

# RIGHTS, POVERTY AND DEVELOPMENT: NGOs AND THE DEPOLITICISATION OF POVERTY

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The year 1998 marks the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Born out of the triumph against genocide in Europe, the anniversary occurs in the aftermath of genocide in Africa that claimed the lives of more than a million men, women and children in the space of nine months. It was a tragedy made more painful by the criminal failure of the international community to take actions to prevent its occurrence or to deal effectively with its aftermath.

Reflecting on the achievements of the last 50 years, some might be forgiven for feeling that there is little to celebrate about UDHR. That is not to say that we have not had our victories over that period. But in spite of them, the current conditions of the people of the third world are desperate. The social gains of independence from colonial rule have been rapidly eroded as economies collapse under the combined weight of debt and structural adjustment programmes. Meanwhile the rich get richer, the poor poorer. While the average income of the top 20% of the world's population was 30 times that of the bottom 20% in 1960, by 1994 it was 78 times. Nearly one quarter of the world's people have an income that is less than \$1 a day - a proportion that is rising. The UN Development Programme calculates each year the human poverty index based on a series of measures including the prevalence of illiteracy, life expectancy, degree of malnourishment, and access to health services and safe water. In 1996 over a billion people fell below this measure, the position worsening in 30 countries, the worst figures since UNDP began calculating the index in 1990. Development, it seems, is failing.

The anniversary occurs in the context also of increasing number of conflicts in Africa. Such conflicts are frequently portrayed as being the result of apparent "irreconcilable ethnic differences" that not only pervade the continent today, but are also viewed as intrinsic to the history of the continent. Mass human rights violations are seen, therefore, as an "inevitable", if regrettable, consequence of these "ethnic" conflicts.

Growing impoverishment, conflict and the increasing number of apparently ethnic-based violence have a common origin. They are the products of a process that began as popular mobilisation against oppression and exploitation -- a movement for rights -- that ultimately became warped into a process that became known as "development". Far from helping to overturn the social relations that reproduced injustice and impoverishment, the main focus of development was to discover and implement solutions that would enable the victims to cope with, or find "sustainable" solutions for living with, impoverishment. Over the last few decades development NGOs have played a critical role in that process. Their roles have gradually

changed from an embryonic anti-imperialism to becoming an integral part of post-colonial social formations.

Africa is a lens that discloses the general characteristics of development. The features are not particular to that continent. They are to be found also in Asia and Latin America, albeit tinted by the specific histories of those regions. By focusing on Africa, the complex inter-relationships between rights, poverty and development can be revealed with the knowledge that those in Asia and Latin America will find the resonance of sounds that speak to their own experience.

This paper discusses the historical processes that transformed the struggle for rights in Africa into an arena for a particular model of development. That model itself is, it is argued, the cause of some of the major conflicts that have arisen in Africa, including those that led to the genocide in Central Africa. The role of NGOs in the depoliticisation of poverty is examined in the context of these developments.

### ***From rights to "development"***

The story of independence in Africa is frequently portrayed as the story of the machinations of nationalist leaders in mobilising popular agitations against the colonial powers and their prowess at the negotiation tables. What is frequently omitted in that account is the story of what was happening on the ground, in the forests, villages, urban ghettos, classrooms and in workplaces, in spite of -- not because of -- the nationalist leaders.

The period following the Second World War witnessed an unprecedented level of popular mobilisations and the formation of numerous popular organisations throughout the continent. Such developments were informed at the grassroots not so much (at least, not initially) by desires for abstract concepts of self-determination, but more around struggles for basic rights that were part of everyday experiences of the majority. The initial spark for most people was provided by the desire to organise around the right to food, shelter, water, land, education and health care; around the right to freedom of association, freedom of speech, freedom of movement, freedom from harassment and other forms of human rights abuses. Different groups within society organised around issues with which they were themselves most preoccupied -- aspiring local capitalists organising around restraints on their freedom to accumulate, while squatters organised around their rights of access to land.

It was these numerous civil agitations (urban and rural) that provided the impetus to the liberation movements. Political independence was achieved through the ability of the leadership of the nationalist movements to capture the imagination of these formations, uniting them in the promise that only through self-determination and independence could all their aspirations be achieved.

The struggle for independence in Africa was thus informed, at the base, by the experience of struggles against oppression and brutal exploitation experienced in

every day life. These struggles constituted the emergence of a tradition of struggles for rights that was organic to and informed by the specific histories and experiences of those involved. Just as the bourgeois revolution that brought the capitalist class into ascendancy in Europe led to the emergence of a particular construct of rights proclaimed against the *ancien regime*, so Africa's struggle against the colonial yoke gave birth to its own traditions of struggle and the construct of rights. The concept of rights was not something that was "God-given" in its universality, but forged in the fires of anti-imperialist struggles. It was informed by the need to overthrow all forms (not just colonial) of oppression and exploitation, not by constructs that had either been embodied in the UDHR or imported into Africa by those nationalist leaders who had spent periods in exile or study in the imperial homeland.

These struggles laid the basis in many countries for the emergence of a national consciousness that would provide some legitimacy to the nation state that was about to be established. But that dynamic was not to be permitted to reach its logical conclusion. While the liberation struggles had begun the process of forging a common national identity, this identity remained fragile at the time of hand-over of power, even in those countries (such as Mozambique, Angola and Guinea Bissau) which had to undergo protracted wars of liberation.

Once thrown into power, the nationalist leadership (comprised usually of representatives of the newly emerging middle class) saw its task as one of preventing "centrifugal forces" from competing for political power or seeking greater autonomy from the newly formed "nation". Having grasped political self-determination from colonial authority, it was reluctant to accord the same rights to others. The new occupiers of the state machinery saw their role as the "sole developer" and "sole unifier" of society. The state defined for itself an interventionist role in "modernisation" and a centralising and controlling role in the political realm.

Born out of a struggle for the legitimacy of pluralism against a hegemonic colonial state, social pluralism began to be frowned upon. The popular associations that had thrown the nationalist leadership into power gradually began to be seen as an obstacle to the new god of "development". No longer was there a need, it was argued, for popular participation in determining the future. The new governments would bring development to the people. The new government, they claimed, represented the nation and everyone in it. Now that political independence had been achieved, the priority was "development". Social and economic improvements would come with patience and as a result of combined national effort involving all classes ("harambee", in Kenyatta's famous slogan). In this early period after independence, civil and political rights soon came to be seen as a "luxury", to be enjoyed at some unspecified time in the future when "development" had been achieved. For the present, said many African presidents, "our people are not ready" - mirroring, ironically, the same arguments used by the former colonial rulers against the nationalists' cries for independence a few years earlier.

In the colonial era, Government social services for Africans were almost non-existent. Where they were provided, the purpose was largely to ensure the integrity of the structures of colonial rule. In periods of serious outbreaks of epidemics in the

shantytowns and overcrowded ghettos, health services were provided principally to stave off the possibilities of infections spreading into white society. In some instances, limited education was provided when certain basic skills would be necessary for the administration of the colony or for the particular forms of exploitation. For the vast majority of the rural population, it was left to a clutch of charities and missionary groups (what in today's jargon would be recognised as NGOs) to exchange their spiritual wares for material support in education, health or other social services. For white settlers or the agents of colonial rule, however, state expenditure on the social sector was usually generous. Although on the eve of independence there were to be significant changes in the extent to which investments were to be made in the social sectors, for the most part the state's function in these sectors was to provide only for a minority.

The situation was to change dramatically at independence. It remains one of the most remarkable, and yet least acknowledged, achievements of independence governments that within the space of but a few years, access to health services and to education was to become effectively universal. No matter how much one may criticise the forms of services provided, it is a tribute to the capacity of the state to implement such far-reaching social programmes. While NGOs may today debate and shower praises on each other about their own capacities to "scale up", the new governments at independence implemented programmes of "scaling-up" in a manner that no NGO has ever dared to think of. The impact of these interventions are undeniable and were to be reflected in the subsequent dramatic changes in average life expectancy, in infant and child mortality rates, and in the improvements in nutritional status of the young. Huge 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. 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.

But at the same time as this infrastructure was being built (often with the financial support of official aid agencies), a transformation had taken place which led to a demobilisation of the popular movement that had given rise to independence. Popular organisations that had emerged out of the struggle for rights (social, political, economic or civil) were provided no further role in the process. Rights were no longer the flag around which the oppressed could rally. Indeed, the concept of rights was codified and rarefied in laws and constitutions whose relevance or application was determined by the self-proclaimed, and increasingly unaccountable, guardians of the state. A gradual shift took place where concerns about rights and justice were replaced by concerns about "development". Certainly there were major problems faced by the newly independent states in addressing how the forces of production (whether industrial or agricultural) could be developed to drag Africa out of the destitution created by colonial rule. But the discourse was not about development in the sense of developing the productive forces. It was about creating an infrastructure that advanced the capacity of the new ruling class to accumulate and smoothing those inefficiencies that hampered the capacity of international capital to continue its exploitation of the country. It was expected that, through trickle-down effects, poverty would gradually be eliminated. This was the agenda of

"modernisation", the paradigm of development that was to hold sway until the end of the 1970s.

Central to this paradigm was to cast "poverty", rather than rights and freedom, as the main problem facing "developing countries". The victims of years of injustices, whose livelihoods had been destroyed by years of colonial rule, were now defined as "the problem", and once so defined provided the stage set for the entry of the development NGO to participate in the process of depoliticising poverty. In Kenya, for example, peasants had been uprooted from their land and forced to eke out a living in marginal land with low yield potential and which required immense labour to produce. The new paradigm required that ways be found to enable them to find sustainable (and participatory) approaches for surviving on such land. The need for carrying out land reform that would overcome the injustices created by colonialism was gradually forgotten.

The structures of accountability and democracy that were inherent in the movements centred on rights were gradually marginalised and replaced by the ascendancy of the expert supported by bureaucratic and centralised decision making under the guise of "national planning". Political associations were soon to be discouraged, if not actually banned, while trade unions were constrained, incorporated into the structures of the ruling party, or simply disbanded. In many countries those structures that had emerged to organise around basic rights had all been either subsumed under "development" or discarded within ten years of independence. The political hegemony of the new post-independence rulers had been asserted. Their capacity to attend to the "basic needs" of the population gave them some legitimacy and allowed, in some instances, reasonable national cohesion. But the development of national consciousness, born fragile and imperfectly in the struggle for rights in the 1950s & 1960s, began to lose sustenance, its life-blood dissipating. The age of the development expert, the relief expert, and subsequently the conflict resolution expert, had arrived.

It is true that, in the early period, there had been a fairly broad moral and humane discourse. Nyerere, Senghor, Kaunda, Houphouët Boigny and others articulated their ideas on development or socialism usually in moral terms, with a discourse about African socialism being about sharing, solidarity and the common good. But in practice, appeals to morality failed to address the structural issues related to the integration of the economies into the international economic order which continued, albeit in a new form, to extract wealth out of Africa into the hands of multinationals in the imperial heartland. It also failed to deal with the fact that those in control of the state and its organs had discovered that power and access provided by the state machinery was a significant source of wealth and private accumulation. While those like Nyerere sought to control the capacity of functionaries from using the state as a source of accumulation, in many other countries such restraint was largely unknown. Access to the state as a source or means for accumulation of private wealth became an end in itself amongst the elite, the emerging ruling class. Favour, patronage, and frank corruption was seen as a means for limiting competition to the honey pot. And in many cases, the most cohesive force able to compete for access to the state was the armed forces. Certainly in West and Central Africa, coups d'État became (and

sadly remain) commonplace.

But the "misuse" of the state was to become a critical factor in the distortions brought to the development agenda. Patronage was used frequently to buy favours with different groups in the country. The purpose of development programmes was distorted to ensure progress was brought not to where there was the greatest social or economic need. Instead it was brought to where investment would serve the need to curry favour with particular social or "ethnic" groups whose political alliance was deemed useful at a particular time and where the possibilities for private accumulation by the elite were greatest. Under such conditions, it was hardly surprising that competition for access to resources increasingly manifested themselves along "ethnic" lines. With the demise or suppression of organisations based on the struggle for rights, old social alliances based on perceived historical grievances against other "ethnic" groups re-emerged. The seeds of subsequent conflicts were already taking root.

### ***The emergence of the post-colonial state***

The state in contemporary Africa inherited many of the features of its colonial predecessor. The repressive nature of colonial legislation, of the judiciary, and the coercive machinery of the state, is well documented. Colonial governance was authoritarian and racist. Its strategy was one of divide and rule accompanied by uneven development.

After an initial zealotry which resulted in confrontations with pre-existing structures of African societies, colonial powers focused their attention on finding mechanisms for maintaining power through the manipulation and recasting of existing "customary" structures or dominant tribes that would defend or reinforce their own control. The complex inter-relations between and within different social formations that had emerged over thousands of years were cynically transformed, fossilised or re-constituted into a caricature of their traditional structures. Those "customary" leaders that were compliant to the needs of the invading European State, be it for slavery, for Africa's rich mineral wealth, for agricultural production, or as an outlet for over-production of commodities in Europe, were nurtured and delegated power to maintain order on their behalf. "Decentralised despotism," to use Mamdani's brilliant characterisation, involved the extensive use of Native Authorities to both define and enforce custom, backed up by the armed might of the central state, as the means for controlling, governing and exploiting rural peasantry. The colonial order made it necessary for the state to direct, even if through a combination of brute force and market forces, all spheres of life and to control the economy and the people in the interest of colonial exploitation. In the process, most fundamental human rights were frequently violated. Even after the adoption of UDHR in 1948, most of Africa was to be *de facto* excluded for at least a further decade from claiming the rights of humanity that were proclaimed in that declaration.

Although those who commanded the state changed hands at independence, the structures of the state machinery were rarely transformed in any substantial or

radical way. Already intimately integrated into the capitalist world economy before independence, there were to be no major shifts in the forms of production established within the country, nor changes to the terms of trade with the advanced capitalist countries. The economic framework of "underdevelopment" was left unchanged. Despite much flag waving and pontificating about socialism (and in some cases about "Marxism-Leninism"), the social relations of production remained firmly within the framework of the capitalist world economy.

The political programme that was carried out with considerable determination in virtually every country was to deracialise both the state and the public domain. Racially determined privilege was thoroughly overhauled, opening up new opportunities for the ascendant middle classes for private accumulation, creating the basis upon which favour and corruption would in due course flourish. But that process was primarily to change the face of urban life and urban civil society.

The structures of ethnically defined Native Authorities that constituted a critical leg of imperial domination before independence was, however, largely left intact in most countries. The deracialisation of urban life without a concurrent detribalisation of rural authority was to become the critical dichotomy of post-colonial political economy, and would be the source of major conflicts in future. For

"... Without a reform in the local state, the peasantry locked up under the hold of a multiplicity of ethnically defined Native Authorities could not be brought into the mainstream of the historical process. In the absence of democratization, development became a top-down agenda enforced on the peasantry. Without thoroughgoing democratization, there would be no development of the home market. The latter failure opened wide what was a crevice at independence. With every downturn in the international economy, the crevice turned into an opportunity for an externally defined structural adjustment that combined a narrowly defined program of privatization with a broadly defined program of globalisation. The result was both an internal privatization that recalled the racial imbalance that was civil society in the colonial period and an externally managed capital inflow that towed alongside a phalanx of expatriates -- according to the UN estimates, more now than in the colonial period."

### ***Structural adjustment and the rise of conflicts***

The economic crisis that emerged out of the "oil crisis" was characterised by a huge glut of capital. Europe and America were suddenly awash with capital with few opportunities for high rates of return. Although many African countries already had heavy debts, there is little doubt that the surfeit of capital created by the oil crisis provided a qualitative encouragement to increase the debt burden. As a result, developing countries were courted to take loans to finance "development". Although the absolute size of debt of sub-Saharan African countries was relatively small in proportion to the external indebtedness of developing countries, the size of the debt (and the cost of servicing that debt) in relation to the resources and productive capacity of these African countries were significantly large.

But that glut was short-lived. Coinciding with the period of the emerging technological revolution in microcomputers and in gene technology that attracted capital to new fields where the rates of profit were likely to be substantial, the 1980s saw significant increases in the cost of borrowing. As interest rates rose, and debtor countries were suddenly faced with servicing the interest on loans that absorbed the ever-greater proportions of export earnings. Debt had now the central issue of "concern" in development circles.

The Bretton Woods institutions that, in the post-war period, had invested so heavily to ensure the resuscitation of economies of Europe, became the new commanders of third world economies. A clutch of social and economic policies that came to be known as structural adjustment programmes were applied, in the spirit of universality, across the board. The social and political impact of these policies were to position the multilateral lending agencies (with the support of the bilateral aid agencies) where they could determine both the goals of development and the means for achieving them. It legitimised their direct intervention in political decision-making processes, enabling them, for example, to set the levels of producer and consumer prices. These institutions literally determined 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. 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.

These measures had the effect of exacerbating the divisions between the "haves" and the "have-nots", between those who, for political or for reasons of patronage, received benefits and those who did not. And the old, discredited theories of "trickle-down" now ardently promoted by the IMF and World Bank, were embraced as the only legitimate way of enjoying the fruits of independence. Popular dissatisfaction with the policies of the government led in the 1980s to spontaneous demonstrations, burning of crops, wildcat strikes, and similar expressions of discontent. Universities were closed, demonstrations brutally suppressed, strikes declared illegal. Trade unions, student organisations, popular organisations, and political parties became the target of repressive legislation or actions.

Such widespread opposition resulted in some rethinking by official aid agencies and the multilaterals about how to present the same economic and social programmes with a more "human face". Significant volumes of funds were set aside aimed at "mitigating" the "social dimensions of adjustment". The aim of such programmes was to act as palliatives that might minimise the more glaring inequalities that their policies had perpetuated. Funds were made available to ensure that social services for the "vulnerable" would be provided - 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.



### ***"When elephants fight the grass gets trampled"***

The material basis for the rise of conflicts in Africa had been laid. A popular movement that had once organised itself around the struggle for rights and justice had been demobilised either through repression or by redirecting its attention to the apparently neutral territory of "development". The process of democratisation of the colonial state had been limited to deracialisation of urban civil society, while the rural peasantry remained constricted within the structures of Native Authority established under colonialism. The development process itself had become as source of accumulation and patronage. Structural adjustment programmes exacerbated social differentiation. As the pie got smaller with the debt crisis and the deteriorating terms of trade, so the state became more repressive. And just as had happened in the 1920s in another era, in the rural areas numerous religious and quasi-religious organisations, sects and other such movements emerged as the source of social solidarity, some entirely based on ethnic membership, others more diverse. And in the urban centres, the only tolerated form of organisation became the network of criminal organisation that rooted themselves in the periurban ghettos of Africa's cities.

With the collapse of the Berlin Wall, the credibility of movements offering an alternative ideology to the Thatcherite "get-rich-quick-beggar-thy-neighbour" capitalism also collapsed. Opposition was no longer a function of alternative ideas or policies or about of who could enhance development, but now an open and frank fight in the market place for economic hegemony. The collapse of ideology led thus to the legitimisation of ruthless competition, competition that was, in the absence of legitimate mechanisms for constraint or credible state machinery able to mediate the competition, increasingly conducted by the most ruthless means, and in some cases (e.g. Sierra Leone, Liberia) using military means. The distinction between social organisation for criminal activities and for political purposes became blurred. Civilians became increasingly caught in the crossfire or as the targets either of armed opposition groups or of the increasingly desperate state machinery. Arrest and imprisonment of political opponents, once a critical focus for international protest against the despotic state, had now become a less frequently used form of repression. Instead, disappearances, political killings and extrajudicial executions were the order of the day

The late 1980s also saw the re-emergence of the mass movement in South Africa from its brutal crushing in the 1960s and 1970s. The South African economy was paralysed, as were its political institutions. All eyes were turned south: everyone expected an explosion, a social revolution that would shake the continent. Legitimisation of political opposition and deracialisation of civil society in South Africa was the cry of the international community, the only way to prevent the threat of social upheavals. But if political opposition and the freedoms of civil society were to be legitimised in one part of the continent, why not elsewhere?

So, in the 1990s, the focus of attention of the international community was placed upon persuading African governments to permit political pluralism in the form of

"multipartyism". Democratisation 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, and its decisive role in determining economic policy had been appropriated by the multilateral institutions. 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 legitimising 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.

If the development process has become about who gets access to what, then civil war is but a continuation of that process by other, albeit more destructive, means. Civil war has frequently become the inexorable outcome of development process itself. 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 illegally mined diamonds in Angola worth some \$500 million. In 1992 alone, money laundered from drugs in war torn countries amounted to about \$856 million.

The conflict which took place in Rwanda in 1994, resulting in the massacre of a million people in less than nine months, was a human catastrophe of immense proportions. But its underlying causes are a tragic example of the consequences of the combination of the factors that have been referred to above. The collapse of the International Coffee Agreement had a devastating effect on more than 70% of households in the country, and Rwandan farmers expressed their anger and frustration in 1992 by cutting down some 3000 coffee trees. This exacerbated the tensions that had been fuelled by the attempted invasion of the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF). The government read the political mood and understood that its legitimacy was being challenged. In desperation it became more repressive, disseminating hate propaganda against the supposed "enemy", the Tutsi, and encouraging systematic killings and violations against any who they defined as being Tutsi or the allies of Tutsi. The defence component of the government's already over-stretched budget increased substantially, the size of the army being increased from a mere 5000 to over 40,000 soldiers. That was the context in which the World Bank insisted on the implementation of its standard package of social and economic policies of reducing public expenditure, privatisation, retrenchment, and making people pay more for health and education. The effect was to increase the burden on the majority of Rwandese, 85% of whom were living below the poverty line. In the context of the disintegration of fragile political institutions, the political impasse within the government itself over the Arusha Accords that proposed power sharing with the RPF, anything could have triggered off the conflict. And that indeed happened when the presidential plane was shot down in April 1994.

## ***NGOs and the depoliticisation of poverty***

What, then, has been the role of the non-governmental development agencies in this turbulent history?

It was, for sure, the postcolonial state that actively suppressed popular struggles for rights, and redirected attention, with the support of multilateral and bilateral official aid agencies, to the politically safer terrain of "development". Development NGOs have, nevertheless, played a pivotal role in the processes that accompanied modernisation that led to the depoliticisation of poverty. Indeed, they have become such an integral component of the political economy of underdevelopment that they are now part of a system that contributes to the reproduction of impoverishment.

Development NGOs will vehemently claim that their work in developing countries is neutral. This assumption of neutrality probably has its origins in the heroic work that NGOs have frequently performed in response to crises. Under such circumstances, NGOs have adopted the essential humanitarian principle that all those affected by disasters should be treated equally and receive assistance equally. Humanitarian responses should take no sides in conflicts. The problem arises when these same principles have been applied in non-crisis conditions such as those that prevail in "development" programmes or, in conditions of prolonged crises especially where, for example as in Somalia, the state itself has long ago collapsed. Why should that be so?

One of the most important roles that the state performs in any society is to guarantee the conditions for the reproduction of those social relations that enable the ruling class to continue to rule. If the state fails in that essential function, then the future of the ruling class itself is threatened. The new ruling classes of post-colonial Africa soon learned the importance of that - and those who were slow to learn were quickly swept aside by coups d'État or civil war.

"Development" (or the political economy, more precisely) as defined by the ruling class was the process that would be used to ensure the reproduction of the required social relations that reproduced impoverishment and injustice for the many, and rapid accumulation of wealth for the few. But is there a space wherein NGOs can carry out their charitable work without "taking sides" in the process of reproduction of these social relations? I believe not. The fact is that many NGOs have, unwittingly or willingly, inserted themselves over the last few decades as part of the very infrastructure of the political economy that reproduces the unequal social relations of post-colonial Africa.

That has not always been the case. In the period of anti-colonial struggles many NGOs actively participated in solidarity movements or in supporting directly anti-imperialist organisations. Their participation in such activities was informed by their (albeit intuitive) understanding that existing social relations of colonial rule needed to be overthrown. The same was also true of those NGOs who participated in the anti-

apartheid movement or supported the work of the Mass Democratic Movement in South Africa prior to the release of Nelson Mandela.

But with independence, the dilemma that NGOs faced (and one that many have faced in South Africa recently) was a difficult one: the *ancien régime* had been overthrown. The conditions for its reproduction had been destroyed. Surely the role of NGOs should now be to participate in the process of ensuring the reproduction of the new regime, the new social order? And surely, the answer to that should be in the affirmative? But only, I believe, in so far as the new social order was not intent on the perpetuation of old or the creation a new injustices or forms of exploitation.

But how were NGOs to know how things would turn out in the future?

Caught in the torrent of upheavals that characterised the victory over colonialism (and against apartheid), it was easy to become romantic and blinkered by one's own enthusiasm. It was hardly surprising that many NGOs became closely involved in "bringing development to the people" in the newly independent countries. But the real problem was that the dominant discourse on development was framed not in the language of rights and justice, but with the vocabulary of charity, technical expertise, neutrality, and a deep paternalism (albeit accompanied by the rhetoric of participatory development) which was its syntax..

This was a period in which the involvement of Northern NGOs in Africa grew dramatically. The number of international NGOs operating in Kenya, for example, increased almost three-fold to 134 organisations during the period 1978 to 1988. Most of the northern NGOs preoccupied themselves with "projects" that would benefit "the poor" and whose main purpose was to bring "development". This process took place in the context of the efforts of the new regimes seeking to demobilise the popular movement. Official sanction for their projects was provided not just from central government, but also from local authority structures in the rural areas -- the native authority that had been formerly established by colonial rule and subsequently reinforced by the new state. Sanction from these authorities served to reinforce their own legitimacy.

As repression of those who were seen to be political opponents became a feature of the new state centralising its control, many NGOs chose to remain silent about that creeping repression. Protest against repression of political opponents was largely left to (northern) human rights organisations. The dilemma faced by NGOs was that such protests could jeopardise the grants that they received from the official aid agencies (who, certainly until the mid-1980s, rarely sought to comment on the excesses of African governments). NGOs, especially the Northern ones, also feared that protest could jeopardise their own relationship with the national government to whom they were beholden for a range of privileges (tax or duty exemptions etc.). There was little point, some argued, in making a fuss since "it would only be the poor who would suffer as a result".

Over time, their role evolved from their anti-colonial past to becoming one of the central actors in the process of development itself. NGOs, especially those from the

North, began to insert themselves as vital cogs in the new political economy, the vehicles through which an increasing proportion of development programmes were implemented. They were armed with manuals and all the technical know-how for focusing the attention of "the poor" on 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). Most remained unconscious that that was the very system that reproduced the impoverishment, injustice and conflict, which the NGOs claimed it was their mission was to abolish.

Their insertion was effectively completed in the era of structural adjustment. This era witnessed the retrenching state absolving itself of the responsibility for providing social services, while investing in the growth of the private sector. The number of NGOs, the private entrepreneur *par excellence* in the public sector, once again expanded (with the encouragement of lavish sums available from aid agencies) in its new role as subcontractor to the official aid agencies for the delivery of social services. They became the "human face" of adjustment itself. And as aid budgets in the North declined, and as greater volumes of funds were made available through direct funding, so Northern NGOs sought to accommodate to the new environment by legally registering themselves as "local NGOs" the better to tap the vast sums available locally. One of the effects of the latter has been to transform the Northern NGO from being a donor/supporter of local NGOs, to becoming a direct competitor for aid funds in the local market. In the meantime, hundreds of local NGOs were established whose sole purpose was to become the subcontractors for the provision of social services that would mitigate the effects of adjustment for the "vulnerable" or "poorest of the poor".

The field of development had become "big business", requiring an entourage of experts committed to the goal of making the unsustainable sustainable. By the 1990s, many of the larger Northern NGOs had begun a process of recomposition ("restructuring"). This process led to the establishment of formations that were similar the transnational corporation of the private sector. New forms of multinational structures and an internationalisation of the "brand" have become the features of that recomposition, mimicking in the NGO sectors the forms of globalisation that GATT and the World Trade Organisation legitimised in the private. The multinational or transnational NGO came into existence whose sole purpose was the effective delivery of aid with the forms of "professionalism" required by the official aid agencies. It raised funds on the basis of the global brand-name whose image had become well established amongst the official aid agencies and multinational corporations as the guarantor or stability and reliability -- the trustworthy depoliticiser of poverty.

And in the process, concerns about the rights of the vast majority of the population, their search for freedom from oppression and exploitation, had become peripheral. Northern NGOs in particular were now more preoccupied with fundraising on the basis of portraying Africans as the subject of pity and whose plight would be relieved through acts of charity. In the region, this approach served to demobilisation and disillusion. In the North, the public's prejudices were reinforced about Africa as

hopeless, as mere victims of endless civil war, and as passive recipients of Northern charity..

But was it inevitable that NGOs would become so thoroughly integrated in to the political economy of Africa as to become partners in the reproduction of social relations that give rise to impoverishment and conflict? Is it inevitable that they will continue to do so?

The cynical view is perhaps that the development NGO has long ago developed a vested interest in the continued reproduction of such social relations, and that they will "do better the less stable the world becomes ... [because] ... finance will become increasingly available to agencies who can deliver 'stabilising' social services."

I believe that the option exists for NGOs to chose otherwise if they recognise that there is no "neutral" ground, no "no-man's land" in the process of development. Those who believe there is neutral territory frequently become prey to the agendas of other social forces. They would do well to reflect on the following excerpt from a USAID review that was quoted by Nelson Mandela in his recent report to the ANC Congress:

"Two-thirds of [US]AID's funding ... is used to fund AID-dependent NGOs ... The Old 'struggle NGOs' have been redesignated by AID as 'civil service organisations' (or CSOs). AID now funds CSOs to 'monitor public policy, provide information, and advocate policy alternatives' and to serve as 'sentinels, brokers and arbiters for the public will.' The purpose of AID's funding is to enable these CSOs to 'function as effective policy advocacy groups' and 'to lobby'... Through its NGOs, AID intends to play a key role in domestic policy concerning the most difficult, controversial issues of national politics. AID's political agenda is ambitious and extensive."

The choice is thus a stark one: either play the role (unwittingly or otherwise) of reinforcing those social relations that reproduce impoverishment, injustice and conflict. Or, make the choice to play a positive role in supporting those processes in society that will overturn those social relations.

If NGOs are to play a positive role, then it will need to be based on two premises: solidarity and rights.

Solidarity is not about fighting other people's battles. It is about establishing co-operation between different constituencies on the basis on mutual self-respect and concerns about the injustices suffered by each. It is about taking sides in the face of injustice or the processes that reproduce injustice. It is not built on sympathy or charity or the portrayal of others as objects of pity. It is not about fundraising to run your projects overseas, but raising funds that others can use to fight their own battles. It is about taking actions within one's own terrain that will enhance the capacity of others to succeed in their fight against injustice.

The issue of rights might appear to be more complex. The ways in which the concept of rights has been articulated and practised in the North reflects the

specificity of historical experiences of struggles for rights that were intrinsic to those societies, and whose foundations lay in the bourgeois revolutions of Europe. That is at it should be. Where the problem arises is when it is assumed that those experiences are sufficient for proclaiming their universality. This is not to say that the rights that are articulated in the UDHR and other covenants are not relevant to Africa. Clearly they have universal significance. Rather, it is to assert that as yet they do not protect the totality of all those human values that deserve protection. For example, it was partly in recognition of the limitations of existing human rights instruments that the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights was established in 1986, the only regional human rights agreement that asserts the collective rights of people as well environmental rights. But proclamations about the universality of the Northern concepts or rights only lead to sterile rhetoric. The issue is not that rights need to be presented, like a washing powder, with more relevant symbols about Africa's cultural experiences. That misses the point. Rather, rights should not be theorised as legal rights

"... which implies both a static and an absolutist paradigm, in the sense of an entitlement or claim, but a means of struggle. In that sense it is akin to righteousness rather than right. Seen as a means of struggle, 'right' is therefore not a standard granted as charity from above, but a standard-bearer around which people rally for the struggle from below."

The field of human rights has recently found much favour amongst the official aid agencies. The latter view the importance of supporting this area as a means for "improving good governance", "promoting democracy", and "strengthening civil society". Unfortunately the focus of many human rights organisations has been almost exclusively on agitations around civil and political rights. Their work remains focused primarily on the urban areas, leaving unchallenged the structures of power that continue to hold hegemony in the name of customary power. As Mamdani points out, "... So long as rural power is organized as a fused authority that denies rights in the name of enforcing custom, civil society will remain an urban phenomenon." And so long as the opposition and the movement for rights does not seek to dismantle the rural structures of power, the explosive tensions inherent in the bifurcated state in Africa will continue.

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In the anti-colonial period, many NGOs demonstrated their capacity to express solidarity and to focus their prime attention to supporting the struggle of African peoples for rights. If that capacity has not already been exhausted, I believe there is a need to return to that tradition. The alternative is to stand impotent and bewildered as NGOs did when the genocide erupted in Rwanda. Impotent because they did not understand what could have been done, and bewildered because of an unease that the processes of development in Africa, of which NGOs have become such an integral part, themselves gave rise to the conflicts and to the terrors of genocide.

The slogan that gave rise to the UDHR was "never again" to genocide. There is a bitter irony in the fact that when it happened again in Africa, the signatories to that proclamation were silent or unwilling to act. Rwanda has demonstrated that the

proclamation was deficient. It remains for popular movements and organisations of Africa to rebuild the tradition based on its own experiences that can guarantee the conditions in which genocide will never again be possible. That will be no easy task. Whether or not development NGOs can participate in that process will depend largely on whether they continue to define their role as part of the political economy of a form of development that breeds and sustains inequalities and conflicts, or whether they rally to the standard of solidarity and rights. The choice is theirs.

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