

Feature

Development

NGOs: The "Miracle Cure"?

In recent years, NGOs have been presented as a universal panacea for all that ails developing countries — a sort of "miracle cure". They have been working in the fields of healthcare, of credit, of education, of the environment, on just about anything you can think of. What is interesting is the almost overwhelming good press such organisations have received, particularly in the English news press of Bangladesh.

There are of course a few people who have spoken out against NGOs, but since they have mostly been either left-wing intellectuals who have been written off as "radical", or right-wing reactionaries who find them too liberal and progressive, the world at large has paid little attention to such protests. As a consequence, there has been a lack of in-depth investigation into what may NGOs are actually doing, and almost no attempt to qualitatively assess their performance and to see to what extent they are practicing what they are preaching. As one who believes that NGOs can play a crucial role in poverty alleviation, and that some of them already do, I nonetheless feel that an urgent need exists to delve more deeply into these issues, and to make such information more accessible to the public.

Let us take the issue of finance. The vast majority of NGOs are externally funded. They all claim that they are working to better the lot of the poor of this country, which is indisputably a laudable aim, and yet in many cases their lifestyles would appear to strongly indicate otherwise. Why do so many NGOs, including one of the biggest ones of all, have air-conditioned buildings? Surely this is an outrageous waste of limited resources. Nor are those air-conditioners all there for the sole purpose of keeping their computer rooms cool!

Another major symbol of prestige has become the Pajero and the Nissan vehicles, also frequently air-conditioned. Anyone who has visited the rural areas of Bangladesh, particularly those where NGO activity is heavily concentrated, will find themselves amazed by the number of Pajeros which go thundering past amidst the dust, rickshaws bullock carts and occasional private cars.

One famous NGO is also well-known in development circles for having had fifteen air-conditioned Pajeros in its car pool! However, there is no point in singling out only one of the bigger NGOs, since the majority of them suffer from the "Prestige Pajero" malaise.

Another interesting area to look at is staff salaries. It is enlightening to see not only how much many of the senior staff in such organisations earn, but also the perks they receive. It's true that you don't have to be poor to serve the poor, but it would help if so many people weren't getting rich at it. It is even more fascinating when you note the drastic contrast this presents with what the field workers, who are the ones doing the essential work at the rural level, receive for their efforts. Nobody is suggesting that senior development practitioners should have to "suffer for their art", but it would be a lot healthier if the disparity in salaries in such organisations was not quite so

by Nina Chowdhury

striking! Perhaps the car pool money could be better utilised elsewhere?

Then we have the "rural craft development and marketing" sister organisations of some of the major NGOs, whose profits run into lakhs, and how neither pay taxes which the smallest of business organisations are required to, nor give the crafts people who work for them a decent share of these enormous profits. Only the showrooms get more lavish, expensive branches pop up in the international capitals of the world and the management go on extensive foreign "business" trips!

And these are just the issues that could be raised with NGOs which are carrying out legitimate operations. There are an estimated thirteen thousand NGOs in Bangladesh, and nobody seems to have any idea what the vast majority of them are doing. Yet virtually everyone you ask nowadays has at least one family member who is working for some NGO.

It sounds like a gigantic job-creation scheme!

The mushrooming of so many tiny, obscure NGOs raises a whole different set of questions, not the least of which is what on earth they are doing. "So and so is working for an NGO" has become a useful catch-all phrase which is about as uninformative as they come. What so many NGOs are doing, and one of course excludes here the major ones that everyone has heard of, seems to be a rather murky business.

And perhaps therein lies the "clue" in the word "business". Because that is exactly what development has become — a business. Expect that they do not have to show results, nor are they accountable for the failure of any project or programme — as any business concern would require. This is true not just at the international level, with donors dealing out funds lavishly, often without asking any of the detailed questions that



ICDDR,B: Lessons Not Just for the Developing World, but Also for the Developed World

Hillary Apprised of Activities



Mrs Clinton visiting ICDDR,B

Mrs Hillary Rodham Clinton, and her daughter Chelsea visited the ICDDR,B Dhaka hospital for an hour on April 4 during her visit to Bangladesh. They were accompanied by Mrs Sarwari Rahman, Minister for Social Welfare and H E Ambassador Merrill, says a press release.

"I have heard a great deal about the Centre and the importance of its work for the world, and am pleased to be able to come here to see it for myself," said Mrs. Clinton, as she was introduced to the Centre's Director, Dr Demissie Habte. Mrs Clinton reviewed the Centre's research programmes on health and family planning and noted that there were many important lessons not just for the developing world, but also for the developed world including the United States. A common theme in the current leg of her trip has been the successes in Bangladesh which have application in the United States and other developed countries: the Grameen Bank, Oral Rehydration Solution (ORS) and the community outreach systems for health and family planning services developed at ICDDR,B.

In view of her involvement in the US health care reform, Mrs. Clinton was particularly interested in ORS and its potential to save nearly half a billion dollars a year in health care costs in the US alone.

Doctors at the Centre and medical schools including the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, have long advocated that ORS also has great potential for industrialized nations. Over 220,000 children are hospitalized in the US each year for severe gastrointestinal illnesses. All these children are put on intravenous drips at an average cost of \$2,300 when a few packets of ORS could be used for little over a tenth of the cost.

Another example of the Centre's work that particularly impressed Mrs. Clinton, and Americans everywhere, was the work of the emergency team sent to Goma, last year, when cholera was killing thousands of Rwandans at the teeming refugee camps in Goma, Zaire. USAID Administrator Brian Atwood called on the expertise of the most prestigious and knowledgeable organization in the world. An eight-member team of experts from the Centre was quickly dispatched to Zaire, where they provided briefings and technical assistance to the international relief agencies. Substantial changes, such as large gauge IV needles, a faster rate of initial rehydration and effective use of ORS, were introduced. These changes helped slash mortality rates in the refugee camps from as high as nearly 50% to less than 1%.

Centre's Nutrition Rehabilitation Unit, several research projects and showed keen interest in the Centre's work on V Cholerae 0139, the new cholera strain. In late 1992, Centre epidemiologists began investigating a new virulent strain of cholera — the first to appear in more than 100 years. This strain, called V Cholerae 0139, is now spreading rapidly through Asia and is virtually certain to cause a new global pandemic of cholera. Within weeks of its discovery, Centre microbiologists developed diagnostic antisera that was then sent around the world. Clinicians described the pathophysiology of the disease and environmental microbiologists established its mode of spread in surface waters. Through the Centre's extraordinary effort, the world was quickly warned of the dangers of this new organism, allowing preventive measures to be taken.

Mrs Clinton was also briefed on the Centre's role in providing technical support to the Government of Bangladesh's internationally acclaimed "family planning success story". She was briefed on the effectiveness of the Centre's Mother Child Health and Family Planning (MCH-FP) in Matlab where the health workers not only counsel women on contraception, but also provide information on primary health care, and nutrition at home.

An Interview with Andoula Vassiliou, President of WFUNA

The Fifth Regional Conference of the United Nations Associations in Asia and the Pacific, was held recently in Dhaka (24-28th March), hosted by UNA Bangladesh. On this occasion, The Daily Star took the opportunity of interviewing the President of the World Federation of United Nations Associations, Andoula Vassiliou, on the role of the WFUNA in international affairs.

DS: Firstly, can you give a brief description of the WFUNA, and clarify for our readers how its role differs from that of the UN?

AV: Andoula Vassiliou: The WFUNA is an international non-governmental organisation. It is one of the oldest NGOs, established in 1946 (one year after the creation of the UN). It is a people's association as opposed to an inter-governmental one, a parallel organisation to the UN belonging to the people, whose primary objective is to promote the principles of the UN and make them known to ordinary people. There are national UNAs in about 82 member states of the UN.

DS: Why are there only 82 UNAs out of over 180 UN members?

AV: Because UN member states aren't always aware of our activities — we need to go out, organise and motivate people to create their own national UNAs. One of our biggest weaknesses is lack of funds. And in many instances politi-

cally unstable situations, especially in Africa and Latin America, hinders our work in these countries. Our major target is to establish UNAs in every member country, in order to initiate pressure groups on governments to implement the conventions adopted by those governments.

I must say that I was very impressed to discover the success of the work carried out by women's groups and NGOs in Bangladesh. I regret I had no time to go out and see rural groups in action, but I have spoken to and listened to papers presented by those involved. We have adopted the proposals of women's groups in Bangladesh, at this conference, to raise certain issues of vital importance to this region at the upcoming Beijing Conference.

DS: Apart from women, according to the WFUNA, at present what are the major international issues facing the world?

AV: Environment, population, education...

DS: So the Copenhagen Social Summit was tackling the right issues?

AV: Yes. As far as the WFUNA are concerned, two major issues are peace and security. Without these, you cannot have prosperity. Peace and security must be emphasised at the human and social level. We must promote economic humanitarian and social cooperation.

by Rashida Ahmad

DS: Apart from global development issues, politically, the end of the Cold War appears to have entailed the rise of a single superpower. There is concern among some UN member states that American interests are perhaps in danger of dominating the UN agenda — what is the WFUNA's view on this?

AV: Most UNAs resent such domination of superpowers. We avoid in the WFUNA the supremacy of any UN. This is why regional conferences like this are important. They give developing countries the opportunity to create a feeling of solidarity against supremacy by any such power.

As for the UN, we feel it is extremely necessary for democratic changes to take place, especially within the Security Council, to avoid such supremacy of any one power over others.

The 35th Plenary Meeting of the WFUNA (there international conferences of the Federation are held every two years) will be held at San Francisco in June this year, to coincide with the 50th Anniversary of the UN Charter. The major theme will be 'The UN at 50. Achievements, Problems and Challenges'. All UNAs will have the opportunity to express their feelings and beliefs on how the democratisation of the UN can take place. The final report will be presented to the Secretary-General.

DS: There is a perception among developing countries that under Boutros-Ghali, the UN has moved more towards peacekeeping, and that this may be diverting much needed resources away from development.

AV: I don't believe it was the intention of Boutros-Ghali to move more towards peacekeeping activities. Rather the situation at the time, with the break-up of the USSR led to an explosion of conflicts and political instability. It was, you could say, a flame which ignited ethnic conflicts in other parts of the world also.

DS: Did the UN act appropriately in Bosnia, did they do enough to perform their role correctly?

AV: Yes. I believe they acted properly, but they lacked the power to act efficiently. As was the case in Somalia and Rwanda. I must emphasise that I do not believe it had anything to do with religion. For example, in Bosnia the persecution of Muslims by Christians occurred, but in Cyprus it was the other way around. Here in Bangladesh the persecution by Pakistanis of people of the same

religion took place. The problem is the evil that is inherent in humans that results in the failure to respect the fundamental rights to belief, to language and to speech.

DS: So you believe that the UN should be given more power in order to address such problems as ethnic cleansing?

AV: Yes, it is crucial. The problem with the UN is that they are faced with problems that they are powerless to address. And if ethnic cleansing is allowed to continue, it will be detrimental to all of humanity. We must ensure minority rights in all countries, but the problem is to do this without endangering the rights of the majority and the concept of the nation states. The Federation's role is to support the UN in facing these problems, to make known the UN's peace resolutions and to motivate people to implement them. We also observe Boutros-Ghali's statement that "Peace is not just political peace, but human peace". Thus, his agenda for peace is naturally followed by the development agenda.

DS: How is it possible to put one before the other, surely in many cases it is the state of underdevelopment that leads to such conflicts, on the other hand conflict entails social disintegration?

AV: Of course you cannot say which comes first. In some cases we must cope with social and economic conditions. In other cases political unrest must come before social development. But in both cases we need the teeth with which to bite, in other words, money. We must increase the availability of funds above all else. It is time developing countries realised that they must become more responsible and raise funds, for example by reducing expenditure on armaments.

DS: And has this happened, for example, was such a resolution passed at the Social Summit?

AV: Well, the report of the Social Summit has not come out yet, but I believe that proposals such as taxing currency transactions were made, which will create a considerable amount.

DS: Apart from ensuring the availability of such funds what have been, or will be the achievements of the major UN summits in the 90's? What has the UN achieved from Rio to Copenhagen?

AV: The major success of these summits have been to set the basis and targets for development. A platform has now been created. Before this there was a lot of effort, but in different directions. What was

established in Rio, Vienna, Cairo and Copenhagen, and will be established in Beijing and Ankara, will help us all to work towards concrete goals.

Dream Water Provides a Shaky Foundation for Peace

by Barry Chamish Jerusalem

In order to secure a peace treaty, with Jordan, Israel accepted a water agreement that could not be kept.

The agreement commits Israel to supplying Jordan with over 100 million cubic metres (cu m) of water a year from its own supplies, or about eight per cent of its annual supply. The problem is that Israeli stocks are inadequate to handle the country's own water needs.

Says Gideon Tsur, Israeli Water Commissioner and a critic of the agreement: "In a drought year we won't be able to comply with the terms."

The peace treaty was signed last year without even being debated in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. The opposition simply agreed it without reading the fine print. Now the facts of the agreement are beginning to sink in and its architects from the Labour Party are under increasing pressure to justify them.

The chief architect was Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's Adviser on Settlement, Noah Kinari, who led the team that reached the agreement. In late January he quit the team because Rabin's rival, Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, was upset about the slow pace of implementation and appointed his own man to oversee Kinari.

The agreement was never intended to be viable, as another member of the negotiating team, speaking on condition of anonymity, explains: "We were working on the theory of mutual inconvenience. Everything was kept vague. For instance, we agreed to cooperate in increasing water collection by 50 million cu m of water a year of which we would be able to use only 3 million cu m of water on condition that Jordan pay for the project."

"On paper it looks like we're handing over 47 million cu m of water a year but this is dream water. We estimated the engineering and construction costs of such a project to be \$250 million. The price of a gallon of water should be far too high to make construction feasible. So really we gave away theoretical water."

Similarly, Israel agreed to desalinate 20 million cu m of water a year of brackish salt water that flows from springs around Lake Kinneret and give

country's national water authority, says "the Jordanians feel that because we regulate the level of the Kinneret, water that would naturally flow into their territory is blocked." Because of the peace process, we have decided to accept their point of view and return the water.

Israel's peace treaty with Jordan was secured with the help of a water agreement based on "dream water," reports a Gemini News Service correspondent, who finds that the water-sharing figures just don't add up.



Jordani half, on condition that Amman pay for transportation and equipment.

As hydrologist Martin Sherman, a former adviser to the Agriculture Ministry, notes: "By the time the water is desalinated and transported to Jordan, it will cost as much as petrol. In the end they won't be able to afford this free water, will back out of paying its costs and Israel will keep the over-priced water." The same situation does not occur along the shores of

the Yarmuk River. There Israel has agreed to reduce its current pumping rate of 73 million cu m of water to 25 million cu m give Jordan the difference. This is not dream water and its loss is a source of controversy.

Says Sherman: "The government is so desperate to show any kind of peace achievement that it is subordinating the country's long-term good to short-term political expedience."

An official of Mekorot, the

water negotiator is more sanguine. "The Jordanians know the problem," he says, "and when it comes up they'll compromise. If they don't, they'll lose the water and the peace."

— GEMINI NEWS About the Author: BARRY CHAMISH is Editor of Inside Israel newsletter.

By the year 2030:

Central and Latin America's population will increase by more than half, from 475m to 715m

Asia's population will be as big as the world population in 1987, increasing from 3.4bn today to 5.1bn



Europe will experience the lowest increase: one per cent, from 731m to 742m

Africa's population will more than double from 720m to 1.6bn

70% of the population increase will occur in the very poorest developing countries where average income is less than \$2 per day

Source: Population Council