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Democratizing the Aid Encounter in Africa

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Democratizing the aid

encounter in Africa

ALEX DE WAAL

The record of aid to Africa, in actual achievements in the improved well-being of its recipients, is not a good one. This article contends that this does not mean that aid should be abandoned, but that reform is necessary in the way it is given and managed. The author points out that aid programmes founded on a strong local base and pursued through local agencies have a much better success rate than those imposed from outside. He is critical of the tendency among aid donors to avoid proper engagement with the question of political power and argues for a democratization of the aid encounter which would put decisions on the use of aid in the hands of the recipients and ensure the accountability of those administering it.

The record of aid to Africa is not encouraging. The moral case for the affluent helping the hungry has not been matched by results in the form of aid actually improving the well-being of its recipients. Aid is both a textbook example of a self-justifying activity and a paradigm case of how the best intentions can produce the most disastrous results.

Most writing on aid tends towards one of three positions. One is to accept the premise that aid can 'work', i.e. promote development, fight hunger, and support democracy and human rights. Hence the failures of aid call for more and better aid: an effort by concerned people to reform the aid system to enable it to work 'properly'. A second (usually Marxist) position is that aid is an integral part of a system designed to promote the interests of imperialism and capitalism; that 'development' in fact creates poverty; and consequently that aid should be done away with altogether. A third viewpoint, increasingly favoured by many academics, is more detached: it tries to analyse what the various arms of the aid industry do (and say) and the actual outcomes, refracted through the power structures of recipient societies. This certainly makes for better sociology than either of the other two approaches, but it is of less use to the policy-maker.

This article tries to combine approaches one and three. It accepts that aid exists and will remain: there is sufficient institutional weight behind it. But there are enduring problems, both with the aid apparatus in its current institutional

and political context, and inherent in the aid encounter itself. The current government review of aid policy which promises the most far-reaching restructuring of the aid encounter for 20 years, is an appropriate moment to examine some of the problems and make a simple but radical suggestion for reform.

The subject-matter of this article is aid in general, but a large amount of attention, in proportion to their size, is given to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and emergency relief. These sectors of the aid business are small but growing, with a high profile and much influence in determining public attitudes. For over a decade, emergency relief has been taking up an ever-expanding proportion of official and NGO aid budgets. In 1980, disaster relief comprised less than one per cent of official development assistance; by 1991 it had risen to nearly seven per cent; in response to the crisis in the former Yugoslavia it increased even more sharply.¹ In 1994 14.8 per cent of Britain's bilateral aid was emergency assistance. The relief sector is also rapidly changing in response to new pressures and conditions, and may show the future for the whole industry. The focus of this article is Africa, where these trends are most pronounced.

One of the abiding problems of the aid encounter is the mental tyranny it exerts: aid itself becomes the lens through which we see the many and varied social and economic problems of poor countries. This is a version of the familiar problem that those holding bureaucratic power can only envisage change in so far as it comes about through their own actions. Even the most cursory examination of the history of famine prevention and the conquest of social ills such as illiteracy indicates that factors other than planned, externally initiated or externally financed change are the most important. Aid is a distorting lens, and no writing on aid can fully escape this distortion. The least that can be done is to issue a warning at the outset: beware, we are studying a marginal phenomenon.

The politics of the aid encounter

The failure of aid to support development and democracy during the Cold War was not surprising. Much aid was despatched with precisely the aim of keeping in power loyal clients who might otherwise have succumbed to the pressure of discontented electorates. But—contrary to more simplistic versions of Marxist analysis—the operation of the aid apparatus was more complicated, and had more mixed results, than its role as a mere servant of Western strategic interests would imply.

The aid encounter and the Cold War

Following the Marshall Plan in Europe, aid planners anticipated that strategic loyalty and economic development would go hand in hand. And indeed, most

¹ John Borton, 'Recent trends in the international relief system,' *Disasters*, 17, 1993, 187–201.

Table 1: Main recipients of US assistance to Africa, 1962–1988 (US\$m)

Country	Principal US client	US aid to country	US aid to client	% of aid to client
Sudan	Jaafar Nimeiri	1,801	1,443	80
Zaire	Mobutu Sese Seko	1,164	889	76
Kenya	Daniel arap Moi	1,043	652	63
Somalia	Siad Barre	884	822	93
Ethiopia	Haile Selassie	817	458	56
Liberia	Samuel Doe	807	532	66

Source: Michael Clough, *Free at last? US policy toward Africa and the end of the Cold War* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1992), p. 78.

aid to poor countries was presented as measures for development, and much of it was made conditional on economic reforms. Some ‘real’ development projects were supported in these countries, and some of them ‘worked’—i.e. delivered growth or welfare. Economic reform measures were proposed, negotiated and (sometimes) enforced. Officials in aid institutions usually promoted ‘development’ in good faith. Over time, aid institutions developed their own interests and their own unique forms of discourse. In some cases, aid lobbies could contradict higher strategic goals: a famous example is the ability of the US food aid lobby to export to the Soviet Union.²

But, for US assistance at least, strategic loyalty endured as the key to receiving aid, and always shone through aid’s ideological and institutional disguises. For example, a list of the main recipients of US assistance in sub-Saharan Africa from 1962 to 1988 speaks for itself: Sudan, Zaire, Kenya, Somalia, Ethiopia and Liberia (see table 1). This held as true for emergency relief as for economic or development assistance. In 1976, Henry Kissinger famously remarked that ‘disaster relief is becoming increasingly a major instrument of our foreign policy.’³

At the end of the Cold War, there was widespread enthusiasm that, unshackled from strategic constraint, aid institutions could at last play their wonted role, as agents of ‘real’ development or humanitarianism. Meanwhile, a miscellany of worthier goals became more prominent in the rationale for aid. These included promoting democratization (which became a major objective of US, British and French policy towards Africa in 1990) and overcoming poverty (an enduring theme intermittently stressed or re-stressed, most recently by the incoming British Labour government). Emergency relief has its own variants on this range of goals. Andrew Natsios, formerly director of the US Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance, has written: ‘diplomats now use disaster response as a preventative measure to stave off chaos in an unravelling society, as a confidence-building measure during political negotiations, to protect democratic and economic reforms, to implement peace accords which the US has mediated, to mitigate the effects of economic sanctions on the poor, where sanctions serve geopolitical ends, and

² Peter Uvin, *The international organisation of hunger* (London: Kegan Paul, 1994), p. 114.

³ Quoted in: Randolph Kent, *The anatomy of disaster relief* (London: Pinter, 1987), p. 81.

to encourage a political settlement as a carrot to contending factions.⁴

The aid industry has many and varied players, and generalizations are hazardous. But one common feature stands out: the working practices of all major aid institutions, official and NGO, simultaneously obscure and change power relations. The central concepts of 'development' and 'humanitarianism', and a range of secondary ones such as 'governance', 'civil society' and 'complex emergencies' are all used in a manner that conceals the centrality of political power to the issues in question. This process—which might be called 'depoliticizing politics'—in turn promotes its own form of bureaucratic power. The rhetoric and intentions of many aid executives, particularly in the more left-leaning INGOs and in the aid departments of some social democratic governments, may embrace the politics of radical social change, but the outcome of their actions is rarely consonant with those ideals.

The aid encounter and neoliberalism

The change in strategic context has removed the major alibi for the previous failures of aid. The light is now shone more directly on difficulties inherent in the aid encounter itself. At the same time, neoliberal reforms and conditionality have also gravely weakened one of the oldest arguments against aid: that it acts as a subsidy for inept central planners. This case has long been argued by, among others, Lord Bauer, and was put in a recent editorial in *The Times*.⁵ But in the 1990s, all major aid recipients make economic policy under strict conditions laid down by the IMF and the Paris Club; so if official aid subsidizes bad economic policy making, the donors can no longer escape blame.

Most critiques of neoliberal structural adjustment have focused on the social cost: the collapse (sometimes catastrophically) of health and education provision, and the unemployment of large numbers of qualified people. The concern here is not with the gains and losses of adjustment, but rather with the more insidious and unplanned political implications of how adjustment policies have been implemented. The politics of the donor–recipient relationship is a vital factor in its operation, but unfortunately remarkably little academic attention has been given to the way in which policies have been conceived, negotiated and monitored, or to the impact of donor conditionality and monitoring on the performance of recipient governments.⁶ Yet the effects appear to have been far-reaching.

The example of Sudan in the 1980s illustrates the way in which a government's energies can become overwhelmingly focused on international financing. With its week-to-week viability dependent upon a drip feed from donors,

⁴ Quoted in Refugee Policy Group, *Hope restored? Humanitarian aid in Somalia 1990-1994* (Washington DC, November 1994), pp. 94-5.

⁵ Peter Bauer, *The development frontier* (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991). 'Short on aid: empire building in international development', *The Times*, 2 July 1997.

⁶ Yusuf Bangura and Peter Gibbon, 'Adjustment, authoritarianism and democracy in sub-Saharan Africa: an introduction to some conceptual and empirical issues,' in P. Gibbon, Y. Bangura and A. Ofstad, eds, *Authoritarianism, democracy and adjustment* (Uppsala: Scandanavian Institute for African Studies, 1992).

whose concerns were confined to strictly economic affairs, it could ignore domestic pressure for political change.

Until 1985, Sudanese President Jaafar Nimeiri was a favourite of the US State Department and the major recipient of US aid in sub-Saharan Africa. The Sudanese finance minister and his American counterparts collaborated in devising elaborate financial schemes for keeping the government afloat.⁷ One extreme case occurred when the State Department took out a commercial bridging loan, used it to pay off Sudan's arrears with the IMF, which then allowed the Paris Club of donors to meet and agree a new debt rescheduling agreement and tranche of aid, some of which was then used to pay off the bridging loan. Such measures unlocked the funds that enabled a deeply unpopular government to resist pressures for democratization. Nimeiri was finally overthrown in April 1985 when a popular uprising in the capital coincided with a suspension of US aid (instigated by the US Treasury against the wishes of the State Department).

In 1985–6, the relationship changed when the IMF declared Sudan in default, and the Paris Club became unwilling to stump up the huge amounts required to keep the government from formal bankruptcy. Dealing with this enduring crisis required even greater ingenuity from the Sudanese ministry of finance. The efforts of Sudan's most capable civil servants kept enough money coming in by the novel idea of a 'shadow' agreement with the IMF—not a formal agreement but a promise to pay debts and implement reforms, in return for which the IMF facilitated new aid transfers. They also carefully scheduled debt repayments so that they could meet different donors' criteria at different moments (sometimes just for a few days before the next payments became due), negotiating to rush assistance packages through these small windows.

For a decade, the Sudanese treasury—the heartbeat of the government—was sustained by a foreign aid life-support machine. The donors' conditions were confined to economic reform and debt repayment—conditions that the government reluctantly conceded. In turn the money enabled the government to fight a war in the south and to ignore popular pressure in the north for peace. Years of street protests, press criticism and parliamentary resolutions counted for nothing: the government remained set on a course of inflicting war, devastation and famine on the south. But when, belatedly in December 1988 and January 1989, first the Netherlands and then the US governments demanded moves towards peace, the Sudan government responded within days. This was the reality of aid dependency: the government had become answerable to its aid donors rather than its constituents.

Across Africa, the process of structural adjustment itself demanded a certain type of accountability from governments. Perhaps with more candour than he intended, the eminent neoliberal economist Deepak Lal wrote of the obstacles

⁷ Richard Brown, *Public debt and private wealth: debt, capital flight and the IMF in Sudan* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

to reform, in the shape of those who benefited from the distorted structure of government: 'A courageous, ruthless and perhaps undemocratic government is required to ride roughshod over these newly created special interest groups.'⁸ Later, when liberal democracy was heralded as the political counterpart of economic neoliberalism, such views were rarely expressed in public. But the reality of Lal's insight remained: adjusting governments had to be more responsive to their donors and creditors than to their electorates. Economic conditionality has sat uneasily with political liberalization. The message from donors to African electorates has been: 'You can vote in whatever government you like but it will have no power to change the fundamentals of economic policy.' It is scarcely surprising that elected governments have either quickly lost popularity or resorted to authoritarian measures. Structural adjustment in the context of the debt crisis has left African governments' accountability even more strongly aligned towards foreign donors.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the neoliberal ascendancy was accompanied by a deep dismay, chiefly in Europe and North America, at the political prospects for Africa. To many, the continent appeared to be on the brink of collapsing into famine and chaos.⁹ The solutions on offer were exclusively external ones: at one extreme, military-humanitarian intervention; at the other, isolating Africa from the rest of the world and withdrawing. As military-humanitarian interventions failed—most spectacularly in Somalia—more elaborate (if less ambitious) systems for 'early warning' and 'conflict resolution' have proliferated. Indeed, the whole process of trying to regulate and professionalize the disaster relief industry can be seen as a response to the failure of philanthropic imperialism during these years. All these approaches share the assumption that Africa is somewhere to be acted upon, rather than a place in which people may be able to find their own solutions.

Intrinsic problems with the aid encounter

Strict neoliberalism may be passing from fashion: there are some signs that major donors may be considering giving more scope to recipient governments in setting their social agendas. Most critics of the current aid apparatus would welcome signs of greater flexibility on this score. But the motives of the donors are not the central issue. We should ask, rather, what intrinsic relation does the aid encounter itself have with democratic accountability?

Aid can contradict democracy in very tangible ways. Aid resources are filtered through institutions of power. They are readily manipulable by political authorities. They are provided in bulk with uncertain ownership claims and their availability reduces politicians' dependence on locally provided resources, less-

⁸ Quoted in John Toye, 'Interest group politics and the implementation of structural adjustment policies in sub-Saharan Africa', in P. Gibbon *et al.*, eds, *Authoritarianism*, p. 109.

⁹ Cf. Robert Kaplan, 'The coming anarchy', *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994.

ening the pressures for democratic accountability.

In extremis, aid can become an instrument of war or genocide: a variant of its historic role of supporting despots. The role of humanitarian aid in supporting the military and political organization of the Rwandese Interahamwe extremists, in exile in Zaire from 1994 to 1996, is evident. In Sudan, government counter-insurgency measures are dressed up as rural development for the benefit of aid donors, some of whom have responded with assistance.¹⁰ The incorporation of aid into structural violence is now a commonplace of the literature.

If aid could bypass such political structures, and be targeted directly at the poorest, could it overcome these problems? International NGOs (INGOs) have long argued that this is where their great advantage lies: they can work directly with the most marginal communities. But a direct encounter between an INGO (or to be precise, its representative, an 'aid agent') and a recipient community and its leadership throws up another set of problems. This is the front line of the aid encounter.

The concept of a 'political contract' is useful here. This refers to a negotiated political dispensation between a political leader and constituents. The processes of negotiation may be open or implicit: the contract is founded on a mutual recognition of interdependence and the limits of power. In some remarkable cases, the negotiation of a political contract has strong resemblances to the fictional social contracts beloved of the liberal tradition in political philosophy. Leaders have literally sat down with ordinary people or their delegates and negotiated a political dispensation. Several such cases will be described briefly below. In yet others, electoral promises have been made and enforced through the ballot box. In others, the sanctions available to the people have been less direct, though perhaps equally effective, for example street protests.

Aid negotiations differ from this model in several important respects. The aid agent cannot establish any such political contract. For a start, he or she can rarely be frank. The aid resources on offer are usually indeterminate. Rarely does the aid agent specify exactly what is on offer, often because he or she simply does not know and can only promise to try and find resources. Even the most sincere aid agent may not be believed by the would-be recipients, who may have expectations that more resources lurk behind modest promises. Thus, an aid agent can make promises that no democratic politician could make without being ridiculed—that is, without an aid agency at his or her shoulder. The resources are not locally negotiated and the procedures are opaque. One of the reasons why struggles for aid resources can be so bitter is that it is difficult to make a bargain over resources that cannot be specified in advance.

Secondly, in addition to this inevitable indeterminacy, aid agencies commonly surround themselves with mystique: their source of power and authority is both obscure and exalted to the recipient. Real political issues are cloaked in a

¹⁰ Ataul Karim, Mark Duffield *et al.*, *OLS: operation lifeline Sudan, a review* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1996); African Rights, *Food and power in Sudan* (London, 1997), chs 8, 10.

language of 'development' and 'humanitarianism'. This language helps to make the aid apparatus, in the words of one analyst, an 'anti-politics machine'.¹¹ Many aid workers rather enjoy the status and impunity that this mystique provides. A related aspect is the remote and often impenetrable character of the discourse of aid: recipients have to struggle to master it, and have no opportunity to develop a critique in their own terms that can contest it and be widely accepted. The intellectual hegemony of aid institutions over African citizens (especially professionals) is a source of immense frustration to the latter, though rarely if ever acknowledged by the aid givers.

Finally, many aid agencies make no pretence of supporting democratic accountability. Some of the maxims taught to Médecins Sans Frontières' recruits speak for themselves:

Action does not like democracy.

Everything is allowed except what is forbidden.

Only describe a situation in terms of the solutions that you bring to it.¹²

For these reasons, the aid encounter cannot be a transparent political contract, and indeed the introduction of aid distorts the negotiations between politician and electorate. Unsurprisingly, promises of aid are a favourite gambit of politicians facing election who have little else to offer. The entry of aid into politics enjoins a return to a premodern, opaque, even mystical foundation of power, in which resources and legitimacy descend from a higher order rather than being the outcome of local negotiation.

This is a bleak picture. But there are examples of aid which has worked to establish or strengthen democratic political contracts, or, more commonly, the struggle to achieve them. These tend to be either cases in which aid agencies act in solidarity with minority causes (e.g. the Defence and Aid Fund for anti-apartheid activists, and the Emergency Relief Desk for the Eritrean Relief Association and the Relief Society of Tigray during the civil war in Ethiopia), or cases in which assistance is given in the context of a pre-existing and robust political commitment to welfare (e.g. donor support for the Botswanan drought relief programme). Aid does not inevitably work contrary to democratic accountability, but combating its tendencies to do so requires constant vigilance.

Democracy in the aid-agency-free zone

The argument that aid has intrinsic anti-democratic qualities is strengthened by the observation that some of Africa's most progressive and effective political systems have been born precisely where no aid (or at least no aid agencies) could

¹¹ James Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine: 'development', depoliticization and bureaucratic power in Lesotho* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹² Jonathan Benthall, *Disasters, relief and the media* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993), p. 138.

penetrate.

In retrospect, it is evident that during the period, approximately 1985–94, when many external commentators were diagnosing the terminal decline of African political systems and the need for military–humanitarian intervention and other similarly drastic measures, some vigorous African responses to the crisis were developing. These are more important than any aspects of planned change controlled by aid institutions. The resurgence of social politics initiated by new governments, as in Uganda and Ethiopia, is the prime example; a different kind of social politics is manifest in Sudan, whose radical social engineering is pursued under the banner of extremist Islam. These countries have widely different policies and varying relations with foreign donors and INGOs. What they have in common is that they have taken back the initiative from foreign aid agencies, and that attempts by such agencies to impose their agendas will lead to conflict.

The reassertion of African political agendas creates an opportunity for reforming the aid encounter and making it more consonant with democratic accountability. If this opportunity is disregarded, aid will continue to distort and undermine the revival of democratic politics in Africa, and the estrangement between the new generation of African leaders and international aid institutions will turn into outright hostility. There are already signs of this happening.

Political contracts forged under extreme duress

One of the more striking developments in contemporary Africa is the creation of innovative public policy in situations of exceptional duress. Several examples have occurred in north-east Africa in the last fifteen years.

In the Luwero Triangle in Uganda during the period 1984–6, the National Resistance Army (NRA) under Yoweri Museveni faced near-genocidal violence from the then government of Milton Obote. The area was isolated from any external access or aid, and the population was divided between farmers of Baganda ancestry and the descendants of migrants, principally Banyarwanda. Museveni's innovative creation of Resistance Councils for each locality, with participation based on residence alone and an unprecedented degree of village-level participation in decision-making, was pivotal not only in the outcome of the war (with victory for the NRA in 1986) but to the nature of subsequent Ugandan politics.¹³

At about the same time, the people of Tigray in northern Ethiopia faced a largely man-made famine, inflicted by the government of Mengistu Haile Mariam, which seemed to put their very collective survival in doubt. At that time the rebel Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) undertook a far-reaching evaluation of its struggle, leading to reforms in its conduct. Their key

¹³ Mahmood Mamdani, *Citizen and subject: contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), pp. 200–203.

decision was to place the fight against famine at the centre of the political and military struggle: to link the basic material needs of the Tigrayan peasantry with the political fortunes of the TPLF.¹⁴ At the time, external aid was very modest, and was all handled by the Relief Society of Tigray, the 'humanitarian wing' of the TPLF. The TPLF consciously entered into a form of 'political contract' with the Tigrayan people, which was essential to its subsequent victory in the war and political strategy thereafter.

The Ugandan and Ethiopian cases are similar in that political leaders, facing exceptionally severe crises, were obliged to be very sensitive to the needs of their constituents—and had the skills and capacity not only to listen but to forge an effective political programme that met those demands. Both programmes were founded on rural-based contracts with village democracy at their centre. But there are sharp differences too, for example in the way in which ethnicity is treated: in Uganda, political mobilization on the basis of ethnicity is prohibited while in Ethiopia it is allowed and has flourished.

Other experiences of forging political contracts at such moments of imminent collective disaster have also occurred in Eritrea, in the self-declared republic of Somaliland (in 1992–3) and in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan (also in 1992–3). Each is different from the others, informed as they are by different threats and different political cultures. But they share the experience of protracted warfare, capable and democratically inclined leadership, the linking of material needs with political programmes, and the absence of aid—or, to be more precise, little or no aid and the absence of an aid agenda imposed from outside. The fact that such contracts have been forged in 'aid-free zones' may not be coincidental. By contrast, the failure of the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) under John Garang to develop either a social agenda or any semblance of workable democracy is associated with the high profile of international aid programmes in southern Sudan as well as the highly centralized and militarized structure of the SPLA.¹⁵ The struggle for aid (actual and anticipated) has been an important part of the intractability of the war in southern Somalia.

These political contracts may prove fragile. A few years ago the 'Zimbabwean miracle' of the 1980s would have been held up as precisely an example of an indigenous political contract that combined liberation politics and food security: in the 1990s one cannot be so sanguine. Nonetheless, an indigenous social politics has developed in certain places in Africa. Recognizing this has enormous significance for developing international public policy.

Internally and externally initiated social programmes

Even the most ardent neoliberals concede that there is a role for public policy in service provision, and especially in providing programmes that mitigate some

¹⁴ Alex de Waal, *Famine crimes: politics and the disaster relief industry in Africa* (London: James Currey, 1997), ch. 6.

¹⁵ African Rights, *Food and power*, chs 11, 12.

of the more conspicuous human costs of structural adjustment. Amartya Sen's comparison of income distributions and malnutrition in countries with different levels of national income shows that growth alone is not a panacea for poverty.¹⁶ It also shows that even at very modest levels of national income, well-designed public policy can have a profound effect on mitigating poverty.

Some public policy measures aimed at combating poverty and hunger succeed, some do not. There are many determinants of success, but one is particularly relevant to this discussion. The experience of 'adjustment with a human face' policies (advocated by UNICEF among others) shows that internally initiated schemes do better than those designed from outside.¹⁷ To acknowledge this is not to advocate withdrawing external advice or assistance, nor to promote some sort of Afrocentric 'authenticity' to the exclusion of all else. One of the more notable successes of anti-hunger policy in Africa is the Botswanan drought relief programme, which is based upon studies undertaken by foreign consultants—but consultants hired by the Botswanan government. Rather, it is to take account of an elusive but important ingredient in public policy: 'ownership'. When a particular policy or dispensation is arrived at by domestic political processes, there is a greater commitment to it than when it is initiated from outside.

The limits of the NGO sector

The shortcomings of official aid come as no surprise to those who have even a passing acquaintance with the critiques mounted by INGOs since the 1960s. A few years ago, INGO executives could assert with all sincerity that if official aid became more like the INGO sector, then most of its problems would be solved. Such claims are no longer heard, or if heard, are not taken seriously. The spotlight has been shone on INGO operations, and reality has rarely matched expectation. With respect to both Western governmental donors and African host governments, the INGO sector has lost the initiative in the debate on aid. While the INGO debates remain vigorous and sometimes refreshing, they are less and less relevant to realities that are being dictated by others.

Supply and demand in the INGO market

The rise of development and relief NGOs has taken place alongside the neoliberal ascendancy. In the early 1980s major donors, notably the United States, began using NGOs as their preferred channel for aid resources to Africa. The way was pioneered with relief, but rehabilitation and development assistance have followed. Though NGOs are often critical of structural adjustment,¹⁸ their growth and mode of operation cannot be understood outside this context.

¹⁶ See *inter alia* Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen, *Hunger and public action* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990).

¹⁷ Frances Stewart, *Adjustment and poverty: options and choices* (London: Routledge, 1995).

¹⁸ See e.g. Oxfam, *The poverty report* (Oxford, 1996).

Partly for this reason, it is arguable that INGOs are reaching the limits of their size and influence. The same factors that led to their rise as donor-funded public service providers are now leading to their stagnation. A cursory overview of the trajectory of major INGOs' institutional development suggests that they may have passed their peak.

In the 1970s, most INGOs considered themselves 'development' agencies and treated relief as a minor—and it was to be hoped vanishing—sideline. Their energies were invested primarily in a succession of models of 'integrated rural development' and the like. But in this field, the major involvement of INGOs proved to be a transitional phenomenon: their work can be done more efficiently by local organizations. For a while, INGOs played a role as intermediaries between Western donors and local NGOs, but as local NGOs grew in capacity, this function dwindled. The role of INGOs in rural development in peaceable countries in Asia, Latin America and Africa is now increasingly problematic.¹⁹

In the early 1980s, the major growth area for INGOs was large-scale delivery of relief. INGOs became major contractual partners first in refugee operations and then in drought relief programmes. But, over time, they have been replaced in most of those situations by commercial contractors, local NGO consortia and, in some cases, government institutions. Again, INGOs proved a transitional phenomenon.

From the late 1980s, the growth area was 'complex emergencies' (wars and their multifold human consequences). This has proved a difficult field. Apart from the physical dangers (and hence expense) involved, there are major institutional risks for an INGO that specializes in complex emergencies. Because of the expense, most INGOs can only operate if they have donor backing. That in turn requires Western governmental interests to be engaged. But in many cases, the principal donor interest is extant INGO programmes. INGOs therefore have to invest more in lobbying donors and trying to generate publicity in order to be able to operate. This in turn has an impact on how they portray crises. In eastern Zaire in November 1996 the INGOs showed a marked readiness to assume the worst and claim that international military intervention was essential, even though no information existed warranting this interpretation.

The politics of aid-giving means that INGOs will continue to call, sometimes successfully, for dramatic international action. But since the debacle of the intervention in Somalia, Western governments have become markedly more sceptical towards INGO claims. The funds they commit to INGO operations are unlikely to increase. Meanwhile, there are signs of emerging competitors to INGOs, including local commercial contractors who can also provide security, and indigenous NGOs linked to belligerent parties which have enough independence and professional capacity to handle significant relief programmes. As the complex emergencies 'market' becomes more competitive, it is difficult to see where INGOs can go next for future expansion.

¹⁹ See Michael Edwards and David Hulme, *Non-governmental organisations—performance and accountability: beyond the magic bullet* (London: Earthscan, 1995).

More widely, some INGOs have tried to protect their position by moving 'up-market'. Their programmes are surrounded by ever more elaborate institutional procedures, including codes of conduct, intensive evaluations and approval by an array of specialists on the environment, social impact and gender. In some circumstances, this can lead to well-regulated and highly professional programmes. But these also tend to be very management-intensive and hence expensive. While this market niche will probably remain—there are enough donors willing to insist on such elaborate procedures—it is unlikely to provide a new sphere for major INGO expansion.

One of the important consequences of inter-agency competition has been the homogenization of aid activity. This is particularly noticeable in emergency relief. INGOs that formerly had widely divergent practices and internal cultures have become much more similar to one another. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Médecins Sans Frontières formerly had distinctive working practices, one practising discretion and caution and the other flamboyance. Under the pressure of a humanitarian 'Gresham's Law', according to which programmes that are good for generating funds drive out those that may be more effective or sensitive, but which cannot obtain the same publicity, the ICRC has become much more like MSF. (Meanwhile some MSF sections, particularly the Dutch and Belgian, have shed some of the excesses of the agency's aversion to professionalization.) The Save the Children Fund is also under pressure to move in the same direction.

In addition, some UN agencies, notably UNICEF and UNHCR, have become much more INGO-like. Mandates have become blurred. The UNHCR no longer deals solely, or even primarily, with refugees under the definitions laid down by the 1951 Convention, but with people in distress who have crossed borders, or who may be internally displaced. Some governmental donors have also set up their own operational units.

The logic of neoliberalism in the aid marketplace is therefore now working against INGOs. Recent moves towards greater transparency and accountability are likely to increase these pressures. This will assist some established INGOs, in so far as regulating professional standards will secure them from some competition. But over time, such scrutiny and regulation will erode the special status that INGOs have enjoyed, making them vulnerable to competition from the commercial sector.

The politics of aid-giving

The principal advantage enjoyed by today's INGOs is their privileged position within the politics of aid-giving in Western countries. This will probably endure, though changes are afoot.

Several distinct cultures of aid-giving can be identified. The secular/protestant tradition of aid-giving tends to generate the most literature and critical self-examination. British official aid and major British NGOs fall squarely

within this tradition; most American and northern European aid institutions are broadly similar. Alongside this strand there is a distinctively Gallic tradition of treating aid (in part) as theatre, as a means for dramatic gesture. The 'French doctors'²⁰ are much less susceptible to critical evaluations of their effectiveness, as that is not their principal *raison d'être*. By the same token they are less willing to submit to regulatory codes, as these might impinge on their ethic of voluntary action.

Well-established practices of running aid budgets in part as means of securing contracts for favoured companies and rewards for political favours from recipients are unlikely to disappear. There are also several vibrant religious traditions. Some of the fastest-growing Western NGOs link evangelical Christianity with hard-sell fundraising techniques.²¹ There is also a highly innovative Islamic model of humanitarianism, which may be the future model for relief and NGO development in most of Muslim Africa. As the name of its Sudanese variant, 'the Comprehensive Call', indicates, this ranges well beyond the confines of Western concepts of charity to include certain forms of commerce, religious proselytization and even military mobilization.²² Islamic extremist humanitarianism holds up a distorting mirror to Western secular humanitarianism—but perhaps not as distorting as some secular relief officials would like to believe. When criticized for proselytization, involvement in commerce or some other 'non-humanitarian' activity, officials of the Comprehensive Call agencies regularly retort that they are doing no more than Western agencies do, or historically have done. They cite in evidence the record of national Red Cross societies in Europe supporting national war efforts, the evangelistic activities of many Christian NGOs and the opulent lifestyles of many senior aid executives. It is probable that Islamic humanitarianism in this or a similar guise is here to stay.

Lastly, there is the use of aid as an element in news management by Western governments. Nik Gowing has argued persuasively that the media have a relatively marginal influence on the policies of major Western countries towards crises in faraway countries such as Bosnia and Rwanda.²³ In terms of Western governmental support for major interventions, such as sending troops, this is certainly true: perceived national interests regularly override a high volume of 'something must be done' advocacy by pundits and INGOs. But the media do have a pervasive influence through a more roundabout route. Occasionally, media coverage of a humanitarian tragedy compels political action. The definitive case was BandAid/Live Aid in 1984–5. This is rare, but it has happened sufficiently often that politicians cannot afford to ignore its ever-present possibil-

²⁰ Benthall, *Disasters, relief and the media*, pp. 124–39.

²¹ Ian Smillie, *The alms bazaar: altruism under fire—non-profit organisations and international development* (London: IT Publications, 1995).

²² African Rights, *Food and power*, ch. 9.

²³ Nik Gowing, 'Media coverage: help or hindrance in conflict prevention?' (New York: Carnegie Council, 1997).

ity. Moreover, the nature of the media coverage of the crisis is predictable: it will focus on the imperative of giving humanitarian aid. This in turn leads aid agency staff and journalists to try to make the magic formula work, so that they can obtain the funds and recognition that will follow; sometimes they succeed. Consequently, in general, ministers pre-emptively manage the potential embarrassment of incipient disasters by supporting INGO programmes.

Many journalists are now appreciably more sceptical towards INGOs than they were in the early 1990s. Certainly no specialist Africa correspondent would engage in the uncritical echoing of INGO agendas that was common ten years ago. But the formula for television representation of African crises, with the foreign aid worker playing the role of saviour, remains both powerful and common.

Reforms: can they work?

Transparency is the element most regularly missing from institutional aid. In recent years there has been progress in making aid more accountable, notably in several independent assessments of aid programmes,²⁴ and the Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has initiated a code of conduct for voluntary agencies and proposed an independent ombudsman for emergency relief. But progress is slow and uneven. Most secular aid institutions (and northern European protestant NGOs) are growing more responsive to criticisms from academics and policy-makers. But some of the more publicity-orientated (often religiously based) agencies are largely immune from this influence. Though small in comparison with the oligopoly of major agencies that continue to dominate the market, they are fast growing. Some intergovernmental or multilateral agencies are also remote from the demands of their recipients, and show remarkably little sign of change.²⁵

However, even if major secular INGOs and some UN agencies do institute major reforms, what impact will they have? These agencies have lost the initiative in both debate and action on crises in Africa. The INGO sector as a whole supported aggressive external interventions in Africa, notably Operation Restore Hope in Somalia in 1992 and the proposed French-led intervention in eastern Zaire in 1996. The difference between the two episodes is revealing. In 1992, many African leaders were unhappy with the proposed military intervention but offered no critique, in part because they themselves had no solutions on offer. In 1996, the governments that were supporting the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo-Zaire (AFDL) of Laurent Kabila deliberately kept the humanitarian agencies out of the picture, in the (justified) belief that the agencies would try to initiate a response that would

²⁴ *Joint evaluation of emergency assistance to Rwanda* (Copenhagen, 1996); *OLS Review*, 1996.

²⁵ Most liberal aid practitioners can hardly suppress a shudder at the mention of the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO).

thwart their political and military plans. In November 1996, the INGOs clamoured for a military intervention to protect about a million Rwandese in Zaire from what they said was imminent annihilation. The fear was grossly exaggerated, as was dramatically shown when most of the refugees returned, spontaneously and in good health. Military developments on the ground made the intervention unnecessary; it was duly called off, and Kabila went on to topple President Mobutu. In the meantime, the estrangement between the humanitarian agencies and Kabila and his allies deepened, and the agencies were unable to play a constructive role in protecting or feeding the refugees who remained in Zaire. Many were killed or died: victims not only of the anti-Mobutu forces but of a monumental failure of humanitarian policy.

There has, in fact, been a catastrophic collapse in confidence in international humanitarian agencies among many Africans, citizens and politicians alike. The more progressive NGOs forwarding proposals for codes of practice have paid remarkably little attention to engaging with the actual political processes that are beginning to change large parts of Africa. The gravity-defying capacity of development and humanitarian agencies to depoliticize all they touch, to the extent of treating wars as natural disasters, perhaps makes this inevitable.²⁶

Democratizing the aid encounter

Aid exists and will not disappear. It can have a role. It can even help promote democratic politics. The following is a modest proposal for a reformed model of aid-giving. It is very largely a model of aid without aid agencies, with the role of donors simplified to that of bankers and regulators, and an open market for expertise in which poor countries can choose what they want to buy.

A democratized aid transaction has two essential components. One is giving control of the aid to its recipients, as much as possible. The second is subjecting the aid process to democratic scrutiny: if aid is to support democracy, it must be more transparent and involve more groups of people in active participation than other aspects of political life.

The ideal type envisages aid recipients as fund-holders, with the authority to determine how their aid entitlement is to be used. This would follow a process in which, first, the aid donors determine a country's aid entitlement, based on its level of poverty, making a commitment for some time in advance. This and all subsequent decisions and decision-making processes should be made public. Then, the recipient government debates and decides on how the aid is to be allocated. It has a very high degree of discretion in allocating the funds, deciding whether it wants technical assistance, material supplies, salary supplements for teachers and nurses, etc. It may decide to buy expertise from abroad, but there are no strong reasons to suppose that it would prefer to buy the services

²⁶ Cf. Ferguson, *The anti-politics machine*, p. 256; de Waal, *Famine crimes*, ch. 7.

of today's aid agencies rather than those of commercial companies: all would compete equally. Finally, the donors and recipient jointly, regularly and publicly evaluate the assistance and its impact.

More realistically, such an arrangement could be made on a donor-by-donor basis, or a sectoral basis, or a provincial basis, or experimentally in a given country. Undoubtedly, mistakes will be made. But the degree of commitment and energy that will be obtained from the recipients over the long term will be much higher than at present, and the rate of learning the required managerial and political skills much quicker.

The trickiest element is conditionality. Under this proposal, countries that cannot or will not meet the criteria for public accountability would forfeit their assistance. Other conditionalities should be minimal—for example, it would be acceptable to stipulate that aid is not used to substitute for existing resources devoted to health and education, which might free up resources for, say, defence.

For disaster relief, the same criteria apply in general. It is better to be more generous to more accountable governments. But the specific forms of accountability have to be *post hoc* rather than the initial part of the aid process. For example, a public commission of inquiry into a disaster and the relief programme should be stipulated as a condition of assistance (applying both to the recipient country and to the aid institutions handling the relief).

This proposal raises as many questions as it answers. The central one is that it relies heavily on a form of effective democratic decision-making in recipient countries. This is asking a great deal. But it is preferable to pose the issue of political power in an explicit manner, rather than shunning it as the aid industry does at present.

Conclusion

Much aid-speak consists of ways of trying to talk about power without mentioning it by name: 'empowerment' and 'participation' have been joined by 'accountability' as favoured terms. But it is only by acknowledging that aid is essentially a political process with political consequences (up to now mostly anti-democratic), that change can come. It can come about only through radical efforts to change power relations, in ways that may horrify much of the aid establishment (a category that includes most INGOs). Ironically, this will probably not make an enormous difference to the problems of poverty, famine, ill-health, illiteracy and the like. These will be overcome only by progressive political changes in poor countries and by major economic changes (in debt and trade) that cannot be effected by aid resources.

But aid and the aid encounter are important. The first maxim must be: do no harm. Aid at least can shed its illusory aspirations and can provide some modest material benefits in the context of African political initiatives.