 the average income of the top 20 per cent of the world's population was 30 times that of the bottom 20 per cent. By 1990 it was 60 times, and by 1997, 74 times that of the lowest fifth. Today 'the assets of the top three billionaires are more

<sup>1</sup> *United Nations Development Programme: Human Development Report—1996* (Oxford: UNDP, 1996), pp. 2–10.

<sup>2</sup> *United Nations Development Programme: Human Development Report—2001* (Oxford: UNDP, 2001), pp. 1–8.

than the combined GNP of all least developed countries and their 600 million people'.<sup>3</sup>

This has been the context in which there has been an explosive growth in the presence of Western as well as local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Africa. NGOs today form a prominent part of the 'development machine', a vast institutional and disciplinary nexus of official agencies, practitioners, consultants, scholars and other miscellaneous experts producing and consuming knowledge about the 'developing world'.<sup>4</sup> According to recent estimates, there are as many as three thousand development NGOs in OECD countries as a whole.<sup>5</sup> In Britain alone, there are well over one hundred voluntary groups claiming some specialism in the field.

Aid (in which NGOs have come to play a significant role) is frequently portrayed as a form of altruism, a charitable act that enables wealth to flow from rich to poor, poverty to be reduced and the poor to be empowered. Such claims tend to be, as David Sogge puts it, 'shibboleths, catch phrases that distinguish believers from doubters. Indeed they are utterances of belief. At best they are half-truths'.<sup>6</sup>

In this article we trace the evolution of the role of NGOs in Africa. We suggest that their role in 'development' represents a continuity of the work of their precursors, the missionaries and voluntary organizations that cooperated in Europe's colonization and control of Africa. Today their work contributes marginally to the relief of poverty, but significantly to undermining the struggle of African people to emancipate themselves from economic, social and political oppression. NGOs could, and some do, play a role in supporting an emancipatory agenda in Africa, but that would involve them disengaging from their paternalistic role in development.

### **From missionaries of empire to missionaries of development**

The market and voluntarism have a long association; the first and most celebrated period of 'free trade', from the 1840s to the 1930s, was also a high point of charitable activity throughout the British empire. In Britain itself, the industrial revolution opened up a great gulf between the bourgeoisie and the swelling ranks of the urban proletariat. In the 1890s, when industrialists were amassing fortunes to rival those of the aristocracy, as much as one-third of population of London were living below the level of bare subsistence, and death from starvation was not unknown. At this time, private philanthropy was the preferred solution to social need and private expenditure far outweighed public provision.

<sup>3</sup> *United Nations Development Programme: Human Development Report—1998. Making new technologies work for human development* (Oxford: UNDP, 1999), pp. 1–6.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Crush, ed., *Power of development* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 5–8.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Smillie, *The alms bazaar: altruism under fire—non-profit organisations and international development* (London: Intermediate Technology Publications, 1995), p. 129.

<sup>6</sup> David Sogge, *Give and take: what's the matter with foreign aid* (London: Zed Books, 2002).

Colonial powers had no desire to finance state welfare programmes for Africans.<sup>7</sup> Government social services for the indigenous population were minimal. Social policy was geared towards ensuring the integrity of the structures of colonial rule. It was designed to secure a sufficient quality of labour to guarantee a reasonably efficient exploitation of the colony. The goals of social development (such as they were) were defined in the metropolis. Within that framework, policy formulation and implementation were usually decentralized, being delegated to the colonial governor and administration.

Social services were not, however, completely absent. In periods of serious outbreaks of epidemics in indigenous settlements, health services were provided principally to stave off the possibility of infections spreading into white society. Limited education was also provided when certain basic skills would be necessary for the administration of the colony or for the particular forms of exploitation. But state expenditure to support white settler populations was usually generous. Although on the eve of independence there were significant changes in the extent to which investments were made in the social sectors, for the most part the state's function was to provide only for a minority.<sup>8</sup> For the majority of the rural population, it was left to a clutch of charities and missionary groups to exchange their spiritual wares for material support in education, health or other social services. In providing such services, they were also concerned with evangelizing among the African population, discouraging what they perceived as ignorance, idleness and moral degeneracy, and promoting their own vision of civilization.

If the welfare of Africans was not a primary concern of colonial administrators and missionaries, control of them certainly was. Whites were universally agreed on the necessity for controlling the expectations and behaviour of blacks. African people did not always respond passively to colonial rule. The interwar years saw some of the first serious challenges to white authority in Africa, the emergence of significant, if nascent, nationalist and anti-colonial movements, of organized black labour and indeed of open revolt against the brute injustices of colonialism.<sup>9</sup>

However, it was the period following the Second World War that witnessed the most significant popular mobilizations and the formation of numerous popular organizations (both formal and informal) throughout Africa. Initially, these grassroots movements were motivated not so much by desires for abstract concepts of self-determination, but by struggles for basic rights that were part of everyday experiences of the majority: the right to food, shelter, water, land, education and health care; rights to freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, and freedom from harassment and other forms of human

<sup>7</sup> Herbert H. Werlin, *Governing an African city: a study of Nairobi* (London: Africana Publishing Co., 1974), p. 45.

<sup>8</sup> This characterization also broadly defines the conditions prevailing in South Africa under apartheid and, as we will argue, increasingly characterizes the conditions currently prevailing in Africa in the era of globalization.

<sup>9</sup> The Harry Thuku disturbances in Kenya are a case in point.

rights abuses.<sup>10</sup> It was these numerous civil agitations (urban and rural) that provided the impetus to the liberation movements.

The imperial response was frequently brutal. In Kenya, grassroots struggles came to a head in the 'Mau Mau' uprising of 1952 when the Kikuyu population of the so-called 'white highlands' mobilized widespread popular support for a guerrilla war against the colonial settlers. Officially, 95 whites and 11,503 Africans were killed in the conflict, although most now agree that the number of African dead was actually far greater.<sup>11</sup> Tens of thousands of men, women and children were also interned in concentration camps under emergency legislation.

However, not all efforts to control Africans were wholly or even mainly based on brute force. Ideology played a far greater role. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o explains:

Colonialism imposed its control of the social production of wealth through military conquest and subsequent political dictatorship. But its most important area of domination was the mental universe of the colonised, the control, through culture, of how people perceived themselves and their relationship to the world. Economic and political control can never be complete or effective without mental control. To control a people's culture is to control their tools of self-definition in relationship to others.<sup>12</sup>

Missionary societies and voluntary organizations were key actors in the ideological war. They provided the administration not only with a cheap form of private welfare, but also with a subtle means of controlling the behaviour of blacks. While colonial philanthropy may have been motivated by religious conviction, status, compassion or guilt, it was also motivated by fear. In Britain and the colonies alike, politicians frequently alluded to the threat of revolution and actively encouraged greater interest in works of benevolence as a solution to social unrest.<sup>13</sup> In short, charity was not only designed to help the poor, it also served to protect the rich.

Charitable organizations actively helped to suppress anti-colonial struggles. For example, in Kenya the Women's Association, Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (MYWO) and the Christian Council of Kenya (CCK) were both involved in government-funded schemes designed to subvert black resistance during the

<sup>10</sup> In South Africa, similar forms of organization were seen during the same period until the movement was brutally crushed, only to re-emerge (albeit in other forms) in the late 1970s. The processes that took place in South Africa in the lead up to the first elections and the gradual transformation of the struggle for rights into the realm of 'development' has uncanny similarities to the what happened in the rest of the continent.

<sup>11</sup> Carolyn Martin Shaw, *Colonial inscriptions: race, sex and class in Kenya* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 153.

<sup>12</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the mind: the politics of language in African literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Kathleen Woodroffe, *From charity to social work in England and the United States* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 13–14.

'Mau Mau' uprising.<sup>14</sup> The CCK established a 'rehabilitation programme' in response to the emergency. It offered 'pastoral care' to internees in the concentration camps, a euphemism for a process of interrogation during which 'loyal Africans' were screened from potential terrorists.<sup>15</sup> It also established community centres in Nairobi's more troublesome slums and shantytowns to extend these 'rehabilitation' services to urban communities affected by the 'Mau Mau' uprising.<sup>16</sup>

Voluntary welfare provision was easily adapted to the purpose of social control because it was conceived as a largely asocial activity. The programmes of care they delivered did not seek to redress the social circumstances that caused impoverishment, but instead concerned themselves with the apparent failings of Africans themselves. The problem was not injustice, but being 'uncivilized' and suffering from the 'native' condition. And charitable welfare was the sweetener that made the colonial condition more palatable.

But with the emergence of the anti-colonial revolution, missionary and voluntary organizations in the colonies faced a crisis. The nationalist movements that came into power did so on the basis of a 'social contract' with the popular movements that they led. Their credibility and legitimacy derived from their promise to end social injustices that characterized the colonial era. Given the extent of involvement of missionary societies and voluntary organizations in the suppression of nationalist struggles in Africa, the question arises as to how such organizations were able to survive and even prosper after independence, as many clearly did. The answer lies in the history of development discourse itself and the emergence of the 'development NGO' as an entity in the national and international arena.

While the idea and practice of 'community development' existed within the colonial period, voluntary bodies did not represent themselves or their work in terms of 'development' until much later when the US government and

<sup>14</sup> MYWO was created in 1952, at the height of the State Emergency, and soon after its Maendeleo clubs were extended to villages throughout the Kikuyu homelands. The clubs were supported by an annual grant from the Government Department of Community Development. African women who joined the clubs were told to abandon their commitment to 'Mau Mau' or lose the 'humanitarian' services the clubs provided. They were also encouraged to reveal information about the daily movements of their neighbours and relatives. People whose movements were considered suspicious were picked up and locked in the concentration camps. In addition to the welfare services they obtained, club members were also rewarded with exemption from the regime of compulsory labour that applied to all other African women. Lisa Aubrey, *The politics of development co-operation: NGOs, gender and partnership in Kenya* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 45–54.

<sup>15</sup> The Christian Council of Kenya, 'The story of Christian aid from churches in Great Britain to those in Kenya', Archive Collection, School of Oriental and African Studies, Missionary Society Archives. CA/A/4 (1965); The Christian Council of Kenya, 'The Christian Council of Kenya: emergency projects and future policy'. Archive Collection, School of Oriental and African Studies, Missionary Society Archives. CA/A/4/3 (1957), p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> The centres were run in cooperation with several missions and voluntary organizations, namely the Society of Friends, the Salvation Army, the Methodist Church and the Presbyterians. Both initiatives received funding from a number of different sources, including the colonial government, Nairobi City Council, and the Inter-Church Aid Department of the British Council of Churches—the forerunner to the present-day development NGO, Christian Aid (Christian Council of Kenya, 'The story of Christian Aid', 1965). Inter-Church Aid actually made a series of public appeals for donations in Britain to support the CCK's 'rehabilitation work'.

international agencies began to distinguish half the world as 'underdeveloped' and to describe 'development' as a universal goal.<sup>17</sup>

The emerging discourse of development provided a convenient rationale for two distinct groups of voluntary organizations. The first group consisted primarily of overseas missionary societies and charitable bodies, like the CCK and the MYWO in Kenya, that were present in the colonies before independence. Christian Aid evolved out of a network of such bodies. The second group is typified by organizations like Oxfam, Save the Children and Plan International, which had no direct involvement in the colonies. They were 'war charities', established to deal with the human consequences of conflict in Europe. The histories of these two groups of organizations are often conflated in accounts of the origins of development NGOs.<sup>18</sup> In fact, each group had very different motivations for adopting the development mantle and, at least originally, each had a very different relationship with the official bodies that dominated the field.

With the rise of the anti-colonial movement, colonial missionary societies and charitable organizations were clearly tainted in the eyes of the majority by their association with racist colonial oppression. Colonial rationales of 'trusteeship' were no longer acceptable. Faced with their potential demise, they transformed themselves completely. First, they 'indigenized' their administrations, gradually replacing white staff, clergy and secular managers with educated blacks.<sup>19</sup> Second, they changed their ideological outlook, replacing the overt racism of the past with a new discourse about 'development' that was just beginning to take shape in the international arena.

The new discourse provided a solution of sorts. It offered an alternative language and set of practices that, at least on the surface, were free of racial signifiers. And it appeared to imply some connection with emancipation, the prospect of 'progress' that would benefit all. The missionary societies 'discovered' the appeal of expressing concerns about poverty, and they began to condemn the racial prejudice that had created this poverty with as much conviction as they had justified racial exclusion in the past. The exigencies of black resistance and international politics had forced them to reconstruct themselves as indigenous 'development NGOs'.

<sup>17</sup> Vincent Tucker, 'The myth of development: a critique of a Eurocentric discourse', in Ronaldo Munck and Denis O' Hearn, eds, *Critical development theory: contributions to a new paradigm* (London: Zed Books, 1999), pp. 6–8. See also Gustavo Esteva, 'Development', in Wolfgang Sachs, ed., *The development dictionary: a guide to knowledge as power* (London: Zed Books, 1996), pp. 12–14.

<sup>18</sup> Conveniently, the ethically questionable past of the former missionary societies frequently disappears within a mythologized history where NGOs begin life as bearers of humanitarian values in the international arena. For example, in his much cited account of organizational change in development NGOs, 'Third generation NGO strategies: a key to people-centered development', *World Development* 15, Autumn 1987, pp. 145–59. David Korten describes a linear process of change in development NGOs, a process he says began in the early part of the twentieth century with the establishment of the first war charities. Korten does not even consider the contribution colonial missionary societies and voluntary organizations made to the evolution of development NGOs, negative or otherwise.

<sup>19</sup> The CCK and MYWO both began this process in the late 1950s.

Unlike their colonial counterparts, war charities had no undesirable associations with racist regimes. They had a popular base in Europe that was supportive of their goals of internationalist humanitarian relief. As the post-war reconstruction effort began in earnest in Europe with the implementation of the Marshall Plan in 1948, mass suffering and starvation were no longer an imminent threat there. The war charities were faced with basic choices. They could either wind down their operations entirely, or they could expand into new areas of activity and new continents. Oxfam, Plan International and Save the Children were among only a handful of organizations that decided to extend their existing humanitarian activities beyond Europe's boundaries.

So why did they make this choice? In part they were driven by organizational survival for its own sake, but they were also driven by ideological goals. Religion certainly played a large part in the founding beliefs of most, but it was the idealist tradition of liberal internationalism of their founders that now provided the motivation—the same tradition that gave birth to the League of Nations in the interwar years. Idealists sought to promote world peace through international cooperation and actively encouraged people to gain a 'truer understanding of civilisations other than their own'.<sup>20</sup>

The 1960s marked the turning point in the history of war charities. The Freedom from Hunger Campaign and the UN Decade of Development both had profound effects on these organizations. They embraced the new discourse of development with as much enthusiasm as colonial missionary societies and voluntary organizations were doing locally. They were seduced by arguments about development as a more noble pursuit than humanitarian relief alone, since it was said the former addressed the long-term causes of poverty, whereas the latter merely dealt with short-term symptoms.<sup>21</sup> Oxfam, War on Want and Christian Aid in particular were sympathetic to these views and supported the Food and Agriculture Organization's call for the relief of poverty through 'self-generating agricultural development'.

Their participation in development discourse helped to solve some serious marketing problems that organizations such as Oxfam experienced in its early overseas ventures. At first, the British public found it very difficult to comprehend the fact that there was widespread poverty and hunger throughout the glorious

<sup>20</sup> Timothy Dunne, 'Liberalism', in John Baylis and Steve Smith, eds, *The globalization of world politics: an introduction to International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 152. Maggie Black, *Oxfam: the first 50 years* (Oxford: Oxfam, 1992). Maggie Black, 'The end of total war', *New Internationalist* 228, February 1992, pp. 20–22. Plan International, *A journey of hope: the history of Plan International* (Woking, Surrey: Plan International, 1998). The expansion of humanitarian endeavour that occurred in the late 1940s and 1950s was implicit in the actions of committed internationalists among the founders of many war-relief organizations such as Oxfam's Gilbert Murray, or Plan International's Eric Muggerridge.

<sup>21</sup> Dr Neville Goodman, the assistant secretary-general to the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), made this point to an assembled audience of British charities three weeks after the official launch of the Freedom From Hunger campaign in 1960. 'Aid must go beyond philanthropy', he said, 'it must fit in with a balanced plan for relieving the world of its food problems. Our campaign is directed not against famine, but against the causes of permanent insufficiency of food supplies'. Cited in Black, *Oxfam: the first 50 years*, p. 71.

empire. The public's vision of Africa was informed alternately by images of exoticism and adventure. As Maggie Black acknowledges:

Whatever variations were provided in the picture of Her Majesty's brown and black-skinned subjects, one feature was axiomatic: they were not described in the same terms—in political, economic, social—as 'us'. Comparisons using the same set of criteria were not made because the people were not comparable; they were 'not like us'.<sup>22</sup>

Development resolved this marketing problem. The discourse offered a confused audience a more palatable perspective on Africans and Asians. It was more palatable because it was similar in many respects to the racist discourses of the past, this time with a vocabulary consistent with the new age of modernity. It was no longer that Africans were 'uncivilized'. Instead, they were 'underdeveloped'. Either way, the 'civilized' or 'developed' European has a role to play in 'civilizing' or 'developing' Africa.

Caught in the torrent of upheavals that characterized the victory over colonialism, it was easy for these Western NGOs to become romantic and blinkered by their own enthusiasm for 'bringing development to the people' in the newly independent countries. But the real problem was that the dominant discourse of development was framed not in the language of emancipation or justice, but with the vocabulary of charity, technical expertise, neutrality, and a deep paternalism (albeit accompanied by the rhetoric of participatory development) that was its syntax. As with the racist ideologies of the past, the discourse of development continued to define non-Western people in terms of their perceived divergence from the cultural standards of the West, and it reproduced the social hierarchies that had prevailed between both groups under colonialism. On this basis, the so-called 'developing world' and its inhabitants were (and still are) described only in terms of what they are not. They are chaotic not ordered, traditional not modern, corrupt not honest, underdeveloped not developed, irrational not rational, lacking in all of those things the West presumes itself to be. White Westerners were still represented as the bearers of 'civilization' and were to act as the exclusive agents of development, while black, post-colonial 'others' were still seen as uncivilized and unenlightened, destined to be development's exclusive objects.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Given this fact, it is not surprising that the British public responded far more favourably to fundraising appeals aimed at helping white-skinned Europeans than black-skinned Africans or Asians. In 1948, Oxfam launched an advertising campaign called 'Arab Relief'. It was intended to raise funds in support of Palestinian refugees fleeing the conflict over the creation of the State of Israel. The appeal was a failure. Oxfam raised far more money in previous years when it appealed for donations to help German and Austrian refugees. See Black, *Oxfam: the first 50 years*, p. 37. Apparently, the British public could view their former enemies on equal terms, but not their former colonial subjects.

<sup>23</sup> Interestingly enough, during this period the northern NGOs established the same racial division of labour that had once characterized the missionary outposts and the colonial state. The white expatriate, the technical expert, was usually the head of the local office. Militant at home about parity in salary scales within their home organizations, the northern NGO in Africa came armed with a baggage full of reasons (usually transported in a four-wheel drive vehicle) why local staff should not be paid at the same rates. Naoki Suzuki, *Inside NGOs: learning to manage conflicts between headquarters and field offices* (London: Intermediate Technology Productions, 1998), p. 1.



Political independence was achieved in Africa through the ability of the leadership of the nationalist movements to capture the imagination of popular formations, uniting them in the promise that only through self-determination and independence could all their aspirations be achieved. Having grasped political self-determination from colonial authority, however, the new occupiers of the state machinery were reluctant to accord the same rights to others. The state was to be the 'sole developer' and 'sole unifier' of society. The popular associations, political organizations and unions that had brought the nationalist leadership into power gradually began to be seen as an obstacle to progress. They were gradually marginalized, replaced by the ascendancy of the expert supported by bureaucratic and centralized decision-making under the guise of 'national planning'. Emancipation was no longer the flag around which the oppressed could rally. Instead, the concept of rights was codified and rarefied in laws and constitutions whose application was determined by the increasingly unaccountable guardians of the state.<sup>24</sup> 'Development' became the main pre-occupation once political independence had been achieved. The 'problem' was not, it appeared, emancipation or the denial of basic rights, but one of 'poverty' and 'basic needs'. While the one demanded popular mobilization, the other inspired only pity and preoccupations about the technically 'correct' approaches to 'poverty alleviation'.

While the vision of 'development' appeared to offer a more inclusive path to 'progress' than had previously been the case, in fact the discourse was little more than a superficial reformulation of old colonial prejudices. As Crush puts it, 'development is fundamentally about mapping and making, about the spatial reach of power and the control and management of other peoples, territories, environments and places'.<sup>25</sup> The discourse of development provided a means of subverting popular aspirations for radical change in the context of independence struggles while legitimating the continued marginalization of non-Western peoples. After independence development worked to undermine popular mobilization and to limit an expanding communist ideology, both of which threatened to obstruct the continued growth of Euro-American capitalism in the former colonies. And it achieved all this while providing very little in the way of tangible benefits to non-Western people. There was no Marshall Plan for Africa. The limited assistance post-colonial countries received in development aid was usually tied more directly to short-term Western interests.<sup>26</sup>

For all its limitations, however, the post-independence African economy did at least sustain a social infrastructure that, while not comparable to conditions in

<sup>24</sup> Issa Shivji, *The concept of human rights in Africa* (London: Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa, 1989).

<sup>25</sup> Jonathan Crush, ed., *Power of development* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> As a portent of things to come, Kenya began its independence in the 1960s owing a debt of £29 million, a loan that the World Bank arranged to ensure that departing British colonists would be paid for returning part of the land they had originally stolen from the indigenous population. Colin Leys, *Underdevelopment in Kenya: the political economy of neo-colonialism, 1964-1971* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 74.

the West, nevertheless served a wide population. It remains one of the most remarkable, and yet least acknowledged, achievements of independence governments that within the space of a few years, access to health services and to education became effectively universal. The impact of these interventions was to be reflected in the subsequent dramatic changes in average life expectancy, in infant and child mortality rates, in the improvements in nutritional status of the young, in literacy levels and educational enrolment and achievements. Substantial improvements in all these parameters were to be observed throughout the continent by the end of the 1970s as a result of these social programmes.<sup>27</sup> These achievements challenge the current, largely ideologically motivated, caricature of the state as being 'inefficient' and unable to deliver effective services.<sup>28</sup>

Notwithstanding NGOs' early allegiance to the idea of development and, indeed, the scope and breadth of their activities during this period, official development agencies remained largely unenthusiastic about their work. In the imagination of organizations like USAID, the UN and the World Bank, development was the business of the state and NGOs stood somewhere on the extreme margins of the field. While international NGOs had a licence to run their projects in Africa, this freedom was conditional, based on an unspoken assumption that they accepted or did not comment on the manner in which the state exercised its power. This arrangement suited official agencies on both sides of the West/non-West divide, since key among the implicit goals of development in the Cold War era was the co-optation of post-colonial governments to the economic and military agendas of Western powers. Consequently, the role of NGOs in the early post-independence period remained marginal. While they carried out 'projects' providing services in peripheral areas that the state was disinclined to reach, the bulk of social services were provided by the state under its social contract with the people.

The work of NGOs was limited to project work where, armed with their manuals and technical tricks, they focused the attention of 'the poor' on finding participatory means for coping with the present rather than seeking justice for past crimes against them. Like their missionary predecessors, they offered the poor blessings in the future (albeit on earth rather than in heaven).<sup>29</sup> And in their local offices they established the same racial divisions of labour and low salaries for local staff as had been customary among their missionary predecessors.

<sup>27</sup> Aggregate figures for Sub-Saharan Africa show, for example, that life expectancy increased from 38 years in 1960 to 47 years in 1978, despite the fact that GNP per capita increased only modestly from \$222 to \$280 (World Bank, *World Development Report 1980* (Washington DC: World Bank, 1981)).

<sup>28</sup> A dogma that has been perpetuated by many international agencies, but in particular the World Bank. See, for example, *Sub-Saharan Africa: from crisis to sustainable growth* (Washington DC: World Bank, 1989). This view has been brilliantly challenged by Amartya Sen who demonstrates that dramatic improvements in life expectancy and reductions in child mortality rates are in fact an outcome of state interventions in the social sector rather than the outcome of increases in GNP. See Amartya Sen, *Development as freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, even one of the largest Christian development agencies saw the virtue of offering solutions in the temporal realm—Christian Aid's slogan 'We believe in life before death'.

### **Neo-liberalism and the resurgence of NGOs**

But by the late 1970s, events were on the horizon that were to qualitatively transform the 'development' arena and lay the basis for the proliferation of NGOs in the region that rekindled their missionary zeal.

The so-called 'oil crisis' of the mid-1970s resulted in the creation of a finance capital glut in a world economy already suffering from recession. Europe and America were suddenly awash with capital with few opportunities for high rates of return. As a result, developing countries were courted to take loans to finance 'development'. But this glut of international credit was short-lived. The 1980s saw significant increases in the cost of borrowing. The US government implemented an avowedly neo-liberal monetary policy, which drove up interest rates around the world. Coincident with this, the emerging technological revolution in microcomputers and in gene technology attracted capital to new fields where the rates of profit were likely to be more substantial.<sup>30</sup> Debtor countries were suddenly faced with servicing the interest on loans that absorbed ever-greater proportions of export earnings. Debt had now become the central issue of 'concern' in development circles.

This was the period that saw the emergence of 'neo-liberalism' as the dominant political-economic ideology in the West, epitomized by the rise to power of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the US. Central to this ideology was the concept of the minimalist state, a concept the realization of which radically altered the landscape of development practice in Africa and throughout the post-colonial world. According to the neo-liberal consensus, the most important function of economic policy is to safeguard the 'right' of a minority to accumulate profits at the highest rate possible (euphemistically referred to as 'growth'). Only when this freedom is unrestricted, it is said, will others in society benefit from any associated spin-offs (the trickle-down effect). The purpose of 'development' is, therefore, to guarantee 'growth' so that ultimately other freedoms can be enjoyed at some indeterminate time in the future. State expenditure, according to this dogma, should be directed towards creating an enabling environment for 'growth', and not 'wasted' on the provision of public services that, in any case, can ultimately be provided 'more efficiently' by private enterprise.

These are the mantras that came to be woven through almost every report on economic development since—whether from the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, World Trade Organization, or from bilateral development agencies in the West. This is the 'madness' that Amartya Sen points out, makes socially useful members of society such as school-teachers and health workers feel more threatened by conservative economic policies than do army generals.<sup>31</sup> It is the madness that contributed to social calamities such as the genocide in Rwanda.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> A. Sivanandan, 'Imperialism and disorganic development in the silicon age' *Race & Class* 24: 2, 1979.

<sup>31</sup> Sen, *Development as freedom*.

<sup>32</sup> Firoze Manji, 'The depoliticisation of poverty', in Deborah Eade, ed., *Development and rights* (Oxford: Oxfam, 1998), pp. 12–33.

The indebtedness of African nations gave the multilateral lending agencies the leverage they needed to impose their neo-liberal policy prescriptions, in the spirit of universality, across the board. The Bretton Woods institutions (with the support of the bilateral aid agencies) became the new commanders of post-colonial economies. Through the myriad structural adjustment programmes they initiated throughout the continent they could determine both the goals of development and the means for achieving them. Adjustment legitimized their direct intervention in political decision-making processes. These institutions soon came to determine the extent of involvement that the state should have in the social sector, and insisted on the state imposing draconian economic and social measures that resulted in a rise in unemployment and the decline in real incomes of the majority.<sup>33</sup> The result was to transform and restructure the social basis of power in African countries, strengthening those forces or alliances that would be sympathetic to the continued hegemony of the multilaterals and of the multinationals in the emerging era of 'globalization'.

Today, most commentators agree that the neo-liberal reforms the IMF and the World Bank imposed under adjustment programmes in the 1980s actually caused much of the growth in poverty and inequality we have seen in Africa and Latin America over the past two decades. Externally imposed constraints on health, education and welfare measures and social programmes, tax concessions on profits, liberalization of price controls, and dismantling of state-owned enterprises—all have contributed to widening internal disparities. Several studies have linked adjustment programmes to deteriorating health conditions in Africa and Latin America, pointing to increases in the incidence of child malnutrition, in the growth of infectious disease and in infant and maternal mortality rates.<sup>34</sup>

It would be wrong to suggest that the mass of African people accepted this situation passively. Popular dissatisfaction with adjustment and its related policies led to spontaneous demonstrations. Between 1976 and 1992 there were 146 protests against IMF-supported austerity measures in 39 countries around the world. These took the form of political demonstrations, strikes and riots. They took place almost exclusively in cities and they reached a peak in the mid-1980s.<sup>35</sup> In many cases, the immediate response of governments was brute force. Demonstrations were violently suppressed, strikes declared illegal, universities were closed, and trade unions, student organizations, popular organizations and political parties also became the target of repressive legislation or actions.

However, such widespread opposition also forced the multilateral and bilateral aid agencies to rethink their approach to development promotion, particularly, how to present the same neo-liberal economic and social programmes

<sup>33</sup> B. Campbell, 'Indebtedness in Africa: consequence, cause or symptom of the crisis?', in Bade Onimode, ed., *The IMF, the World Bank and the African debt: the social and political impact* (London: Zed Books, 1989), pp. 17–30.

<sup>34</sup> G. Cornia, G. Jolly and F. Stewart, *Adjustment with a human face* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

<sup>35</sup> John Walton and David Seddon, *Free markets and food riots: the politics of global adjustment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 38–43.

with a more 'human face'.<sup>36</sup> The outcome of these deliberations was the 'good governance' agenda of the 1990s and the decision to co-opt NGOs and other civil society organizations to a repackaged programme of welfare provision, a social initiative that could be more accurately described as a programme of social control.

So, in the 1990s the focus of attention of the international community was placed upon 'good governance', persuading African governments to permit political pluralism in the form of 'multipartyism'. But democratization of the structures of the state had not occurred, and was certainly no longer in the interest of the ruling elites. The state's role in the social sector had been effectively gelded in the process of structural adjustment. State actors' decisive role in determining economic policy had been appropriated by the multilateral institutions and, instead, they found themselves the focus of blame for the failed neo-liberal policies that had previously been imposed upon them by their critics. What was there left that could be offered that might stave off the possibilities of social upheavals? Pluralism in the political arena seemed the only possibility. But, far from legitimizing any struggle for basic rights or for greater accountability of the state and its structures, the result has been to bring into the public domain the seething divisions between sections of the ruling class competing for control of the state. With their constituencies usually in the rural areas, the inevitable consequence was to bring the explosive tensions of tribalism into the urban context.

And what of the welfare initiatives that accompanied the good governance agenda? The bilaterals and multilaterals set aside significant volumes of funds aimed at 'mitigating' the 'social dimensions of adjustment'. The purpose of such programmes was to act as palliatives that might minimize the more glaring inequalities that their policies had perpetuated. Funds were made available to ensure that a so-called 'safety net' of social services would be provided for the 'vulnerable'—but this time not by the state (which had after all been forced to 'retrench' away from the social sector) but by the ever-willing NGO sector.

The availability of such funds for the NGO sector was to have a profound impact on the very nature of that sector.<sup>37</sup> This was a period in which the involvement of Western NGOs in Africa grew dramatically. The number of international NGOs operating in Kenya, for example, increased almost three-fold to 134 organizations during the period from 1978 to 1988.<sup>38</sup>

According to the Overseas Development Institute, NGOs in 1992 distributed somewhere between 10 per cent and 15 per cent of all aid transfers to 'developing countries'.<sup>39</sup> While most of this money comes from private donations a

<sup>36</sup> Cornia, et al., *Adjustment with a human face*, 1987.

<sup>37</sup> International NGO Training and Research Centre, *Direct funding from a southern perspective: strengthening civil society?* (Oxford: International NGO Training and Research Centre, 1998).

<sup>38</sup> P. Osodo and S. Matsvai, *Partners or contractors: the relationship between official agencies and NGOs: Kenya and Zimbabwe*, INTRAC Occasional Papers No 10 (Oxford: INTRAC, 1998), p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Overseas Development Institute Briefing Paper 4: NGOs and official donors, [online archive]. ODI. 1995. Available from: <http://www.oneworld.org/odi/>

significant proportion also comes from official sources. Britain's Department for International Development (DfID) allocates around eight per cent of its aid budget to NGOs. The US government transfers nearly 40 per cent of its aid programme through NGOs. The scale of official funding has increased considerably over the past two decades. In the early 1970s less than two per cent of NGO income came from official donors. By the mid-1990s this figure had risen to 30 per cent. In the ten years between 1984 and 1994, the British Government increased its funding of NGOs by almost 400 per cent to £68.7 million. NGOs in Australia, Finland, Norway and Sweden all saw similar increases in official funding from the early 1980s onwards.<sup>40</sup> As a consequence of increased levels of funding and increased attention, the number of development organizations in Western countries mushroomed and many established NGOs experienced spectacular growth.<sup>41</sup> The number of NGOs active in African countries has grown equally. About 40 per cent of the development NGOs working in Kenya today are foreign organizations, 204 out of a total number of 511 according to the most recent survey.<sup>42</sup>

### **The missionary position or an agenda for emancipation?**

In the era of globalization, African states have increasingly lost the authority to determine both the direction of social development or the content of social policy. Externally imposed constraints on health, education and welfare measures and social programmes, tax concessions on profits, liberalization of price controls, and dismantling of state-owned enterprises—all have contributed to the widening of internal disparities. And faced with the growing dominance of the multinational corporation in the domestic economy, there remain few legitimate ways for the indigenous capitalist class to accumulate. Their choices are limited to either becoming agents of the multinationals, or turning to crime, corruption, drug-trafficking, sex exploitation, illegal migration and illicit arms. As UNDP points out, criminals are 'reaping the benefits of globalisation'. The deregulation of capital markets and developments in information and communications technologies 'make flows easier, faster and less restricted for drug-trafficking, laundering money and weapons'.<sup>43</sup> As the distinction between social organization for criminal activities and for political purposes has become blurred in African society, civilians are increasingly being caught in the crossfire

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Save the Children, for example, saw its annual income grow from £6 million in 1981 to £60 million in 1991. See Chris Dolan, 'British development NGOs and advocacy in the 1990s', in Michael Edwards and David Hulme, eds, *Making a difference: NGOs and development in a changing world* (London: Earthscan, 1993), p. 205. In OECD member countries as a whole, the number of NGOs increased from 1,600 at the beginning of the decade to 2,970 by 1993. David Hulme and Michael Edwards, *NGOs, states and donors: too close for comfort?* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 4.

<sup>42</sup> Osodo and Matsvai, *Partners or contractors*, p. 8.

<sup>43</sup> UNDP, 1998.

or becoming the targets either of armed opposition groups or of the increasingly desperate state machinery.<sup>44</sup>

Continued impoverishment, growing conflicts, the state reneging on its social responsibilities, it is in this arena that development NGOs have been plying their trade. Africa's decline contributes to the continued justification for their work. NGOs will 'do better the less stable the world becomes ... [because] finance will become increasingly available to agencies who can deliver "stabilising" social services'.<sup>45</sup> As African governments increasingly become pushed into becoming caretakers of what might be described as the peripheral Bantustans of globalization, are we seeing a return to the colonial paradigm in which social services are delivered on the basis of favour or charity and their power to placate?

The mass mobilizations that led to the end of colonial rule in Africa were sparked by aspirations for social, economic and political emancipation. The gains of independence have all but been reversed.

When the market goes too far in dominating social and political outcomes, the opportunities and rewards of globalisation spread unequally and inequitably—concentrating power and wealth in a select group of people, nations and corporations, marginalizing the others ... When the profit motives of market players get out of hand, they challenge people's ethics—and sacrifice respect for justice and human rights.<sup>46</sup>

NGOs are acknowledged today as 'the preferred channel for service provision in deliberate substitution for the state'.<sup>47</sup> Official aid agencies have come to expect NGOs to act as a substitute for state welfare programmes, a solution to welfare deficiencies at a time when structural adjustments have hugely increased the extent of welfare needs.

Development NGOs have become an integral, and necessary, part of a system that sacrifices respect for justice and rights. They have taken the 'missionary position'—service delivery, running projects that are motivated by charity, pity and doing things for people (implicitly who can't do it for themselves), albeit with the verbiage of participatory approaches. It would be wrong to present the relationship between Western NGOs and official aid agencies in the 1980s as the product of some conscious conspiracy, as was clearly the case with colonial

<sup>44</sup> In Sierra Leone both the army and the 'rebels' are the main actors in the mining industry. The war in Liberia has become a lucrative venture for illegal mining, drug-trafficking and money-laundering. Angola's protracted war has helped Savimbi and some multinational corporations to extract diamonds from the country: in 1993 alone, Savimbi's rebel group pocketed \$250 million from the mining towns that it controls. The South African mining conglomerate De Beers has admitted to buying diamonds illegally mined in Angola worth some \$500 million. In 1992 alone, money laundered from drugs in war-torn countries amounted to about \$856 million. Mamdani takes this analysis further. He characterizes tribalism as 'civil war' because the 'notion of civil war is a continuum along which muted tensions coexist long before they break out into open confrontation'. Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and subject: contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism* (London: James Currey, 1996), p. 292.

<sup>45</sup> Alan Fowler, *Striking a balance* (London: Earthscan, 1997), p. 229.

<sup>46</sup> UNDP, 2001.

<sup>47</sup> Michael Edwards and David Hulme, eds, *Non-governmental organisations: performance and accountability: beyond the magic bullet* (London: Earthscan, 1995), p. 6.

organizations like MYWO. The pre-condition for NGOs' co-optation to the neo-liberal cause was merely a coincidence in ideologies rather than a purposeful plan. In charitable development, the proponents of neo-liberalism saw the possibility of enforcing the unjust social order they desired by consensual rather than coercive means. The role NGOs have played in expanding and consolidating neo-liberal hegemony in the global context may have been unwitting. It may not have been as direct or as underhand as some of the activities willingly taken up by colonial missionary societies and voluntary organizations. But that is not to say it is any less significant. Indeed, one could argue that it has actually been far more effective.

But the missionary position is not the only option. Local voluntary organizations have consistently expressed doubts about the lack of attention Western NGOs have paid to areas of activity other than overseas development, and have called upon them to intensify their awareness-raising activities at home. As far back as 1986, for example, African NGOs felt it necessary to remind their Western 'partners' of their wider responsibilities in a formal declaration made at the United Nations General Assembly:

We encourage Northern and international NGOs to recognise the linkages of many policies of their governments, corporations and multilateral institutions which their governments heavily influence and which adversely affect the quality of life and political and economic independence of African countries.<sup>48</sup>

NGOs face a stark choice. If they stand in favour of the emancipation of humankind (whether at home or abroad), then the focus of their work has inevitably to be in the political domain, supporting those social movements that seek to challenge a social system that benefits a few and impoverishes the many. The closing years of apartheid in South Africa were illustrative of the choice that NGOs face today: either they supported the emerging popular movements (in South Africa and internationally) that supported the overthrow of a brutal system of exploitation, or they stayed silent and continued their philanthropic work, and became thereby complicit in the crimes of the system of apartheid.

Some consciousness of the need to engage in supporting emancipatory movements has been emerging, even among those Western organizations (such as Oxfam, Save the Children and Christian Aid) for whom development project work has been (and remains) their 'bread-and-butter', as well as among many local NGOs: their involvement in campaigns to end debt, their support for campaigns to protect and promote human rights—these are but some of the examples of work motivated by an emancipatory agenda. Alternatively, they can continue their work in projects that serve, as was the case with their missionary precursors, to shore up those forces that have come to subjugate and miserate the majority.

<sup>48</sup> C. Kajese, 'An agenda of future tasks for international and indigenous NGOs: views from the south', *World Development* 15 (Autumn: 1987) supplement, pp. 79–86, 83–4.



The challenge that both local and Western NGOs face in making this choice will be that funding—at least from the bilateral and multilateral agencies—will not necessarily be forthcoming to support the struggle for emancipation. But then, one would hardly have expected the apartheid regime in South Africa to have funded the movement that brought about its downfall.

