Problems with development – beyond the OXFAM crisis

THE RECENT SEXUAL MISCONDUCT crisis experienced by Oxfam and engulfing the Save the Children Fund (SCF) gives us an opportunity to examine international development co-operation in a wider context.

It is not our intention to look at the accusations facing Oxfam, SCF or other organisations in detail or to damage their reputation further. However, their crisis does offer an opportunity to take a critical look at the evolution of development organisations – and a chance to pose different options and models for delivering international development aid and programmes which may be more in keeping with their emancipatory and social justice rhetoric. To do this we will look at the wider policy and funding issues and then use disability as a case study.

Both Oxfam and SCF are big beasts in the world of development co-operation. Both have been, in their own terms, successful international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). Both are beneficiaries of large governmental contracts to deliver crisis aid and longterm programmes and projects.

Increasingly governments and global institutions are outsourcing delivery to private sector and non-governmental organisations. This means charities like Oxfam and SCF have grown into large international multi-million pound businesses. Their business models for expansion often ape and reflect the private sector. Yet both have increasingly been seen to be modelled on approaches at odds with their anti-poverty and anti-inequality ideologies. This has been reflected in their relations both with their donors and their end users, with little commitment to the ‘public and user involvement’ increasingly demanded of public policies, and in a greatly increased reliance on the values of ‘new public management’ privileged by the for-profit market sector.

Layered on top of this are public fundraising practices which have come under public scrutiny and criticism in recent years. Chuggers, or charity muggers, have come in for criticism, where mostly young people are employed by commercial companies on a commission basis to stop people on high streets or door-knock to set up standing orders to fund their work. Some charities have never used this as a fund-raising method and others have stopped using them following loss of public confidence. Inevitably this raises challenges as tensions between founding values and principles come up against market imperatives.

As CEO and senior management salaries are pegged to expansion, the imperative to feed the machine becomes greater. The salaries of senior SCF staff are eye-watering. Save the Children is paying its CEO £234,000 a year, with 20 employees earning more than £100,000 at the charity’s international body. Another nine are on six-figure salaries in the UK arm.

The unconvincing argument is that ‘we wouldn’t recruit people of sufficient quality without this’, taking no account of the very different, more altruistic values rightly associated with the third sector.

Over the last couple of decades global corporations and the big accountancy firms have seen international aid programmes as an easy source of profit, as the leading development funders such as the World Bank, the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and UN agencies outsource delivery. In our globalised world, with expanding development budgets and shrinking bureaucracy and manpower, these agencies are looking to dump huge sums of money on external bodies to manage on their behalf.

This market-based model clearly hasn’t worked for local communities and service users in relation to domestic public service contracts in the UK, with the likes of G4S, Capita, Atos and Maximus all failing to deliver outcomes which benefit end users and now collapsing as their business models fail. This world of competitive tendering, where charities are competing against each other for contracts, is a race to the bottom for end users who become incidental in the whole process. The drive to involve the private sector and the arms industry in development co-operation has also emerged. The close linking of the war against Iraq (and later in Afghanistan) and the international aid budget by the Blair/Brown governments represented a sea change. You had the worst of all worlds, discredited trickledown economics with dodgy dossiers and war for oil. Money was diverted by DFID away from other programmes which were shut down mid-contract to support the goals of regime change. The beneficiaries were private sector businesses and INGOs supported to further illegal foreign policy goals. Since then successive governments have directly used aid to promote private sector development.

One of the programmes that was closed to fund the Iraq incursion was a disability programme in Russia. This was a relatively small-scale project between UK user-led disabled people’s organisations (DPOs) and their sister organisations in a region of Russia. The funding was withdrawn just as the local Russian DPOs were about to receive resources to implement their plans.

The collateral damage to the UK’s reputation was further compounded when the host institution challenged the breach of contract. The contract was restored in the UK but not in Russia.

The sex abuse scandals currently engulfing aid organisations have their roots in a failed model where programmes are outsourced to western experts. The bigger scandal in Haiti is the lack of internal governmental infrastructure and agency to solve their own problems arising from a natural disaster. We argue that the aid community has failed to deliver any sustainable solutions because of a failed model which creates a development industry and profession in the host countries and dependency in the recipient states. This happened in Cambodia post-Pol Pot, where the local state has failed to take responsibility for its own population largely because the international community funds INGOs to deliver its health and social care programmes. This is replicated in other countries such as Afghanistan.

DFID is about to invest a significant amount of public funds (£27m) in a disability programme that is deeply flawed by design. This is largely because no disabled people from DPOs in the South or North have been involved in the design or development of this programme. Any involvement in the development of this programme has been with INGOs and private sector businesses, run and managed by non-disabled people. This approach goes against the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). The CRPD is the only UN Convention to have been developed by the subjects of the treaty based on the principle of ‘nothing about us, without us’.

The UK is failing to meet its responsibilities under Articles 3 and 32 of the CRPD. Article 3 states: “In the development and implementation of legislation and policies to implement the present Convention, and in other decision making processes concerning issues relating to persons with disabilities, States Parties shall closely consult with and actively involve persons with disabilities, including children with disabilities, through their representative organisations.” Here is the relevant recommendation from last year’s Concluding Observations from the UN Disability Committee to the UK Government on Article 32, International Co-operation: “Consult with disabled people’s organisations on policies to implement the Sustainable Development Goals…both in the UK and internationally.”

Our own parliamentary International Development Committee’s inquiry into disability and development in 2014 stated: “Finally, and crucially, DFID should ensure disabled people have a central role in its work. It should step up its support for disabled people’s organisations. It should also ensure disabled people participate fully in the design and delivery of DFID’s own programmes. The more visible disabled people are in development work, the easier it will be to reverse the damaging patterns of discrimination that have, for so long, left disabled people behind.”

DFID are also choosing to ignore the findings of their own research and programme work, which highlights the problem with the approach adopted in this new disability programme.

Lessons from the DFID-funded Disability Knowledge and Research Programme (KaR) in 2006 identified that the contracting-out of disability interventions to INGOs directed by non-disabled people was problematic. In the research, many disabled people and DPOs in the South saw INGOs as part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. This stemmed from the massive inequality in their relationship and the strong tendency for INGOs to impose northern priorities in working with DPOs in the South. Because of southern DPOs’ financial dependency on northern NGOs, these issues are rarely brought up.

What we need is a new paradigm which builds on this participatory and co-production model for development co-operation and foreign policy. For it to be helpful, international development needs to be aware of and take account of the power imbalances, colonial history and legacies of racism and gender inequalities. It needs to be based on values and principles that underpin progressive practice in the UK, and not act as an adjunct to foreign policy or business development goals.

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