

Canada and Africa: Prospects for Internationalism and Common Cause

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I am pleased to be back at the University of Alberta. The last time I was here it was for a conference on Africa and the G8 in 2002, at the invitation of the University of Alberta International Centre. At that time I had the good fortune of sharing a panel with Susanne Soederberg, who was then a U of A professor. She later moved to Queen's where she is a professor in the department of Global Development Studies. It was at her invitation that I was able to spend an academic year at Queen's and we were able to make connections between the academic and activist/practitioner worlds through some joint research and teaching. As someone who has been working within the international NGO sector in Canada for many years, I have been interested in studying the political economy of the aid industry and its implications for our work for social justice and peace in the world. I am pleased to be able to continue making connections with academics studying Africa through this conference and thank you for this invitation.

I will be speaking to you about some of the issues and dilemmas facing international NGOs today dedicated to international solidarity with people in Africa. No doubt there are many related implications for your own work as scholars – however, I will leave that to you to elaborate.

My working premise is that international solidarity is necessary for local social solidarity, human dignity and survival. I define solidarity as the collaboration to defend the possibilities for people to assert their aspirations and improve their lives. The space and possibilities for solidarity are material (economic), political and cultural.

Yesterday, during the panel on resource extraction in Africa, I noticed an example of what this solidarity means, of how we are connected. During our discussion of the potential for resource extraction to contribute to development in Africa, one of the presenters commented that “African leaders would be happy to have to deal with the problem of five hundred ducks dying in a pond”. We did not have a chance to discuss this comment during the panel. However, it struck me at the time that the comparison being made revealed a very limited understanding of how we in Canada are connected with people in Africa, and therefore what the basis of our solidarity might be.

I just returned to Canada a couple of weeks ago from Mali where I spent a few days with pastoralists in the Sahel, near the Mali/Mauritania border. The communities there are facing the destruction of their livelihoods and way of life, and eventual dislocation, due to loss of water through desertification and climate change. In the past two years, the water table has fallen so sharply that a vast area can no longer support populations that have survived in this difficult and

fragile ecosystem for centuries. I can assure you that African leaders do have to worry about what happens to five hundred ducks in the Alberta tar sands. And to say that it was only five hundred ducks that died in a pond is like saying that the canary in the mine was just a little bird that died in a hole in the ground.

As I have listened to many of the presentations over the past few days I have been struck by how pervasive the lens of the post-World War II “development” project, with its emphasis on the aid relationship, remains in the study of Africa. So much so that the lens itself is not examined. As someone who is frequently afflicted with middle-aged forgetfulness, I sometimes find myself looking for my glasses only to realize they are already on my face. I think our understanding of our relationship as peoples – as fellow citizens of the planet, suffers from not examining sufficiently the lens with which we have come to look at the so-called African problem – which is defined by poverty, violence, conflict, disease, and the failure of leadership. While this construct may move people in the West to express concern and sympathy for the “other”, for those who suffer, it also tends to obscure history, and agency, and diversity – and therefore tends to reinforce the belief that we have indeed reached the end of history, and that real change, transformative change, is simply not possible.

I would like to share with you one experience that shaped my own understanding of why it is so important that we recognize the ways in which the aid paradigm has come to define our solidarity with people living in Africa, and that we apply our research and creativity and resources to re-creating that solidarity, and finding, as Leonard Cohen would say, the “cracks that let the light in”.

In January of 2002, I attended the first Africa Social Forum, which was held in Bamako, Mali, as a preparatory gathering to the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The Africa Social Forum was organized by activists from all regions of the continent and from many sectors, including farmers, trade unionists, students, academics, and journalists. I was one of a handful of non-Africans, committed to international solidarity with those movements, who were invited to attend as observers. The Forum lasted a week with workshops and plenary sessions on a wide range of issues including human rights, the WTO, debt cancellation, women’s rights, peace-building, and democratization.

In the course of that stimulating, somewhat chaotic week, I heard many stories and many points of view. Youth challenged the older generations to make way for new kinds of leadership and political action. Women asserted their determination to not be marginalized within movements. Farmers criticized NGOs and academics for appropriating their struggles and their voices.

For someone visiting from Canada, and from the world of international NGOs, there was one element in this forum that was conspicuously absent: in the course of that week I never heard anyone say that Africa needs more aid. No one said that Africa does not require aid either. The subject just did not come up.

And yet, in Canada, leading up to the G8, and continuing until now, much of the advocacy for Africa has focussed on the aid relationship – to the detriment of the many other ways in which the lives of people living in Africa and people living in Canada are connected.

It is important to look at international development NGOs in the context of the challenge posed by this conference because of the ways in which development NGOs influence public discourse and understanding, and the ways in which we influence public policy – or not.

I want to speak about some of the ambiguities and dilemmas of international development NGOs (who have an expressed commitment to international solidarity) given their integration in the aid industry and their roles in the aid regime.

Northern-based international NGOs have diverse histories of activity on the continent. Today we are active in most African countries as employers, service providers, donors, advocates, and campaigners. In this multiplicity of roles, we are also aligned with a variety of local social and political actors.

In Canada, we relate to governments and constituencies in a variety of often contradictory ways as well: as contractors, fundraisers, researchers, educators, advocates, and campaigners. We are all dependent, albeit to varying degrees, on the aid establishment, and its development model for funding, and for our own public identity and authority.

We are challenged from many directions. As we seek continued inclusion in the official development project through our funding relationships with official donors, we too are asked to harmonize and align our efforts for what the OECD calls greater “aid effectiveness”. And we are confronted with the ways in which, even in the name of strengthening African civil society, Northern NGOs are often the agents of legitimization and reproduction of the very relations of power that we seek to transform. We run the risk of being quite effective in roles that are neither helpful nor desirable: as legitimizers (in the North as well as the South) of flawed and ultimately destructive models of development; as facilitators of consent with structures of global governance that are undemocratic; as agents of discipline and conditionality toward our civil society ‘partners’ on the continent, and as usurpers of the voice and authority of indigenous African associations and social movements.

So we have some dilemmas: How do we support civil society actors in Africa to build cultures of citizenship and democratic participation when the policies and relationships of the aid regime reproduce and reinforce African governments’ primary accountabilities to debt creditors and aid donors? And when the global institutions that control so much of the policy agenda and space within which African citizens are asserting their aspirations are themselves anti-democratic?

How do we support democratic development within an aid framework of “good governance” that to date has had a restrictive focus on strengthening institutions without adequate consideration of the effects of poverty, inequality, and discrimination on political participation and representation?

The mainstream good governance discourse assigns civil society a “watch-dog” role (the enforcer) and a service delivery role (the grass-roots connection). What is more risky, because it is less welcome, is the role of dissent and proposition (especially when the local established

order is actually fulfilling its role of fiscal management within the neo-liberal logic). We see an increasing acceptance in liberal democracies for surveillance of ourselves and our neighbours, and a confounding capacity for the neo-liberal project to endure in spite of all evidence of its disastrous consequences for humanity.

We are left with “poverty-reduction” rather than development– something like pain management, rather than healing. The poverty reduction agenda, now codified in the Millennium Development Goals, has minimal, vague, and affordable demands, but where does it take us? And where does it leave us? If we did start budgeting .7% for ODA **in its current form**, if we did provide greater market access to developing countries **who still have serious weaknesses in production**; if we did cancel all debt – **within existing frameworks of macro-economic conditionality and de-regulation of capital flows**, would we necessarily be better off in terms of fulfillment of rights and environmental stewardship?

This is a key challenge for NGOs that are dependent on the aid regime in both material and conceptual terms. In a crude sense, at the level of popular discourse in the North, emancipation is reduced to poverty reduction. And poverty reduction is reduced to the commodification of care, as illustrated, in an especially crass way by the Red campaign and Vanity Fair's special issue on Africa last July.

This distortion reached an almost fever-dream pitch in the 2005 Live8 extravaganza broadcast around the world during the G8 summit at Glen Eagles, climaxing with Madonna's maudlin parading on stage of a young Ethiopian woman who had survived famine “thanks to us.”

During a time of rising global campaigning around the future of Africa, it is striking to what extent the voices of the great majority of people living their lives and building their futures in African countries are rarely heard outside the continent – and the messages broadcast by others in their name, and ostensibly in their service, more often than not reduce their lives from historical, complex and diverse aspirations for survival and self-determination, to a “disaster” a “basket case”; an aid project to be managed within a logical framework, a problem to be solved with the knowledge, technology and power of others.

Our short-comings as agents of international solidarity cannot be attributed solely to our integration into the conceptual and political framework of the aid industry. The obstacles to change are powerful and complex and we all face serious difficulties in proposing alternatives to the current order that can unite and mobilize people.

When and if we get the “policy space”, do we know what do we do with it? How do we construct politics of common cause in a world of such unequal, and ever-widening, gaps in material circumstances and interests? What is the internationalist political project in a world of such breathtaking inequality? Inequality that should be noted by much more than who lives on a dollar a day. Inequality in terms of rights, and access to opportunity and to freedom (to move, to travel, to associate, participate in civic life, to marry or not, to have children or not, to integrity of the body, and security of old age). What is the “terrain of solidarity” in such a world? What vision, what action connects and strengthens local struggles across such divides?

We do not have easy answers to those questions- but we should not let that deter us from a serious interrogation of our assumptions and our strategies. It should also not deter us from a serious commitment to the investigation and creation of alternatives based on shared responsibility and common cause.

Public taxation for the redistribution of wealth and investment in public goods is a legitimate feature of a healthy national society. And the reform of aid architecture and modalities of international investments for the global public good should be pursued.

It is our challenge as citizen organizations dedicated to global solidarity to engage with the aid system as advocates for public policy reform, while still raising and sharing independent resources to support courageous, creative people and institutions working in difficult circumstances for a better world for all of us. And if, as we hope, official aid policy really does begin to treat ODA as “public funds for the public good”, international NGOs, who have in many ways reinforced and benefitted from the privatization of aid, and from a dominant paradigm of a chauvinistic, technocratic development model, will need to move more decisively from being agents of aid delivery, to the more gritty politics of global citizenship, in which organizations and movements are expressions of citizen agency with all the risk and raggedness that that implies.

This change would also require greater imagination and vitality to respond to the public desire for change and for hope. A poll released in March, 2006 by Gallup international showed that Canadians identified the global gap between rich and poor as the world’s number one problem by more than two to one over any other problem. And, in late January of this year, the CBC released a poll in which Canadians named the environment and war as the top two most pressing problems facing today's world.

Another sign of Canadians’ concern about global issues is the public support for the Make Poverty History campaign. The campaign platform, with its emphasis on aid, may have some problematic features, but the mobilization of people as citizens has had a powerful effect on the receptiveness of government to civil society advocacy on international development concerns. Our colleagues who lobby Parliament notice a substantial change in terms of increased interest and respect, because Parliamentarians are hearing from their constituencies – from voters – and they know they can't run from those issues. We now need to build on this concern to reclaim, or create, the qualities of solidarity that have been corrupted by the official development project, and use our resources and relationships for politics of common cause that are open-ended, dynamic and organic, supporting and revealing agency, and cooperative in the full sense of shared risk and opportunity.

People often talk about the problem of “donor fatigue”. Lately, as I spend more time with students and younger adults, people whose future horizon is longer than mine, and certainly longer than the men in power today, I am struck by what I would call “De-construction fatigue”.

There is a hunger for proposition. The American author, Rebecca Solnit, wrote regarding a recent inspiring visit with the Zapatistas in Mexico: “The fantasy of a revolution is that it will make everything different, and regime revolutions generally make a difference, sometimes a

significantly positive one, but the making of radical differences in everyday life is a more protracted, incremental process. It's where leaders are irrelevant and every life matters.”

In a protracted, incremental process, international development NGOs could apply ourselves now and going forward to being citizen advocates regarding our own government's policies (not just development assistance, but also, finance, foreign affairs, international trade, agriculture, defense, immigration and citizenship, health, natural resources, etc.). If things must change, then things will have to change. Bold leadership is required.

As Gerry Caplan has said in his recent book, *The **Betrayal of Africa***,

“If the West were serious about "helping" Africa, it would not use the World Trade Organization as a tool of the very richest against the very poorest. It would not insist on private sector solutions that don't benefit the poor or create employment. It would not dump its surplus food and clothing on African countries. It would not force down the price of African commodities sold on the world market. It would not tolerate tax havens and the massive tax evasion they facilitate. It would not strip Africa of its non-renewable resources without paying a fair price. It would not continue to drain away some of Africa's best brains. It would not charge prohibitive prices for medicines. In a word, there would be an end to the 101 ways in which rich countries systematically ensure that more wealth pours out of Africa into the West than the West transfers to Africa.”

More specifically, in Canada, we could press our government to

- Enact legislation that requires Canadian corporations operating outside Canada to meet and be accountable to international human rights, labour and environmental standards in all their operations worldwide. Ensure transparent corporate reporting against these standards and make Canadian public support to corporations contingent upon compliance.
- Demonstrate leadership within global financial institutions to put a brake on the imposition of neo-liberal policies of liberalization, de-regulation, privatization and commercialization of land and resources of fragile economies.
- Promote local investment, strengthen public finances and allow more progressive tax systems through coordinated measures to control capital flight, tax havens, and tax competition.
- Ensure that royalties and other payments from extractive industries reflect the full cost of natural resource depletion.
- Contribute our fair share of public funds for wealth re-distribution to re-invest in public infrastructure destroyed by structural adjustment programs, and in poverty reduction and social development to favour sustainable livelihoods through productive local and regional economies.

Solidarity does include sharing money – whether in a family, a village, an association, or among nations. We should continue to raise funds to facilitate the sharing of resources among people

who want to make a positive difference in their communities and in the world; using those funds to sustain the capacity to take risks, to innovate, to dissent, and to engage in long-term accompaniment based on mutual respect and accountability – accountability to those in Canada who share their money, and accountability to those in Africa in whose names we carry out our work.

In our communications and campaigning we should strive to be honest witnesses, challenging the rationale for so-called “necessary illusions” (such as that we can “save” Africa through aid) and communicating more clearly and more honestly what we know is necessary to honour the trust, the needs, and aspirations of the people with whom we cooperate.

To be more effective in supporting the emancipation processes of the post-colonial, post-development world, we must be prepared to support the possibilities of people to create their own futures and to accompany them in struggles that are long-term, complex, and often full of uncertainty. We must be prepared to contest the continuing imposition of existing development models, by existing elites, within existing international power relations – all of which have proven in the past to be destructive of the interests of the majority of people in the global South, and destructive of prospects for the kind of international cooperation our world so urgently needs.