

Foreword

Democratization, respect for Human Rights and the construction of a “civilian” society are necessary conditions for human development. Democracy comes first. Without political freedom, development remains a farce. It is true that there can be considerable growth in production in totalitarian régimes, but equitable distribution of that production is dependent upon political pluralism. Such pluralism also determines the durability of the chosen developmental model. If people do not feel involved – if the government systematically disregards their aspirations – then economic stagnation and political repression are the inevitable consequences. If the events of recent years in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have taught us anything, it must surely be that totalitarian rule does not work in the long run. So it is gratifying that throughout Africa the one-party state is in retreat and is having to make room for multi-party politics.

With the return of the military to their barracks during the last ten years, Latin America has also made considerable progress towards the democratization of society.

Democratization increases the likelihood that the second condition for development – respect for Human Rights – will be met. The concept of Human Rights is a broad one; at its very basis lies protection from political imprisonment, intimidation and torture, but the rights to an adequate food supply, to shelter, to education and to medical attention must also be counted among elementary Human Rights. Political democracy – a system of government which incorporates “checks and balances”, in which citizens can cross swords with one another and with the authorities over patterns of development – is the best guarantee that these rights will be respected in practice. In this context, experiences in Latin America and, more recently, on the African continent are very encouraging. In South Africa, democratization of the system, the abolition of apartheid and respect for Human Rights are also proving to be inextricably linked. As the third condition for development, I mentioned the construction of a “civilian” society. Alongside party politics and the government, new forms of organization will have to find a place. Organizational forms that are capable of contributing independently to the progress of society. These would include organizations of farmers, trade unions, environmental pressure groups, con-

sumer organizations, development groups of the landless and the urban poor, women's rights organizations and such like. A "civilian" society is the guarantee that democracy and Human Rights are not temporary phenomena. The "civilian" society ultimately ensures that development is of a lasting nature, carried and supported by the citizenry, and respectful of the natural environment and thus of the generations that will follow us.

Elsewhere in the world the "civilian" society has also been brought closer by the developments of recent years in Europe. These have led to the end of the Cold War, to détente between the Super Powers and, thus, to a decrease in their conflicts over spheres of influence in the South. In various areas of tension, peace has come closer, and a relaxation in international relations also leads to greater freedom within countries, making the rôle of the non-governmental sector more important.

This alone would be reason enough to say that this book – which has come about with the help of a workshop made up of Novib partners – is being published at a thoroughly appropriate moment.

The tasks of NGOs, their potential and the dangers which they face are presented in a systematic and new manner. This was much needed. Whilst whole libraries have been filled on the subject of the rôle of governments in the developmental process, the literature on NGOs is still extremely limited. Now that the driving force of the popular movements has become so clear, a systematic analysis of this phenomenon is indispensable.

In the book that you are about to read, Theunis describes how, in recent times, governments and international organizations occupied with the problems of development have come to realize that NGOs can contribute to the effectiveness and the legitimacy of the development programme. The donors have good reason for this: NGOs are often the closest to those very poor who form the target group of the policies in question. NGOs can gain the confidence of the people for whom so much has been decided without their input sooner than governments and large international development bureaucracies. Without misjudging the importance of good public services, or disregarding the limited capacities of NGOs, it remains true that NGOs are perfectly suited to make development programmes more effective and reliable.

In this context, I found it striking that the most recent Human Development Report of UNDP (1991) does not deal with the importance of NGOs so much in an idealistic sense, but in the chapter "Efficiency in Human Development". The example is given of a Novib partner, BRAC, which is capable of providing a child in Bangladesh with a year of primary education for just 5 dollars. Through the involvement of village elders and of parents, through the use of simple materials, and through an easily implemented and locally administered training-system for prospective teachers, costs can be kept low. This is just one of many examples that prove that the days of amateurism and ineffectiveness have long been confined to the past.

Emphasis on professionalism and efficiency, in itself correct, does mean, however, that NGOs must keep a close watch on their own nature. As soon as

they find themselves too much on the side of the donor who takes care of the financing, as soon as financial cost-benefit-analysis becomes the sole yardstick, the danger looms of a gap opening up between the NGOs and the recipients of aid. The NGO would then lose its specific rôle.

In this context I would like to raise two further points, which should also be of importance to the NGO-divisions of UN institutions: NGOs are more than merely extensions of the official donors. They do not exist simply to fill up those parts of the development policy which governmental institutions cannot reach! They have their own history, their own following, their own policy and their own network of contacts in the South. Financing by governments and multilateral institutions is desirable only as long as NGOs can continue to fulfil their own rôle.

The second point involves the range of NGO work. In my opinion, NGOs should be more than just donors. Those who maintain that they are on the side of the very poor, those who derive their strength from the trust of the people for whom aid is intended, will rapidly find that their task encompasses more than simply assistance. Fighting poverty, inequality and injustice in developing countries demands active struggle in the countries of the North. Without fundamental changes in the rich countries and substantial restructuring of international relations, even the best thought-out development projects will eventually be no more than the notorious drop in the ocean.

This is asking a lot of NGOs. It does not mean that every professional aid organization has to man the barricades, but it does demand that every NGO representative adopts a questioning attitude towards the environment in which a development project is being set up. How does it relate to the status quo? Who is in charge? Is it conducive to necessary changes in the balance of power? What is its contribution to democracy and respect for Human Rights?

A "civilian" society needs questioning citizens, and these citizens would do well to organize themselves into movements that are capable of co-operating, on their own terms, in the creation of a just social order in their own country and, as an extension of this, in the world community as a whole. International networks of NGOs, consciously oriented towards influencing macro-economic policy (trade, environment, debt) and multilateral institutions in both the South and the North, are therefore indispensable factors on the road towards a more effective and consistent struggle against poverty. Therein also lies the importance of a strong non-governmental movement. "The South Smiles" is a major contribution to the strengthening of this movement, with its rich catalogue of insights, experiences and strategies.

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