

Viewpoint

MYTHICAL FEARS: DEVELOPMENT NGOS AND PUBLIC CRITICISM

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Introduction

Why do most development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) refuse to criticise official donors in public? One reason relates to the different perspectives that NGOs hold regarding the role of official donors in overcoming global poverty. Those who view donors as largely benign (albeit flawed to various extents) partners in the struggle for development are unlikely to ever consider using public criticism when conducting advocacy. An alternative view (which I share) understands absolute poverty in the 21st century as the result of unacceptable failures on the part of powerful actors – including the governments of rich countries and multilateral institutions – to promote development (Green, 2012).

Furthermore, these powerful actors continue to fail the world's most vulnerable people to this day, by creating and perpetuating poverty, as well as by not doing enough to reduce it. Unfortunately, even when this 'power and injustice' view is accepted, some NGO staff believe that official donors will become alienated if publicly challenged. This is an argument I believe to be deeply flawed and this article suggests that many NGOs are held captive by mythical fears of disempowerment as well as loss of funding and influence when challenging injustices and inequalities, particularly those that may be attributed to governments and/or multilateral institutions. It argues for greater levels of NGO advocacy informed by the rights of the poor rather than timid, reactionary responses to the agenda of official donors.

NGOs as agents of change

Regardless of whether change proves to be slow and piecemeal or rapid and dramatic, public as well as private criticism of governments is always necessary to create and maintain pressure on elites. Entitlements and other policies that benefit excluded people are rarely conceded by governments on the basis of

ideology and principle; rather they must be actively claimed by citizens and these claims should be supported by NGOs (Gee, 2011). As long as these claims are evidence-based and constructive, official donors should be able to handle criticism from NGOs. If they cannot, then they have lost the argument before it has even started. In reality, while donor staff probably do not enjoy being made to feel uncomfortable by NGOs, they tend to understand that the role of civil society is not to act as a cheerleader for governments or multilateral agencies. Their role is to act on behalf of – and especially in alliance with – their constituents through informed advocacy and action.

In the realm of official funding in the international development sector, a few NGOs in the UK, such as ActionAid, Christian Aid, Oxfam and War on Want, regularly demonstrate that it is possible to publicly criticise the British government and still receive funding from the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). However, even if it were true that donor funding for NGOs could be jeopardised if NGO staff sensibly challenged donor policy and/or practice in public (and there is no evidence of this being the case), then a whole set of questions would need to be answered. What is the price of silence? What are the implications of suggesting that the world needs tweaks when it is known that radical change is needed? How is an NGO benefiting the poor by increasing its income if these resources are not used to directly address policies and practices that exacerbate poverty? How would poor and excluded people feel if they knew that their NGO partners were biting their tongues in order to maximise income?

While it is so disappointingly rare to see a development NGO speak truth to power in public, I must stress that this is not an 'either/or' debate premised on the decision to either (a) remain quiet or (b) attack donors with all guns blazing. Public advocacy needs to engage with the complexity of policy and practice issues in sustainable human development and development education, and thus should be multifaceted and dynamic. And, of course, NGO staff must always act in a professional manner. But beyond this, instead of fretting about hurting donors' feelings, NGO staff should seek not to be liked by donors but respected by them. Only then will NGOs be able to demonstrate genuine solidarity with those who are marginalised and oppressed. This is critical to the

legitimacy of NGOs and thus to their efforts to remain relevant in the twenty-first century (Banks and Hulme, 2012).

The aid debate

NGOs must be particularly wary of falling into the ‘either/or’ trap when supporting the British government’s commitment to spend 0.7 percent of national income on aid (Department for International Development, 2011). Defending this commitment should not obscure the need to challenge controversial aspects of aid policy (see for example World Development Movement, 2012) or to highlight the wider macroeconomic and governance problems associated with aid dependency (Glennie, 2008). In addition, NGOs should not refuse to criticise the government’s anti-development decisions beyond aid, which often have far greater impacts on poor countries’ prospects for development (Hilary, 2012). Instead, NGOs need to work together and rise to the challenge presented by both those making ill-informed contributions to the aid debate (Barder, 2009) and those in power when their policies hinder rather than help development.

The co-option of NGOs by donor governments was a hot topic when I began to work professionally in this field a decade ago (Little, 2004), as was the increasing efforts of Western governments to manipulate humanitarian agencies into serving political or military objectives and thus undermine their traditional role in emergencies (Weissman, 2004). It does not appear that these lessons have been learnt. The reluctance on the part of most NGOs to publicly criticise official donors continues to unnecessarily restrict their ability to achieve positive change.

Conclusion

The global financial crisis and the wave of austerity that has accompanied it (particularly across Europe) has threatened and, in some cases, already reduced aid flows and other financial and non-financial resources made available to NGOs both for development education work at home and development assistance overseas. In this context, there will be even greater pressure on NGOs to toe their donors’ line on policy and practice issues, supposedly as a way of safeguarding their budgets as far as possible. This reaction should be strongly resisted. The current economic climate has placed even greater

importance on the role of NGOs to critically interface with governments and multilateral institutions both at home and in the global South. NGOs have an opportunity to strengthen their credibility in union with marginalised groups by challenging official donors when they get it wrong and by being pro-active proponents of policies that will tackle the root causes of poverty.

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