International NGOs and the challenge of modernity

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The forces associated with economic globalisation and the apparent supremacy of market forces have unleashed a range of political and social processes that have served, and were indeed designed, to enrich and empower the few at the expense of the majority. These include phenomena such as the rise in armed conflict, threats to food security, the loss of livelihoods and traditional ways of life of millions of people worldwide, the commodification of social provision, assaults on national sovereignty, and the privatisation of citizenship. However, the author argues, the most significant impact of globalisation is the 'localisation' of social and political struggle, and the emergence of new forms of international solidarity. Many NGOs have too readily succumbed to the view that globalisation in its present form is inevitable and irreversible, and have accommodated to it by trading their essential values for technical professionalism, often imported from the private sector. However, if NGOs are to assume their place as part of a transformational movement for social justice, they must rediscover and foster the values of citizen participation and develop a genuine respect for diversity.

Fifty years after the historic launch of the global development era with the 20 January 1949 'Four Points' speech by US President Harry Truman—as *de facto* leader of the 'Free World'— the very concept of 'development' is coming under fierce scrutiny, its most basic premises and tenets fundamentally challenged from all points on the political spectrum, whether the far right, the hard left, or the liberal centre.

Likewise, 30 years after the attempt to re-tool this global development project with the 1969–70 Report of the Commission on International Development, Partnership for Development (or 'The Pearson Report', after its Chairman, Lester B. Pearson), the much-heralded promise of equal partnership between North and South in promoting global prosperity and equity has been swamped by the more ruthless competitive mechanisms of what has come to be known as economic globalisation.

In the process, the global imperative announced in 1980 by the Independent Commission on International Development Issues, North–South, A Programme for Survival (or 'The Brandt Report', after Commission Chair, Willy Brandt), has been mocked and marginalised, as though its vision of pragmatic global interdependence was just a quixotic and idealistic fancy rather than the minimal blueprint for global survival that this actually represented.

More recent attempts to bring a modicum of rational constraint to the anarchy of the global market and corporate licence, such as that manifest in the 1995 Report of the Commission on Global Governance (Ramphal and Carlsson 1995)—with its urgent emphasis on promoting

global security defined in terms that included protecting the global commons, nurturing social cohesion, and conserving the natural environment—have failed to forestall the destructive impact of the forces of globalisation, in spite of a recurring diagnosis of a world gone wrong.

Now, as the twenty-first century begins, professionals and activists in international cooperation for global justice and peace are at the cusp of a fundamental global transition. This transition could possibly signal the end of the traumatic rupture and violence that marked the twentieth century—what Hobsbawm (1994) called 'the age of extremes'—and the dawning of an era that will see the sustained, equitable, and just transformation of the planet to the benefit of all of humankind, wherever we live, and however we envision our communities, our lives, and our livelihoods. Equally possible is a transformation that consolidates the wealth and privilege of a minority, but deepens the misery and malaise of the 'new social majority' (Esteva and Prakash 1998), the permanently marginalised and impoverished people who are the majority of virtually every nation, including the growing underclass in the more affluent industrialised countries.

The latter scenario can only lead to human debasement and a catastrophe that ultimately will swamp even the enclaves of privilege that have been artificially sheltered from the horrors that have engulfed hundreds of millions over the past century. But hope remains for a positive and fundamental transformation that can bring peace, justice, and universal dignity to the human community. This hope is rooted in the reality that around the world, and as never before, people are engaged in dialogue and debate about national neo-liberal economic policies and the effects of globalisation. At the heart of this dialogue is the question of whether it is still possible to bring about a truly free, humane, equitable, and just world, and how such a historic project might be re-launched and realised within this new century. What is the role of international NGOs in this process?

Globalisation revisited

That human society has entered an era marked by myriad phenomena collectively labelled 'globalisation' has become a cliché. Like most clichés, the term describes so much that it defines nothing at all. In any case, from the perspective of international cooperation and social justice activism, the critical reality lies not in the general characteristics of globalisation, but in the particular and unique conditions of people's lives, and the effects of globalisation in the places where we live: in our homes, our communities, our natural and cultural environments.

Inescapably, one of the most dramatic effects of globalisation has been the intense localisation of its impact on ordinary people. The more globalised the systems and mechanisms of commerce and finance, the more isolated and marginalised are individuals, their families, their communities, and the more particular the circumstances of their lives. And yet, within this isolation and 'particularity' are the seeds of the resurgence of community itself, and of the age-old strategies of cooperation and mutual support that have characterised human habitation and interaction throughout history.

This feature of globalisation—what I call 'localisation'—is perhaps its most profound and enduring element. Yet, ironically, while this is starkly apparent in the places where international development agencies and institutions work, it is little remarked upon. Localisation has been obscured by the rhetoric—pro and con—about the general and worldwide impact of globalisation. In the final analysis, however, impact is, by definition, local and specific. Theoretical commonalities are no more than abstractions; the concrete reality is very particular.

The forces that have globalised economic systems and restructured societies have generated countervailing forces of increasingly local responses to the effects of globalisation in people's

lives. Globalisation does not make the world a bigger place, but a smaller one. It becomes a place in which communities of interest consolidate and become concentrated, locally as well as internationally. As the process of globalisation intensifies, so will the process of localisation—the long-term impact of which will be a dominant characteristic of the new development era.

How does globalisation affect concrete conditions at the local level?

The erosion of governance

Globalisation is not a natural event, an inevitable global progression of consolidated economic growth and development. The specific variation of globalisation that we have created internationally, and its local manifestations and effects, is not even the only variation possible. Rather, it is the option that has been chosen and implemented by the global powers, using as a cutting edge the multiplex instrument known as structural adjustment, which has been imposed as a condition for debt restructuring and IMF loans worldwide over the past 20 years.

The fundamental and explicit goal of structural adjustment has been to liberalise or 'free' international financial and commercial enterprises, and the global markets in which they compete, from the control or influence of individual governments through the deregulation of trade and commerce and the privatisation of the social functions of the state. A necessary aim of this process has been to diminish the economic independence and sovereignty of nations and integrate them within a global economic system and a trade and investment regime that will regulate and govern national policies in the interests of the 'free' market and international commerce.

This process is virtually complete and has been a resounding and tragic success, so much so that the élite who drive this global regime are now desperate to reverse some of the most disastrous effects of these policies and to stabilise what has become an extremely volatile political and economic global situation. The hand-wringing of corporate and political leaders at the Davos 'economic summit' in June 1999 revealed the growing preoccupation with the need to rebuild and protect the institutions of national governance in order to forestall the crisis and anarchy that international capital sees clouding the horizon.

In the meantime, the vision of democratic national governments that promote and protect the common interests of their citizens, to whose social and cultural needs as well as their economic well-being they respond, has been destroyed—even as rogue governments hide behind notions of sovereignty to resist international sanctions for their brutal repression of internal dissent. This has not happened accidentally, but as an explicit policy of the international system and of the same actors who now wring their hands at economic summits. Although seldom a reality at the best of times, this notion of good governance has been a rhetorical goal of most national governments throughout the century. Indeed, it was one of the four points of Truman's platform, and the axis of the various proposals for global partnership, from Pearson, through Brandt, to Ramphal and Carlsson—and remains so within the official text of global institutions, even as the resources and tools of responsible government have been diminished and debased in most countries.

Everywhere, the institutions of governance have been eroded and have lost legitimacy with their populations. The primary function of the state has become that of social control within its own borders along with the imposition of policies to attract and serve the national and international economic interests that are now essential to 'develop' and integrate the national economy within the global system. Yet even this minimal goal is barely realistic in a system where the strong consolidate and increase their wealth while the weak compete with the weaker and are increasingly diminished.

The result is the abandonment of the poorest and most marginal precisely at the moment when global events have made them most vulnerable to dislocation and catastrophe. This process of exclusion is accompanied by a dangerous erosion of the institutions of governance and a vacuum of legitimate and credible political leadership that can deal with the crises that are caused by the destruction of the social fabric that has accompanied the radical restructuring underway.

Destruction of economies of scale

At the heart of the process of economic globalisation has been the increasing concentration of wealth and capital—the means of production and distribution—and economic power. This process of constantly increasing economies of scale and the vertical and horizontal integration of production, marketing, and distribution—what capitalist economists call 'increasing efficiency and productivity'—has effectively destroyed local economies and made smaller-scale artisanal and family-based production and commerce non-viable. In most countries, this process has been formally encouraged by government policy for over 20 years. Aggressive legislation and regulation have promoted large-scale industrial and export-based production at the expense of traditional economies as part of the structural adjustment orthodoxy imposed by the IMF and the World Bank. In many cases, government policies have been complemented by organised violence—literally terrorising people off the land and out of production, as we see daily in Colombia and Brazil for example. With this dislocation has also come an explosive unemployment crisis the world over, as growing numbers of people come to depend on wage labour at a rate that far outstrips the capacity of the economy to create even temporary and poorly paid jobs, let alone secure and gainful employment.

The local effect of this economic disenfranchisement is the emergence of the so-called parallel or 'informal' economy. This is the real economy for the majority of people in the South, and an increasing proportion of the underclass in the North as well. While there have been massive attempts to appropriate this phenomenon as part of official international development programmes—particularly through the burgeoning micro-credit movement to promote petty-capitalism—these schemes do not begin to apprehend, let alone influence, the evolution of informal economies, which are extremely localised and diverse. Modern economics, which Heilbroner (1996) describes as the theory and study of the mechanics of capitalism (which is assumed to be all there is), does not have the tools even to see and identify the elements of the informal economy in its local manifestations. Far less can capitalist economic theory describe and analyse the mechanics and norms of the informal economy, many of which are norms of mutual support and cultural action rather than of mere acquisition and accumulation.[1]

Restructuring class and privatising citizenship

Not surprisingly, economic structural adjustment had brought with it a restructuring of class within traditional societies, the implications of which have not really begun to be analysed. A society's political-economic structure determines the distribution of wealth, and the distribution of the labour involved in producing that wealth. Structural adjustment, often presented as a technical matter, a mere refinement of an existing, natural system, actually represents a fundamental transformation for most societies in the world, including the industrialised nations of the North. Structural adjustment—and more specifically the neo-liberal economic ideology that underpins it—formally rejects the notion of the 'commons' and the 'commonweal', the well-being of the community as a whole. It reduces the role of the state

in promoting the economic welfare of the citizen, and a fair distribution of the common wealth of the nation through basic services such as healthcare and education. It also declares the logic of the market—and in particular, the global market—as the motor of society, rather than the logic of society itself determining the mechanisms of the market and the economy. This fundamental inversion increasingly isolates and marginalises those already remote from prevailing market mechanisms, and promotes the concentration of wealth in fewer and fewer hands. It also makes redundant and obsolete the skills and products of entire strata of society, particularly primary producers—farmers, herders, fishers, foresters, miners, artisans— essentially making them economically 'useless' and, therefore, 'class-less', and rendering them economic outsiders even within their own society.

Structural adjustment has entailed the economic disenfranchisement of large swaths of entire societies—often a significant majority of the population—while at the same time promoting the emergence of a new and expanded 'globalised' and affluent upper-middle class whose outlook and self-interest is influenced much less by local and national conditions than by international events and trends. With the withdrawal of the state from its role as the promoter and protector of general social welfare, and the privatisation of even the most essential social services, this emerging class can purchase all of the services it wishes— whether water or electricity, education or medical care—while the class-less have access to nothing, not even the resources required to respond to their most basic needs. To the limited extent that the state intervenes to provide any meagre assistance to those in need, it is dispensed as charity, not as an entitlement of citizenship.

The result of this restructuring is a formal, rationalised system which reinforces the structures of deep economic and social disparity, and through which the basic rights of citizens are privatised and commodified, available for purchase, but only for those with the means. And while the growing class-less majority are aliens even in their own land, often handled with hostility and aggression by the police and security forces of their countries, the internationalised affluent classes are virtual global citizens, sovereign in their own societies and internationally, easily able to turn their backs on the conditions experienced by those left behind.

De-ruralisation

The most profound change in most societies in this period has been the transformation of largely rural agricultural economies and ways of life. The countryside is being transformed, common lands systematically privatised, peasants driven from their lands, and agriculture concentrated, industrialised, and export-driven. The same process is destroying coastal fishing communities and other primary producers. Those who become socially and economically dislocated drift to the cities and across borders to join the tens of millions of rootless people forced into the international wage economy.

Diminished food security

The triumphant rhetoric about the benefits of globalisation and the integration of global markets implicitly and uncritically assumes that food security has been achieved, and that this new reality benefits everyone. But the bounty benefits only those with access to this food, and with the money to pay for it. For others, there is no such bounty, and often it is their deprivation that subsidises the choices that the affluent urban classes take for granted.

In reality, the world's food supply is less secure today than ever before, even with the remarkable increase in production that has been achieved in the past 50 years. Certainly today

there is enough food produced for all; indeed, in many sectors there is vast over-production. At the same time, this unparalleled production devastates landscapes, local markets, and livelihoods. It is a manifestation of the contradictions inherent in global food systems that threaten the security of most poor people every day.

Gains in food production have been achieved through intensive and concentrated cultivation based on chemical inputs, genetic engineering, and monoculture. This process has been exhaustively documented by the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI), and others, most recently in the successful campaign against Monsanto and its 'Terminator' technology—which ultimately saw Monsanto publicly withdraw this technology in early October 1999[2]—and the ongoing campaign on the broader issues of genetically modified (GM) food. The resulting loss of genetic diversity and wasting of landscapes is making all basic foodstuffs vulnerable to catastrophe. The cost in terms of lost livelihoods and generations of farming wisdom is even more catastrophic. Tens of millions of small farmers around the world have been driven off the land by the unrelenting competitive pressure of industrial agriculture. Turning our backs on centuries of tradition, knowledge, and stewardship of the land, we are entrusting global food security to a coterie of unaccountable global corporations, such as Aventis, Monsanto-Upjohn, Bayer, DuPont, and Syngenta (Novartis). In a global system that is driven by commercial logic, and where governments have abdicated responsibility for ensuring the basic well-being and livelihoods of ordinary people, food distribution is left to the market. Those driven out of the market—and those who were never part of it in the first place—go hungry.

Internalised social conflict

It is not surprising, given the developments outlined here, to see the phenomenon of conflict and violence in nations across the globe; nor that the poorer and more decaying the society, the more widespread and horrible the violence. This is one of the most tragic effects of the 'localisation' that comes with globalisation. The contradictions of wealth and power that are manifest internationally are internalised intensely in each country, and at the local level within each country, just as the structures of disparity are manifest both nationally and locally.

Conflicts thus emerge among and between both those who have nothing left, and therefore nothing to lose, and among those who, in the context of the prevalent vacuum in governance, fight for control of the spoils of the devastation caused by the ravages of globalisation. The conflicts that catch international attention are described in many ways, but most often focus on the characteristics of the populations involved rather than on the root causes of the violence. Internal conflicts are usually described as being tribal, ethnic, or religious in nature, as though primordial antipathies—as often fantasies of colonial history as real historic antipathies—are merely recurring.

At base, however, it is the fact that contracting opportunity and deepening economic and social crisis inevitably both consolidate local community identity and heighten differences— real and imagined—among those in crisis. The targets of the frustration may be marked by differences—of ethnicity, religion, or origin—but it is not the differences themselves that are at the root of the hostility and violence. Rather, it is poverty, despair, and lack of any reasonable horizon of prosperity and hope for a humane future that are the underlying causes: the dehumanisation that comes with the accumulated erosion of livelihood, community, and culture. It is this dehumanisation that is the legacy of the restructuring enforced by the last decades of the 'development era'. The violence that scars the landscape of so many blighted nations is a predictable outcome, all the more stark because it was predicted, although the official record still ignores the cause.

The other element of this phenomenon is an apparent resurgence of nationalism and fundamentalism. Again, as globalisation proceeds we see the factionalisation of nationalism and fundamentalism, into smaller and smaller local units of sectarian identity, each exploiting the disenchantment and disenfranchisement of people abandoned and set adrift by the structures of governance and power that once guaranteed at least stability and place, if not prosperity. Nationalist and fundamentalist leaders easily exploit dislocation and alienation by scapegoating 'the other' and promising at least a clear identity and the possibility of opportunity in a landscape cleared of competing claims to scarce land and resources.

This process is deepened by the fact that when the opportunities for legitimate economic enterprise are destroyed, they are often replaced by the illicit, especially when the illicit is both the sole avenue into the global marketplace, and immensely profitable. This is most clearly seen with the production and marketing of narcotics, but increasingly involves the trafficking of human beings, which according to the UN will soon be more profitable than drug trafficking. Control of the mining and international marketing of precious minerals, of trees and lumber, and even of the land itself, is also critical in many local conflicts, as are sales and control over other commodities.

Global apartheid and the diaspora of the poor

In all of this, one of the noblest human instincts—to move on, to explore, to pioneer, to settle and resettle—has been perverted as never before. People, families, entire communities have been forcibly dislocated by the processes described here. Migration is ever increasing, from countryside to city, from traditional environments to hostile urban slums, across borders and across continents. Untold numbers of people are homeless, often stateless, without identity or identification. A small minority are among the official toll of refugees, the almost 15 million people presently titular wards of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). At least 10 times this number are internally displaced within scores of countries that are wracked by internal violence. These people are officially protected and assisted by no one, and often harassed by the state and other contending actors in local power struggles.

But the largest number of displaced communities and individuals are entirely anonymous, uprooted by the social upheaval of economic 'restructuring', on the move to earn the money needed to live and be able to provide even the tiniest opportunity for their children to build a different life. These are the ones often called squatters and itinerant workers in their own countries and 'migrant labourers' abroad. Most often they are 'illegals'—illicit human beings, with no rights nor protectors, unwelcome at home, unwelcome abroad, undesirables without place or name. These are the ones who pay the heaviest price for the new world that is being advertised for the new global citizen, but who will never reap the benefit from the restructuring that has uprooted them. A bitter irony is the fact that it is precisely the notion of national 'sovereignty' that allows governments to control the movements of their own citizens, including their right to leave the country or return, as well as to prevent the internal migration of others fleeing violence, repression, or economic hardship in their homeland. While sovereignty is being ceded on all fronts that could assist the poor and promote local development, it is still used to rationalise the arbitrary use of extreme coercion—with virtually no accountability to international sanction or standards—in order to restrict and control the movement of people. In the reality of globalisation, the movement of goods and money is free, but the movement of people is more restricted than ever before—except for the new globalised élite.

A particularly heinous variation in the dynamics of migration and coercion at the end of the twentieth century is the trade and traffic in human beings, now one of the world's largest and

most profitable illicit commercial ventures. This trade is dominated by the trafficking of people as indentured labourers, often in hazardous and illegal conditions, and bereft of the minimum of decent conditions or protection, forever indebted to the traffickers and their 'employers'. In its most extreme form, trafficking includes outright slavery, including sexual slavery, which entraps hundreds of thousands of young women annually.

The feminisation of poverty

It is no secret that where there are poor people, the majority and the poorest among them will be women and children. This pattern is as old as history, rooted in structures of patriarchy and male domination, reinforced by women's economic dependence and entrenched gender roles, and enforced by their vulnerability to pervasive domestic and sexual violence.

Modern social and economic restructuring has accentuated this historic injustice. It has fundamentally ruptured the very heart of traditional communities that for women—even in poverty and amid entrenched historic gender-oppression—were a home and haven. And it has undermined specifically the kinds of agricultural production and processing that are the mainstay of hearth and home, the labour for which is provided in the main by women worldwide. The poverty deepened and rationalised within the new world economic order therefore particularly affects women and the children they have chosen to protect with their own lives. The destruction of communities and the subsistence activity that sustained them, and the transition to cash economies, has inevitably affected most of those with the least money and economic power and the least possibility of moving into the cash economy. This vulnerability is intensified by the hard fact that women, often entirely abandoned and on their own, are left with—and embrace with their humanity—the responsibility of looking after children no matter what circumstances the world has laid at their feet. It is women who assume primary responsibility for the survival of their families, and for the restructuring and reconstructing of the life of the family in the situations of dislocation and displacement described here. Moreover, these women continue to face double—and sometimes triple— social and economic discrimination: as poor and dislocated people, as women, and often as indigenous people.

It would be a mistake to consider women only as victims of these processes. The shared experience of women is that the critical circumstances of war, of economic crisis, of social and natural disaster, all provoke a profound questioning of a social order that manifests itself not only in the misogyny and gender-oppression that they experience, but also in class, cultural, racial, ethnic, and generational conflict. As women have faced violence, insecurity, loss or destruction of their accustomed environment and lives, they have also become protagonists in the struggle to recover decent living conditions, and have taken on new roles both within their families and their communities and towards government authorities. This protagonism of women uprooted and abandoned is a fundamental factor in the resurgence of citizen action described below.

The resurgence of citizen action

As argued earlier, one of the most significant elements of globalisation has been a concomitant and intense localisation both of the impacts of globalisation themselves and of organised response to them. Indeed, the development that may ultimately have the most far-reaching and long-lasting implications is the resurgence of popular organisation and the mobilisation of communities of interest in campaigns of dissent, resistance, and proposition within what has come to be referred to as 'civil society'.

For the purposes of this essay, civil society—a term which, like globalisation, denotes and connotes a wide range of meanings—refers to the sum of citizens organised into formal and informal associations to contribute to their collective lives and communities and to propose and contest social and economic policies with their fellow citizens, their governments, and the state.

The abdication of government and retreat of the state from its role in social welfare and development has led local communities to come together to analyse and create their own solutions to the crises they are experiencing. Citizen action, and greater involvement in governance right down to the municipal level, has reached unprecedented heights and is fast becoming one of the most important political realities around the world. As this grassroots organising consolidates, we are now seeing local associations reach out to others in their communities, and beyond to the national, regional, and international level in strategies of mutual support and collaboration on major issues such as ending violence and constructing peace; enforcing government and corporate accountability; promoting democratic governance, human rights, social equity and economic opportunity; protecting local food security and traditional primary producers; and conserving the natural and cultural environment, including biodiversity.

In a remarkable and dynamic development, this element of localisation is achieving a critical mass such that local groups are increasingly ready and able to take advantage of the shrinking world and the technical tools of global communications in order to reach out for support for their own immediate issues and strategies, and to join with others in solidarity and common cause around shared issues. This intensification of community has coincided with the expansion of opportunity for collective and collaborative action at wider levels of abstraction both nationally and internationally.

It is simplistic to refer to this process as the 'globalisation of civil society' as some in the NGO world have rather triumphantly asserted. It is, in fact, a profound challenge to the essence of globalisation, and those who promote a global civil society misapprehend and betray the profound roots and essential impetus of this new movement. Rather, what we are seeing is the amplification of localisation through a process of concerted local, national, and international action. The focus remains particular, specific, and local; and the strength of community and the impacts of strategies are also local and particular. This is the significance—and the power—of this new civil resurgence.

Indeed, it is this very fact—that the locus and focus is very much local and national as well as international—that leads many governments to allege that such international cooperation to put pressure on local policies and practices is an assault on national sovereignty. They are beginning to feel the pressure and effect of increasingly concerted citizen action. Again, as in the case of the dilemmas concerning the ever-increasing migration of dislocated populations, in matters of citizen action and dissent we experience the belated recourse on the part of the state to claims of national sovereignty in order to protect existing structures of privilege, even though sovereignty—indeed, responsibility and accountability—in all substantive areas of economic and social policy has been ceded. Sovereignty is at the forefront of the mechanics of social control, but yet is not defended in the arena of social development and self-determination.

Challenging the discourse

How are these phenomena described in the media and in the official discourse of policy-makers and international agencies and institutions? Within what framework are the problems we all face today defined and described? These questions are critical because how the world

is defined and described determines and limits the reality that will be acknowledged and the variables that will be addressed.

Inevitably, the prevailing framework within which world problems are described and analysed is that of 'modernity' and progressive history. The serious and articulate critique of modernity is still largely contained within intellectual circles and (post-modernist) cultural theorists, although its influence is increasingly felt within the 'Critical Theory' stream of political science and feminist social theory.[3] This said, the influence of post-modernism has inescapably seeped into mainstream discourse. The notion of 'discourse' itself is an important contribution that acknowledges that there are many parallel and competing realities in the world, and the one that prevails—that is, the one that 'rules'—is the one that reflects and serves the interests of those who control how reality is described, what is seen to be 'true', and what is allowed to be talked about.

From this perspective, how are the global phenomena outlined above described in mainstream discourse? What is seen to be true, and how are we allowed to talk about these problems?

The modern age, which began with the renaissance and so-called enlightenment period in Western Europe, is now some 500 years old. It has reached its apogee with the extended industrial revolution, the third phase of which—the electronic revolution—we are in today. This (modern) period represents the hegemony of technological objectification of the world and knowledge, and has been marked by a hyper-rationalist, scientific, linear, and reductionist de-struction of nature. It is no coincidence that capitalism, industrialism, and corporatism have flourished in such an extreme and radical fashion in this age.

'International development' as announced 50 years ago by Truman and since promoted by international agencies, including the international NGO movement, is based in this linear and cumulative notion of history, and the complex set of assumptions about 'progress' that goes with it—including the bias of the 'scientific method', and the systems calculus that is used to measure and promote 'progress'. This is typified in 'strategic framework analysis' and its poor cousin, 'results-based management', presently imposed on the voluntary sector by public and private funders who are obsessed with 'inputs', 'outcomes', and 'indicators'. This ethos has been embraced by and is now aggressively—sometimes ruthlessly—promoted by senior managers in many of our leading NGOs, convinced that restructuring our organisations along corporate lines is the ticket to successful integration in the new trilateral global order that sees the public, private, and voluntary sectors somehow as partners in development.

Modernity, progress, and the project of development

The crux is in the paradigm of modernity and the concepts of progress and development themselves. The project of development and modernisation began with the conviction that there is a natural order, design, and progress in things and that humans have the capacity and responsibility to promote and direct progress through the application of science and technology. Hence progress is equated with technological invention and capitalist enterprise, industrial development, economic growth, and the expansion and integration of markets. These have come to be the essential human activities, the normal and natural vocation of all human beings and societies.

Development, and specifically international development as defined since Truman, is merely the concerted programme to bring the entire planet into one clear, concerted, and unified road of progress: the road of liberal capitalism.

Within this framework, all problems and catastrophes that emerge within the project of modernity and 'progress' are seen as aberrations in the normal and natural course of things—

indeed as abnormal—although these effects are not rare at all but constitute the norm itself. They are in fact an element that marks the development era and its various strategies and false starts.

Yet, social, cultural, and environmental disaster continue to be described as deviations from the march of progress, rather than intrinsic to the project of global development itself. That 'development' is an imposition on those who are being 'developed', and that progress itself is often destructive of what already exists while offering little to those dislocated by it, is not seriously considered, although the critique has been voiced by serious observers from the outset of the development project, and the effect has been evident for all to see from the beginning.

Fully 15 years ago, Sithembiso Nyoni, then of the Organisation of Rural Associations for Progress (ORAP) in Zimbabwe, declared that the poor are fighting:

> *. . . an internationally well-organised system of domination and exploitation . . . which would rather see the poor removed from the face of the earth than see them change their situation or have them gain real power over their own fate.*[4] (Nyoni 1987)

She warned that 'we cannot reverse the process of underdevelopment by using the same tools, methods, structures, and institutions which were used to exploit and dominate the poor' in the first place.

Even today, although the wall has been irrevocably breached, and the negative effects of development practice, and progress itself, have come under more intense scrutiny, it is extremely difficult to get any more than lip-service to the proposition that the application of the norms and tools of 'progress'—often dangerous and destructive, and always only selectively beneficial—should be a democratic choice in the context of processes of self-determination, rather than an imposition from outside with the collusion of national élites who are already integrated within the global economy and political system.

The politics of utility

Within the discourse of modernity, how are the pervasively negative effects of 'progress' rationalised and justified? At the core of modernity is the ethics of utilitarianism. The criteria of politics and action are utility and pragmatism: *what is useful is true, and what works is good.* The utilitarian principle, 'the greatest good for the greatest number', replaces the golden rule of the ages, 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you', which can be re-phrased as 'guarantee for all what you expect as a right for yourself'.

Cloaked in the language of objectivity and good intentions, utilitarianism is promoted as democratic and inclusionary, where the best thing possible is always done and the majority always benefit. To the contrary, it is most often undemocratic and exclusionary, and always begins with the assumption that some people—a lot of people—must lose. Utilitarianism is a win-lose proposition based on the explicit and calculated exclusion of some (often the majority) for the benefit of others, and the cost/benefit analysis is virtually always done by those in a position to ensure their own interests, or by proxies—including international NGOs—operating in professional capacities.

In the context of globalisation this calculation is even more perverse. Although speaking the rhetoric of utilitarianism, no serious orthodox theorist or senior bureaucrat or politician any longer argues that the restructuring occurring under the forces of economic globalisation is beneficial for the majority living on the planet, or that the majority will ever benefit in their lifetime. The new utilitarian mantra is 'short-term pain for long-term gain', and the greatest number are acknowledged to be those 'suffering the worst effects' of restructuring, whose

condition the development industry is continually scrambling to 'ameliorate'. Structural adjustment is justified on the promise that in spite of the pain and disruption caused for billions now living and struggling on the planet, the greater good will ultimately be available for a greater number, that is, those not yet born who will inherit in some dim future the brave new world that technology, capitalism, and corporatism creates.

But of course, the real issue is: who benefits and loses today, and who decides? When a cost–benefit calculation is made, who makes the calculation, who benefits, and who pays the cost, are critical issues. And when we presume to make this choice on some calculation of a greater good for a greater number, what of others—the lesser number—who not only do not benefit, but actually pay the freight for the rest of us, often at the cost of their communities, livelihoods, and their very lives?

The choice of who pays, and who is left out, at the table of globalised progress, is not haphazard. We know who they are, and their characteristics—race, gender, and class—and we know where they live. The sustained project of international cooperation and the international NGO movement must be to empower precisely those who are at the short end of the utilitarian equation, the lesser number—although, at almost three billion souls, they are virtually the majority on the planet—the permanently marginalised who are not scheduled today, or tomorrow, or ever, to be included in the greater good that utilitarian pragmatism and its corporate sponsors promise.

Point of view

The prevailing discourse of globalisation obscures the reality that continues and deepens for the majority on earth. Over three billion people suffer deep and unrelenting poverty. War and militarism hold sway, and authentic electoral democracy remains the exception rather than the rule. How this state of affairs is described and defined depends upon point of view, direct lived experience, and perceived interests. The project of international cooperation for equity and global justice has to be assessed from the perspective of those most directly affected. Many of these people do not believe that their poverty is a natural state, nor that some must always be poor. They do not believe that war is natural, and that war must always be with us. They do not believe that governance must be the domain of élites, or that tyranny is natural and inevitable.

The question of agency is critical here. People are poor because of the way humankind acts and behaves—that is, how we run our affairs, and in whose interests the world is organised and managed. Wars do not just happen; they are declared and waged by human beings. Tyranny does not just emerge; it is the brutal and intolerant exercise of power by a few people over the many. People are not simply poor; they are *impoverished*. That is, the affairs of humans are the acts of humans and the responsibility of humans. We either condone the way the world is organised and managed, or we change it. And if we wish to change it, then we must try to describe it accurately.

From this perspective, NGOs and those involved in international cooperation cannot abdicate our right and responsibility to speak out about our experience with the world. Nor can we allow ourselves to be silenced by some code of speech that speaks in the passive voice, and avoids recognising and describing 'agency'—that is, that the conditions we deplore are created by the identifiable actions of real people, including ourselves.

The world is organised rationally and systematically to work the way it does, and is justified within a finely wrought ideological and moral framework. Real people—Presidents and Prime Ministers, corporate directors and clerks, bankers and traders, industrialists, managers, professors, government bureaucrats, and NGO managers—are the rational and intentional

authors of our economic system, and articulate advocates of the ideological and moral framework that justifies and explains this system. At the international level, the World Bank, the IMF, and the WTO are rational instruments with clear policies reflecting the priorities and interests of those who create and run them. The structural adjustment policies imposed on sovereign nations by these institutions, and the foreign policies of the governments that control them, have had real, demonstrated effects in the world. From the point of view of the international social justice activist, it is necessary to speak out and to promote and support programmes to challenge and transform these effects, and to change the systems that destroy rather than develop human societies.

Still, there is an instinctive resistance to accepting the intentional and rational nature of these systems. There is resistance to the assertion that those who create and manage systems are responsible for their effects. There is resistance to the implication that we who participate in these systems, or observe them, without struggling to change them, are complicit in their effects. But from the point of view of those who are brutalised by global systems and their local inflections, evil received is evil done, and there can be no neutral act, regardless of the good intentions of those who engage in international programmes.

Diversity and homogeneity

Ironically, it is globalisation itself, in its manifestation of localisation, that is finally revealing the deep fault lines in the development paradigm, and creating the opportunity for other perspectives and visions to emerge.

Modernity assumes homogeneity, assumes the increasing convergence of quality and interest into one common, homogeneous global human future. Within modernity, diversity is seen as a deviation from the central axis of progress and so must be tamed and refined for the project to progress. The quest for a unified theory of nature and a unified practice of human society was at its beginning, and remains today, the impetus of modernism. The concentration of all human endeavour into one consolidated social and economic system is at the heart of the project of modernism. Indeed, some of the prophets of this final stage of the modern age have declared that with the hegemony of liberal democracy and *laissez-faire* capitalism, the project is a success and the 'end of history' has dawned.

In this context, while paying lip-service to 'difference'—the superficial characteristics and varying histories of groups—development programmes, including those of international NGOs, have never been patient with diversity. Diversity implies not only diverse pasts, but diverse futures: it assumes diverse visions of the world, of the meaning of 'progress', and of quality of life and ways of being. Diversity assumes self-determination. It assumes that no option is 'natural' and enjoys a special claim to absorb all other ways of being and systems of human community.

Owing to the ways in which the effects of globalisation are localised, the social majority who are marginalised by it are reinforced in their diversity and in the particularity of the experience of resistance, adaptation, and survival. The social solidarity required among people in the isolation of their abandonment by the state and the mainstream economy, nurtures the very diversity that globalisation promised to absorb and level.

Outside its margins, the influence of the system is marginal, and other norms and values emerge and are tested in the ongoing dynamics of community and personal struggle. With the increasing interaction among those marginalised by the new economic order, and the crisis of national governance, new social and political visions and values are being asserted as never before. The world has become more than a laboratory for political experiment and social engineering; it is becoming once again a garden of social and economic diversity and a

celebration of human creativity and ingenuity. It is in retrospect no coincidence that this is happening precisely as the economic project of globalisation is approaching its own material limits. The legacy of this era may indeed be the end of the possibility for any single hegemony to dominate the earth again, since the intensified localisation that has accompanied globalisation has left communities of interest armed with renewed identity, a profound scepticism about absolutes and progress, and the tools to develop, defend, and assert their identity in the wider world.

The role of the voluntary sector

Within the above process there has also emerged an incredible amount of sophisticated, effective mobilisation within civil society worldwide. Active, intentional citizenship is increasing, and is increasingly effective. Links between citizens, and citizens' groups—locally, nationally, regionally, and globally—are increasing. People are no longer satisfied to leave governance to the whim and will of politicians and bureaucrats and local party bosses. We are entering a new age of civil and political accountability.

This is the positive side of globalisation, a phenomenon that is largely invisible and only beginning to be acknowledged and analysed. People are making huge strides in taking control over their own lives, although much of this activity is happening outside the mainstream consciousness and discourse. It is in this context that voluntary sector agencies have a dynamic contribution to make if we can move beyond our meek and compliant humanitarianism and our cloak of 'neutrality'.

The politics of international cooperation—which means, or at least should include, radical politics—has been obscured by an emphasis on professionalisation and technique. The dilemmas of institutional viability have been reduced to questions of money and comparative advantage—that is, they have been constrained by corporate logic rather than the logic of a clear and explicit political project, vision, and role. Rather than challenging the way the world is, the tendency is to accept and adapt to—and therefore reinforce—the way the world is, as though nothing significant or structural can be changed, so it must be managed and ameliorated. Recall the 'inevitability' of globalisation, and 'the end of history' discourse.

Increasingly, the model for the 'successful' NGO is the corporation—ideally a transnational corporation—and NGOs are ever more marketed and judged against corporate ideals. As part of this trend, a new development 'scientism' is strangling us with things like strategic framework analysis and results-based management, precisely the values and methods and techniques that have made the world what it is today. The 'realist' ethos holds sway, and *Realpolitik* justifies all. It is all very pragmatic and utilitarian.

The role of the voluntary sector is fast becoming, in the new language, merely 'to ameliorate the worst effects', to care for those who cannot adapt, who are left behind, who 'are not prepared'. And in so doing, many in the voluntary sector have become deliverers of (charitable) services, partners of (downsized) government, and handmaidens to the (corporate) philanthropic sector which sponsors charitable activity, often as advertising. Not only are people increasingly commodified, even in their poverty, but so too are our cherished voluntary organisations, which once were expressions of cultural and political participation.

To mediate this erosion of the original values of the voluntary sector we have to identify and challenge the corporatisation of NGOs in the name of efficiency and effectiveness, and the utilitarian ethic that emerges from this trend and dominates practice in many NGOs—especially the leading transnational NGOs with their internationally promoted brand names. On the proposition side, we have to recuperate the politics of NGO activism, and the (original)

notion of international cooperation as a profoundly political activity. We need to promote a new sense of *protaganismo*. We need a renaissance of transformative NGOs.

Our sector cries for a new season of *proliferation* that would see the creation of a whole new generation of NGOs. We need new organisations, new forms, smaller and more political, value-driven, organisations, new voices, new methods, moved by the ethics of common cause and social solidarity. We need diversity, dissent, debate—indeed a breakdown in the self-interested and stale consensus about the role of NGOs, and a resurgent passion among truly citizen-led voluntary organisations in creating the world, and transforming it in the interest of everyone on the planet.

We need to challenge some of the current notions of international civil society, and the role of NGOs as a partner of the state and of the multilateral regimes. We have to be critical and wary of notions of global governance, and especially of the idea that NGOs can or should be integral to governance structures. As always the questions: In whose interest? In whose voice?

We need a renewed openness and space within the traditional NGOs to allow and encourage political activists, young and old, to challenge the hegemony of the professionals and the momentum of tripartitism.

The role of the voluntary sector is to give breath and heart to innovative and alternative ideas for developing and conserving creative, vibrant, tolerant, caring, and dynamic societies. It is a role of nurturing mutual support and social solidarity, of promoting values of social responsibility and reciprocity, of supporting and mobilising citizenship in the interests of the entire community. The essence of this role is participation, is activism—indeed, is citizenship itself. The essence of this role is not service, and is not technical, which is the path along which the preponderance of voluntary organisations in Northern countries, with the encouragement of government and corporate sponsors, have allowed ourselves to be diverted.

The greatest dilemma facing an activist organisation in the domestic or international arena is that the voluntary sector itself has become an intrinsic part of the system that it was once committed to transform. Many mainstream leaders of NGOs have internalised the language and myths of social and economic conservatism. Many NGOs, indoctrinated in the assumptions of neo-conservatism, and convinced that 'globalisation' is inevitable and irreversible—that indeed, we are at the end of history—have joined with its acolytes, ironically without much critical analysis of what 'it' actually is or means. What the corporate PR manager understands implicitly as economic propaganda, NGO people often repeat as articles of faith.

Firoze Manji (1999), writing about the role of NGOs in Africa, says: 'If NGOs are to play a positive role, then it will need to be based on two premises: solidarity and rights.' He continues:

> *Solidarity is not about fighting other people's battles. It is about establishing cooperation between different constituencies on the basis of mutual self-respect and concerns about the injustices suffered by each. It is about taking sides in the face of injustice, or the processes that reproduce injustice. It is not built on sympathy, charity, or the portrayal of others as objects of pity, nor the arrogant self-appointment as trustees of the poor. It is not about fundraising to run projects overseas, but raising funds that others can use to fight their own battles. It is about taking actions within one's own terrain that will enhance the capacity of others to succeed in their fight against injustice.*

The role of the voluntary sector is, fundamentally and inescapably, political, regardless of whether this is acknowledged and acted out explicitly. The critical and primary role of the international NGO movement should be to initiate and support actions that promote the right

of all persons to be fully human and achieve their full creative potential, and to live creatively and actively as citizens in their communities, their countries, and their world.[4] Strengthening the capacity of marginalised people everywhere to influence the social, economic, and political structures that govern their lives should be the central focus of our movement in the early years of this new century.

The voluntary sector should be a garden of social innovation and change, a locus of organised resistance to and dissent from the excesses of the market and privilege—whether the privilege of class, of race, or of gender. Yet today, when we have such a critical innovative and transformative role to play, the mantra of the established voluntary sector is a new 'realism'—the pragmatism of adaptation and 'social partnership'. The vision is not of change, but of charity. And if anything must change, it seems, it will not be the world; it will have to be those whom the world no longer needs nor wants, those on the margins of society and the market. All of this is seen as natural, and those who challenge it are often described as unrealistic, ideological, outdated, strident, unreasonable, uncooperative—in other words, marginal.

In her keynote address to the Conference on Economic Sovereignty in a Globalising World held in Bangkok in March 1999, Susan George declared:

> *No matter how many disasters of all kinds the neo-liberal system has visibly created, no matter what financial crises it may engender, no matter how many losers and outcasts it may create, it is still made to seem inevitable, like an act of God, the only possible economic and social order available to us.*[5]

She continued:

> *Let me stress how important it is to understand that this vast neo-liberal experiment we are all being forced to live under has been created by people with a purpose. Once you grasp this, once you understand that neo-liberalism is not a force like gravity but a totally artificial construct, you can understand that what some people have created, other people can change. But they cannot change it without recognising the importance of ideas. I'm all for grassroots projects, but I also warn that these will collapse if the overall ideological climate is hostile to their goals.*

She closed her presentation by observing:

> *We have the numbers on our side, because there are far more losers than winners in the neo-liberal game. What we lack, so far, is the organisation and the unity which in this age of technology can be overcome . . . Solidarity no longer means aid, or not just aid, but finding the hidden synergies in each other's struggles so that our numerical force and the power of our ideas become overwhelming.*

It has been said that politics is the art of the possible. To the contrary, politics *could* be the art of the possible. But historically, politics has largely been the business of persuading people that various transformative social visions and courses of action are *impossible*. However, if enough persons share a choice, that choice is not only possible, it is inevitable. As Frances Ponge tells us, 'Beauty is the impossible which lasts'.

Many people sincerely believe that some things will simply never change, including many of the realities I have described in this paper, and that we must work within these constraints. I can only say in response that while we must obviously work in the *context* of these constraints, it is precisely those things that are believed will never change upon which we should most relentlessly focus as change agents.

Transformational activists, and effective transformational organisations, do not have to be marginal, and should not allow ourselves to be marginalised. We do not have to be cogs in the

machine. The world is not the way it must be if it is to nurture and protect human health and prosperity. It can be changed for the better, and this can happen best through the direct participation of citizens collaborating to envision better ways and mobilising to bring their ideas forward in the diverse theatre of proposition and debate we know as civil society. This is not only necessary, but possible. The international NGO movement should re-affirm our commitment to it. This is our unique role.

Acknowledgement

Notes

1 The discussion of this theme in Esteva and Prakash (1998) is excellent.
2 For information on this campaign—and for much more on the corporate threat to food security and the environment—visit the website of RAFI (www.rafi.org). This website is in a class by itself, easily one of the best, most accessible, and most useful and informative on the Internet.
3 An excellent treatment of this theme can be found in George (1994).
4 For an extensive treatment of this theme, see Murphy (1999).
5 'A Short History of Neo-Liberalism: Twenty Years of Elite Economics, and Emerging Opportunities for Structural Change', address by Susan George to the Conference on Economic Sovereignty in a Globalising World, hosted by Focus on the Global South, Bangkok, 24–26 March 1999; see also Susan George (1997) 'How to win the war of ideas, lessons from the Gramscian right', *Dissent* 44(3).

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