

Collaboration with the South: agents of aid or solidarity?

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In line with other donor countries, the United Kingdom has been channelling a significant proportion of its development aid through non-government organisations (NGOs). As part of a review of the effectiveness of this form of aid, several studies have been commissioned by the British Overseas Development Administration (ODA).¹ The latest study focused on exploring British development NGOs' attitudes to increasing the proportion of aid channelled by the ODA directly to Southern NGOs (Bebbington and Riddell 1995). Based on a questionnaire survey, this study provides a fascinating insight into the British NGO (BINGO) psyche. It suggests that, despite years of exposure to and interactions with the Third World, there remains a considerable deficit of respect and trust for their counterparts in the South.

According to the survey, most (80 per cent) of BINGOs are opposed to aid being channelled directly to Southern NGOs, for a number of reasons. They allege that Southern NGOs

- lack the experience to undertake rigorous monitoring and evaluation of projects;
- lack experience of how to manage projects in accordance with donors' requirements;
- with direct funding, would shift their accountability away from their own constituencies towards donor agencies;
- would become more directly influenced by donor agencies in setting their agenda, and hence more 'donor-driven';
- would eventually revolve more around the availability of money than the meeting of needs;

- would end up filling a void created by a retrenching state;
- would be susceptible to manipulation by donor agencies, and more susceptible to political influence.

In addition, they argue, there would be a loss of the ‘neutrality’ provided by BINGOs; and it would be cheaper to fund projects in the South via BINGOs.

What is striking about this list of reasons against direct funding of Southern NGOs is that, were logic to prevail, most Northern NGOs would not qualify to receive funds from ODA either. Are these characteristics really the exclusive property of Southern NGOs? To what extent are they shared by their Northern counterparts? Let us look at the reasons individually, and then as a whole.

In my experience, very few NGOs — either in the North or the South — can, with all honesty, always claim to demonstrate their extensive experience of monitoring, management, and proper evaluation of projects. Most agencies will admit that virtually all NGO projects fail to demonstrate adequate monitoring and evaluation. Poor management has been the bane of many projects, something that has become increasingly recognised if attendance rates at project-management training courses are anything to go by. Most experienced development NGOs would probably agree that monitoring and evaluation could be improved, and even the long-established BINGOs are frequently criticised for not managing their projects in accordance with the donors’ requirements.

What about accountability? Most BINGOs are non-membership organisations. As such, they are rarely accountable to anyone other than a self-appointed Board. In most cases, even those who contribute regularly to the organisation have no rights to determine its policy or to elect its Trustees. In almost every case, their constituency — if one understands that to mean either those who directly benefit from the projects, or the Southern NGOs — has no rights to determine a BINGO’s policy or practice. So how accountable are BINGOs? Certainly, they are required to be accountable ‘upwards’ to their donors, an accountability for which there are both structural mechanisms and rights embodied in the grant documents (if not in law). But such mechanisms are seldom accorded to their Southern partners (or their beneficiaries). Would it not, therefore, be fair to say that, for the majority of BINGOs, accountability has long ago shifted away from their constituencies towards the donor agencies? Have BINGOs perhaps not been interested in establishing structural mechanisms that could increase, over time, the degree to which they could become accountable to their Southern counterparts?

How many BINGOs have, for example, representatives of their Southern counterpart organisations on their Board of Trustees? That this is more the exception than the rule speaks volumes about their concern for ensuring their own ‘downward’ accountability.

Can BINGOs really claim to be immune from the influence of donor agencies? Are they not guilty not only of being driven by these but also, in turn, of setting and influencing the agenda of their Southern counterparts — with whom, let us be clear, they have a donor-recipient relationship? Looking at the kinds of projects and programmes in which BINGOs have been involved over the last three decades, it is clear that the focus of their attention shifts with the trends and fancies of the donor agencies. Project proposals and reports, for example, mimic the latest jargon (‘modernism’, ‘environment’, ‘sustainable development’, ‘civil society’ and so on) on which ODA has decided to focus. When donor agencies hold the money, is it surprising that NGOs are prone to being driven by their agenda?

Do BINGOs always respond to need, rather than to the source of potential funding? Looking at the proportion of ODA’s funds which have moved from the poorest parts of the world towards, for example, Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, a shift equally reflected in the funding profiles of many NGOs, many observers might feel that need tends to be a neglected parameter for determining priorities. Wherein lies the justification for the claim that British development NGOs are any more likely than Southern NGOs to respond to needs rather than chasing after money?

As for filling the void of a retrenching state, one needs only look at the British indigenous NGO scene over the last decade. As successive governments have clawed back social expenditure, numerous charities have ardently rushed to fill the vacuum. Is there any evidence that Southern NGOs are any more prone to this phenomenon than their British counterparts?

Claims that British NGOs are somehow more ‘neutral’ than Southern ones are hard to take seriously, and suggest a depth of paternalism that is surprising at this end of the twentieth century. Like their missionary precursors one hundred years ago, British NGOs have for years played, and continue to play, a less than neutral role with respect to the interests of British foreign policy, of which overseas development assistance is not an insignificant part. BINGOs have their own biases and prejudices, as this survey so clearly demonstrates. Just because these prejudices are so widely held does not mean they should be taken to represent a form of neutrality. The tragedy may be, if BINGOs tend to be neutral, it is frequently in relation to the less than benign role of British imperial policies.

The arguments advanced by British NGOs against direct funding hide a more profound discomfort. I believe this may be an expression of the primordial fear among some BINGOs that if donor agencies start funding Southern organisations directly, their own future is at risk: it is the *cri du coeur* of the dinosaur facing potential extinction. It is tempting to draw the conclusion that the *raison d'être* for development may no longer be to build sustainable development and institutions in the South, but rather to keep the home team going. Direct funding of Southern NGOs does, of course, represent a direct threat to the survival of Northern NGOs in their present form. What is required, surely, is a discussion about what the new role of Northern NGOs should be in an era where Southern NGOs are fully able — at least to the same degree as BINGOs — to manage funds provided directly to them by donors.

Are there not also good reasons to question the commitment, capacity, and willingness of British NGOs to 'build capacity' in the South? The results of this survey suggest that, after more than 50 years of 'development', British NGOs feel that they have signally failed to build viable, independent, sustainable Southern institutions, institutions capable of managing donor agencies' attempts to manipulate them, able to run programmes effectively and carry out rigorous monitoring and evaluation. If this is so, what exactly has been the purpose of their activities over the last few decades? Are we to assume that pronouncing a commitment to 'sustainable development' and institutional capacity building is just public relations for the benefit of the 'punter' whose contributions are being sought?

This raises a serious issue: is it feasible for an organisation to be effective in institutional capacity building if, at the same time, its relationship with its Southern counterpart is mediated through money? From the perspective of most Southern NGOs, there may be, in effect, little difference between dealing with ODA and dealing with a Northern NGO, since in both cases the relationship is one of donor-recipient. No matter how sympathetic the donor may be, the fact that the Northern NGO is the one with the money means that the Southern NGO must be the one with the begging bowl. No matter how good the personal relationship between the Northern NGO and the Southern NGO, the latter must accept the humiliation of being the receiver of charity. Perforce, there is a relationship of unequals. And inequality never built capacity: it nurtures dependence; it establishes the material basis for dancing to the tune of the donor.

My purpose here is not to argue the case for or against direct funding of Southern NGOs by ODA. But I am deeply uneasy about the underlying motives of BINGOs that lead them to oppose such funding. What is perhaps

more disturbing is the lack of critical assessment of ODA's policies, especially in assessing the extent to which BINGOs are themselves being used by the British State in the same way that they fear Southern NGOs might be used if the money were channelled to them directly. Five hundred years of British good will in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World has been characterised by pillage, slavery, genocide, colonisation, and more recently a development paradigm that results in more wealth flowing from the South to the North than the other way around (aid budgets notwithstanding). And this is to say nothing of the support and arms provided to despots and dictators. By now, one would have thought a healthy scepticism about British foreign policy and development aid would be the norm. Perhaps BINGOs should be looking at how they themselves might be being used and manipulated by donor funds, just as they so perspicaciously highlight the risks faced by Southern NGOs.

What is needed today is a greater reflection by Northern NGOs on the nature of their relationship with their Southern counterparts. If we are seriously committed to the struggle to eliminate poverty and injustice and their causes, then we need to assess the degree to which the nature of that relationship may be hampering rather than enhancing our common goals. We need to examine how to build alliances with Southern NGOs that are based on solidarity, not charity. We need to look at whether we are being used, albeit unconsciously, by aid agencies to achieve ends that subvert rather than promote those values we hold dear. We need to question whether the overall effect of British aid has indeed led to improving the conditions of the poor in the South, and, if not, after all these years of trying, to ask why. We need to explore ways in which we can be as accountable to our Southern partners as we expect them to be to us. And we need to break away from the tradition of paternalism which has been so lucidly revealed in the recent study. To do otherwise is to risk becoming the agents of aid.

Note

1 Since this article was first published, ODA has been superseded by DFID, Department for International Development.

Reference

Bebbington, A. and R. Riddell (1995), *Donors, Civil Society and Southern NGOs: new agendas, old problems*, London: IIED/ODA.

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