

Charity versus Solidarity: Do Development NGOs do More Harm than Good?

Global Research News Hour Episode 34

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"True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring."

-Reverend Martin Luther King, 1967 [1]

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One of the virtues of mass media is its ability, or at least its capacity, to connect people around the globe. From those who labour and toil in some Third World sweat shop, to those caught in a moment of athletic excellence, to those in the midst of unimaginable suffering to those endowed with the most opulent creature comforts.

The Global Village which Canadian academic Marshall McLuhan predicted decades ago effectively gives the privileged denizens of the so-called First World a window on the almost incomprehensible poverty and destitution of the Global South.

The instinct for any moral being is to want to reach out to help. We see this impulse in action every time there is an earthquake, flood, typhoon or other major disaster. Even outside of such dramatic events, images that haunt our conscience and soil our spirits can motivate a humanitarian response.

In a world where 1.1 billion people including children do not have access to a reliable supply of drinking water, where 2.5 billion live without improved sanitation, and where 870 million people don't have enough to eat, it is understandable more privileged people residing in more prosperous communities would be consumed by the need to DO something. [2][3]

State governments traditionally divert some of their funding to international development projects. In addition, we have seen the rise of so-called Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Funded by individual donations, these groups, some religiously based, some not, can intervene to provide assistance in a seemingly benign way.

Some have come to question the ultimate effectiveness of these approaches. Putting aside concerns about whether the bulk of the donations to these groups actually makes it down to the people on the ground, there is also the critique that NGOs do not typically confront the causes of poverty.

As Professor Michel Chossudovsky explains in his 2003 book, [The Globalization of Poverty and the New World Order](#), much of the poverty we see in the world was generated and exacerbated by the Bretton Woods Institutions:

“Since the early 1980s, the “macro-economic stabilization” and structural adjustment programs imposed by the IMF and the World Bank on developing countries (as a condition for the renegotiation of their external debt) have led to the impoverishment of hundreds of millions of people... Internal purchasing power has collapsed, famines have erupted, health clinics and schools have been closed down and hundreds of millions of children have been denied the right to primary education. In several regions of the developing world, the reforms have been conducive to a resurgence of infectious diseases including tuberculosis, malaria and cholera. While the World Bank’s mandate consists of “combating poverty” and protecting the environment, its support for large-scale hydroelectric and agro-industrial projects has also speeded up the process of deforestation and the destruction of the natural environment, leading to the forced displacement and eviction of several million people.”[4] (More info: “[The Globalization of Poverty](#)”)

Roxanne Joyal, co-CEO of the social enterprise [ME to WE](#), has a long history of front-lines involvement in international development. ME to WE works in partnership with the charity Free the Children. They boast of being ‘world transformers’ utilizing ethical and sustainable business practices, in concert with securing direct connections with people at the grass-roots level to make a difference “one action and one experience at time.” She passionately and articulately speaks to the kinds of changes that she believes are possible in spite of not directly addressing larger political and economic power dynamics.

Nik Barry-Shaw is co-author with Dru Oja Jay of the recently published book *Paved with Good Intentions: Canada’s Development NGOs from Idealism to Imperialism*. As the title of the book implies, he is more critical of the NGO assistance model and of the conscientious consumer approach undertaken by Me to We and Free The Children. He outlines how contemporary NGOs not only don’t address the roots of poverty and displacement, but help to advance a less benevolent political agenda. He sees real solutions in movements rooted in resistance struggles.

Yves Engler, a prominent critic of Canadian foreign policy, completes the discussion by how supposedly benign aid, is first and foremost a tool of the Canadian State’s foreign policy which in turn is more directed to advancing the interests of domestic mining and resource interests than it is to humanitarian instincts.

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References

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- 3) World Food Programme Hunger Statistics; <http://www.wfp.org/hunger>
- 4) Chossudovsky, 2003, pg 17; The Globalization of Poverty and the New World Order-Global Research

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