

A POLITICAL VISION OF DEVELOPMENT NGOS

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Development aid, unlike charity, is not aseptic. Development aims at modifying the living conditions of people or social collectives by introducing structural changes and hence it is affected by political, social, economic, and cultural variables. If this is in fact the case, it is surprising to see development NGOs define themselves ever more frequently as 'technical' or 'professional' organisations when their daily activity is clearly linked to ideological variables (education, gender equality, justice, human rights, etc.). And it is even more surprising, given the current ideological scenarios, that secular development NGOs can be more useful to propagate social change than the technical arguments they advocate.

NGO Ideological Asepsis

Over the last few decades, various ideological currents have inspired the work of development NGOs: from the paradigm of a state responsible for the redistribution of wealth and supplier of basic resources; to the neo-liberal approach, which sees the state as a minimal entity responsible for regulating the free market and guaranteeing human rights; to other models which prioritise a rights-based approach or the broadening of social, civic, and political citizenship. But over the last few years, a growing number of NGOs in Spain have stopped defining themselves ideologically. Rather, they have intentionally ignored this discourse and now frequently define themselves more as development cooperation professionals. They are familiar with discourses that foment development but they always give more importance to the technical function than the political aspect.

For this reason, it is worth asking, first, if a technical function can be implemented without ideological inspiration in terms of development cooperation. Let us consider the following example: several mayors representing diverse political parties are planning on implementing a plan developed by a consulting firm. Their objective is to produce crafts and economically develop a valley in which there are communities of returnees from an internal armed conflict living side by side with different ethnic groups. The mayors asked the central government for help and the latter contacted a Spanish NGO which, in turn, asked for economic aid from a certain Autonomous Community, the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECI), and a EU programme dedicated to assisting returnees. Can we remain aseptic in the midst of this complex institutional and socio-cultural scenario? Further still, what is the point of doing so?

As if they were an extension of the Public Administration or of International Organisms, NGOs have been assimilating themselves within the international development cooperation professional corps made up by international and national

civil servants, creating the current existing paradox: some development NGOs may be more 'professional' now than other public administration organisms (in the South, in the North). This may be positive from a technical efficacy perspective, but from a political point of view, it has another interpretation: it is possible that these 'technical' NGOs will neither become exponents of citizen participation nor strengthen the social fabric, but rather, that they be used to extend the state's bureaucratic apparatus, reproduce ethnic and class differences or strengthen an authoritarian political culture. This would represent an even more political scenario: professional NGOs would not proliferate due to a weak state, but rather, in some cases, the state would be strengthened thanks to the NGOs.¹

Perhaps for this reason, politicians feel closer, paradoxically, to 'technical' NGOs than to political ones: because they carry out functions that the bureaucratic state has not been able to do effectively and, in many cases, they are more legitimate to do so than the public administration itself. As such, there are ever more efficient NGOs that specialise in areas such as child labour, fair trade, access to the judicial system, health, education, nutrition, refugees, the environment, and humanitarian issues. And, on the other hand, NGOs demand that citizens have a better understanding of 'what is being done' to eradicate poverty.² For example, if improving education and ending poverty implies the 'fulfilment of the UN's Millennium Development Goals', it should not be surprising that more children are being sponsored: it is a more direct language which is easily understood. Today, poverty is in the heart of advanced societies, there are immigrants, there is solidarity, and awareness of development issues, but both politicians and civil society tend to adhere to secure values when the discourse gets complex: religion (which has historically monopolised charity) and humanitarian aid organisations.

What has become, then, of secular development NGOs? On the one hand, these NGOs are faced with the difficulty implied in explaining to civil society what their complex labour consists of (and the responsibility for eventually failing in fulfilling their mission) and, on the other hand, they are faced with the need to battle with their partners and counter-parts who, oftentimes, do not understand laicism or technicalities and expect political or economic aid from the NGOs to get by.

Identity and Power

By contrast, the appropriate political vision may have very important effects on development. One of the clearest examples of how social movements have efficiently taken advantage of their clarity in distinguishing the technical function from a political vision has been in extending political rights to women. Many NGOs and women's associations in developing countries have succeeded in carrying out analyses in terms of power which have turned out to be more beneficial than technical analyses – to a degree, assistance-related – and than those of allied NGOs in developed countries.

For example, the political and social change produced in the world due to the affirmation of multiple collective identities has been notable: socio-cultural,

¹ Martínez Novo, Carmen, 'Empresas mixtecas: "desarrollo" y poder en una cooperativa indígena en la frontera México-Estados Unidos', in Gimeno, J. C. and Monrel, P. (eds), *La Controversia del Desarrollo. Críticas desde la antropología*, IUDC/UCM, 1999, pp. 131-180.

² A recent public opinion poll in Spain revealed that, when asked 'Are you familiar with or have you heard about the United Nations Millennium Development Goals to reduce poverty in the world by 2015?', 72% of respondents answered 'No'. Barómetro 2005, *América Latina y la Cooperación Internacional en la opinión pública española*, Fundación Carolina, CEALCI, Documento de Trabajo N° 3.

religious, ethnic, and gender identities. It would seem that great advances have been made in extending political rights, in some countries more than advances in social rights in which there is still delay. This is the case with the role played by the extension of women's participation in the make-up of a new citizenry, a citizenry which has already altered the world's social and political agenda. The curious thing is not that this is happening in Europe, where governmental education policies have had better or worse results in promoting gender equality, but rather, that this is occurring within many Latin American countries with traditionally *machista* cultures which lack educational policies that allow for the introduction of such complex changes. It is very possible that this is due primarily to the work of social movements and development NGOs.

Women conquering this space have implied an open contradiction and, in many cases, a break with political parties among those who wanted the parties to act as a 'transmission belt'. Political parties, by contrast, had nothing to transmit along this belt, while their *compañeras* (female colleagues) in their NGOs were able to promote the right to vote, fight against social violence, promote economic independence, and co-ownership of land, that is, they were able to create a space to extend citizenry by affirming identities: being a woman, being a community, or being indigenous. This is the case in many women's organisations in Central America and other organisations which discovered how to take political advantage of decentralisation programmes implemented from the North as a way to provide efficient response to citizen demands, while in the South taking advantage to develop a new pact between the state and society which had been broken after a series of wars in the region. In other words, these organisations carried out a much more developed analysis in terms of power relationships than a technical analysis or, in more daring cases, in terms of participation spaces.

In the last two decades, some NGOs have seen the chance to 'make politics' via 'technical development cooperation' and this, in good measure, has contributed to building the social fabric. Because laying the first brick to build a basic social infrastructure, implies building an embryonic community organisation. Possibly, many NGOs from the North, without realising it, have participated in extending democratic citizenry while they thought they were doing something else.

The New Public Space for NGOs

Participation by women and indigenous communities and the explosion of civil society is transforming, to a certain extent, the meaning of many political concepts. There may be as many democracies now as the number of identities which make these up: in terms of the United States, a reading of its revised National Security Doctrine demonstrates that a democratic country is one which guarantees the economic and physical security... of the United States; for the United Nations, a democracy is one which primarily guarantees human rights; for civic republicanism, democracy is the recuperation of a space for what is public and belongs to the citizenry and the extension of social rights to new collectives demanding it; for traditional liberalism, democracy is, basically, a respect for the rules of the game, an institutional architecture that perhaps no longer responds to new societal demands where the individual can no longer develop in an isolated fashion; and, for immigrants, democracy has connotations regarding economic and legal security. And all this is occurring while the world is filling up with democracies, consolidating themselves and succeeding in many different ways.

To summarise, and from a development cooperation point of view, the wealth in terms of democratic practice and the affirmation of identities in societies with a long tradition of social exclusion has also been the result of those acting with a political vision and those who see political activity as a regulator of social conflicts, taking political advantage of what seemed to be technical development cooperation support and thus felt legitimate to act politically from a social ambit.

But, if identity has been a motor behind development and a source of new ideologies, it may also be a source of conflict. Countries, cities, and neighbourhoods are beginning to define themselves as identities which separate and divide, and affect the social structure. If the affirmation of gender identity has led to the extension of citizenship, the affirmation of religious identity may not have the same consequences. This is, from our point of view, the main political challenge faced currently by NGOs.

NGOs have to choose whether to be an instrument to implement the social policies of a broadening bureaucratic state or to be autonomously active in the midst of the current ideological challenges related to development: identity and democracy. NGOs have to define themselves ideologically before, just to give an example, certain Bolivian organisations declare themselves to be feminists while their counter-parts in developed countries can only say, 'We finance women's projects'. Therefore, whatever the ambit of the new public space, it would not seem reasonable for these to limit themselves to the 'public administration' area, but rather, have a much broader social and political focus.

That is why it is important to rescue the concept of the Alliance of Civilisations. It seems at first glance to be the natural and proper space not only for governments but for civil society as well. In the new international development cooperation agenda, it is beginning to be understood that economies are immersed in socio-economic processes which may make a country grow or stagnate economically. Even from an economic perspective, it can be seen that the heterodoxy of public policies has determined the economic success of many countries.³ The Alliance of Civilisations is precisely a strategy to overcome conflicts which may arise from socio-cultural matters. Why not add socio-cultural content to a new Alliance? And, what other new ideological spaces – with strong governmental and institutional support – will be the source of future inspiration for NGOs?

Conclusion

NGOs, due to their proximity to society and their high degree of empathy within the collectives they support, are exceptional witnesses to the changes taking place around the world, and their success depends not on their youth or experience, but rather, on their ability to adapt to the environment. In the words of Hirschman, within development we have to learn to live side by side with multiple paradigms and not be dragged – like Ulysses – by the siren's song of a given current. We believe that this current focuses these days on poverty reduction and it seems to be presented as an exclusively technical problem when it is nothing of the sort: the new challenges are not only technical in nature but also ideological. It is necessary to know what position everyone wants to occupy within development cooperation and how effective our social and political discourse is. It would be worthwhile to reintroduce political issues within the debate on coordination and for our politicians to be interested in development cooperation from a less instrumental focus than

³ Rodrik, D., *Rethinking Growth Policies in the Developing World*, Harvard University, 2004.



they have been up to now. We feel that this 'sector' needs a political and ideological stance to accompany the development processes.

Foroaod – Spanish Development Aid

FRIDE organised the project "Spanish Development Aid - Mid-term Review and a Proposal for a Participative Consultation" between June 2006 and April 2007. This project aims to develop a consultation process about the current Spanish government's development cooperation policy. We have created a forum for participation and debate, in order to assess the Spanish development cooperation reform agenda and to identify the main achievements and shortcomings in operationalising the initiatives based on the principle of "More Aid, Better Aid". A set of recommendation guidelines were developed, through participative methods, with the objective of putting into practice the aspirations of the Spanish development cooperation policy.

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