

## Poverty as a spectator sport

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14 May 2006

« A partir des années 1960, le triomphe de la télévision a provoqué une centralisation et une standardisation extrêmes de l'information destinée au grand public. La concurrence féroce pour l'Audimat pousse les chaînes de télévision à privilégier l'information-spectacle. Pour intéresser les gens, il faut les toucher en leur montrant constamment des victimes : victimes des catastrophes, de la grippe du poulet et, surtout, de la violence, car il n'y a rien de plus spectaculaire que la mise en scène de la guerre, des attentats, des voitures qui brûlent. »<sup>2</sup>

*Les nouveaux parias de la République*  
Stéphane Beaud et Gérard Noiriel  
*Le Monde* 23 Oct 2004

### Being led to or from the sacrifice?

It is of course impossible to say whether the growing need for victims on the television had any link to the parallel growing need for 'victims'<sup>3</sup> in the development industry, but by the end of the 70s, many development agencies were getting worried. Field staff were complaining that the work they were trying to do bore little relation to the advertising campaigns for the industry which focused on victims – the hungry, the maltreated, the dispossessed, the sick. Those organisations that tried to change their tack, to 'educate the public' about the real nature of the work they were doing, suddenly found themselves in financial crisis. Very few people were interested in providing money for what looked like a long drawn-out process of negotiation with community groups about improving utilisation of resources, or legal advocacy or of thinking about the implications of power imbalance. So the agencies went back to the startling images of victims – images (either positive or negative) of individuals (looking distressed or happy, depending on the assessment by the advertiser of the donor audience) whose situation would be changed by the experienced intervention of the agency concerned.

Since that time, development agencies have learned how to target particular donors with particular interests, as well as stabilising their funding base so as to allow for a variety of approaches in their work. Many have converted the negative images to positive ones – building on the hope that their intervention will help particular people realise their potential. But the fundamental truth remains: the majority of people who want to contribute their money want to do so for some immediate form of suffering or want, and the images building on hope are easily recognised as a substitute for "there are negative forces impeding this person's development which we will alleviate". Such images rarely include any political, cultural, social or personal context. It is a hard sell, and lies completely at odds with the idea that people have their own identity and dignity – agencies have to make the case that they will put that dignity and support into place in lieu of local social forces whilst implying that those local forces have been wrong, evil or mistaken.

What does this have to do with 'labelling'? Well, clearly the development agencies make the maximum use of categories and labels that they think will attract the greatest funding. Put in a kinder way, they hold out the promise that they will help people in the categories that the public want to help. In this respect, 'victims' and 'poverty' rank high as labels designed to attract funds. But there are many more insidious labels in use referring to supposed situations as much as to people – examples include 'gender-based violence', 'exploitation', 'power', 'orphans and vulnerable children', 'risk behaviour', 'genocide' and 'rights' – whose use implies not only an agreed understanding of such

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<sup>2</sup> Rough translation: "The huge success of television in the 1960s led to considerable centralisation and standardisation of the way information was provided to the public. The fierce competition engendered by the need for ratings pushed all the television channels to prioritise 'info-tainment'. In order to keep people's interest, they had to show a constant stream of images of 'victims': victims of disasters, of avian flu, and, above all, of violence – because there is nothing more spectacular than images of war, of bombings, of burning cars".

<sup>3</sup> 'Victim' is a term used here in both senses: (1) a subjective and emotional label implying that the objects are subject to forces supposedly outside their control; (2) objects being worked on for the satisfaction of the person in control without the consent of the 'victim'.

terms (which does not exist) but also the possibility of the immediate action that will meet the short-term needs of donors.

## The *purpose* of labelling is more important than the labels

The discussion leading up to this publication suggested that labelling<sup>4</sup> of people and situations needs to be challenged<sup>5</sup> or at least that those who are labelled need to participate in the discussion as to the relevance and utility of the labels. This is a very old argument indeed, as will be discussed later in the paper. However, one aspect that has been covered neither by the old nor new debates is the **purpose** behind such a challenge.

A debate about labels or about the framing of a problem would only have relevance if the goal of development were agreed – since each set of labels applies only to the way in which a particular problem is framed and to the end point to be achieved – but this is very far from being the case. Not only is there a multitude of visions of what ‘development’ has as a goal but there are also millions of very different ideas about why people should want to help others, to be benevolent or to be helped. Whoever determines the purposes of development, there can never be such a thing as a single purpose. Matching (a) these desires to help with (b) the desires to be helped provides the basis of the game of development.

The desire to help those who seem to be suffering or in need is deeply embedded in perhaps the majority of people. As has been mentioned in a previous article<sup>6</sup>, the debates about such benevolence<sup>7</sup> were already clearly articulated in the third century B.C. in Chinese writings. It is also a desire that is associated with great virtue in many, if not all cultures. Unfortunately, this generalised well-spring of benevolence conceals many different types of motivation and understanding, and it is this diversity that has led in many cultures to ferocious debates through the centuries about who it is that should be supported, whether it is people or their situations<sup>8</sup> that should be tackled, with what criteria and how that should be done. These debates are essentially unresolved today, and the absence of agreement makes it absurd to make grandiose calls for the elimination of poverty, or the establishment of rights or whatever is fanciful on the current catwalks of development agencies.

***The basis of the argument of this paper is that the variety of labels, frames or categories applied to people and their situations reflects the variety of interests hidden in the idea of benevolence, and that unless there be clarity concerning the end point of this benevolence there is little point in arguing about labels or frames.***

There are three main types of motivation that lead to the variety of acts of benevolence. Firstly, as Confucius was quick to spot, there is the muddle of compassion, selflessness<sup>9</sup> and selfishness which are often combined in benevolence. Secondly, as Arthur Schopenhauer clarified, added to this muddle, the idea of benevolence is also intrinsically linked with (in his terms) our ‘**will** and **power**, which (following Kant) he linked with the ways in which we create categories – categories and frames being created by **our** interests and by the language games we all play. These determine our identities and cultures<sup>10</sup>. Thus the questions addressed in this paper are about these *motivations*<sup>11</sup> for using those labels, categories of problem or frames.

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Labelling’ in this context refers to the use of categories to define people or situations for the purposes of creating development programmes.

<sup>5</sup> Since the use of labels can be patronising, can reflect power differences, can lead to neglect of those without the label, and because different discourses use different labels and are dependent on the perceptions of those creating the categories

<sup>6</sup> Klouda, A., *Helping, Challenging or Using Others?*  
[http://www.tonyklouda.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/Helping\\_Challenging\\_Using.htm](http://www.tonyklouda.pwp.blueyonder.co.uk/Helping_Challenging_Using.htm), Jan 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Please note that the word ‘benevolence’ is often scorned as something that might be patronising or sentimental, perhaps as in ‘acts of kindness’. This is not the usage of the word in this paper. It is taken in its more generic sense as “the will to act for the benefit of someone else”.

<sup>8</sup> i.e. social relationships, economic or other environments, class struggle.

<sup>9</sup> Selflessness, of course, is not a motivation, but is included here because of its impact on the three motivations.

<sup>10</sup> To use the formulation of Ludwig Wittgenstein in his development of Schopenhauer’s thinking.

<sup>11</sup> Another manifestation of the ‘will’ referred to by Schopenhauer.

The danger in the debate about labels and frames is that by pretending that a unified or consistent approach is possible to a condition labelled or framed in a particular way (such as 'poverty' or 'inequality'), the debate gives a spurious validity to the actions of development agencies that identify either a cause for action, or people grouped by labels (such as 'poor'), to support. This paper tries to undermine such validation and proposes instead an acknowledgement of the chaos of the current range of acts of benevolence which have simultaneous legitimacy **and** illegitimacy.

## 'Development' is an emotional not logical business

Development is not a logical business, but an emotional one, based on conflicting values which can never be resolved. This is one reason why it is impossible to leave the range of people's motivations<sup>12</sup> outside of the equation. All development aid is ultimately founded on the interest of individuals to give aid for the purpose *they* define, and since these purposes vary it is important to consider this diversity and understand how best it can be managed. The motivation<sup>13</sup> determines the way the problem is identified as well as the categories of people or situations that are to be 'improved'.

## Parallel strands

The three main types of motivation for benevolence (compassion; personal or national benefit; control) are worth keeping distinct even though they are rarely separate. Thus it is quite possible that the majority of individuals who give to donor agencies directly or through their taxes do so predominantly out of some kind of compassion for others, whether or not that compassion has been studiously generated by clever marketing.

Against this apparently simple desire, there is the wide variety of practises of modern 'development' agencies. Some of them either closely relate to this desire for compassion by singling out particular individuals and supporting them directly. Others work in more general terms. Some of these latter work for a general goal such as the provision of particular services (armaments, roads, infrastructure, schooling, health, education, loans), or generalised reconstruction after a disaster. Some try to work to reduce the impact of or to prevent particular types of social or economic inequality. Some try to advocate for or promote particular rights. Many base their work on a rather hazy idea of 'empowerment' whose nature may be derived from the Enlightenment philosophy at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century – when the French decided to follow Rousseau and liberate people in the rest of the world from their supposed chains<sup>14</sup>. There is very little, if anything, in common between these various approaches. Furthermore, in working through this variety of mechanisms, the simple idea of compassion very quickly is subsumed to the self-interest, personal or national benefit, or control that take over – as has been detailed in a very large number of studies of the development industry.

The problems behind this multitude of approaches have been very extensively debated by economists and others since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, together with debates about the theoretical basis for work with 'the poor' or else against 'poverty'. As has been so well charted by Gertrude Himmelfarb<sup>15</sup>, the central debates of the time were:

- (a) the extent to which a 'scientific' approach based on verifiable indicators should replace the personalised, subjective, moralistic approach;
- (b) whether the focus should be on pauperhood (and therefore on individuals, their capacity to cope and their dignity) or poverty (however defined);
- (c) whether providing aid or support increases dependency.

One argument of this paper is that these debates are still relevant today – *all* approaches being hamstrung by the values that are behind them.

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<sup>12</sup> This range includes the motivations not only of those who give money, but also the professionals and others who work for agencies.

<sup>13</sup> Perhaps a better word would be emotivation.

<sup>14</sup> There have been many articles on the neo-colonialism of development practise. The point here is merely to place it in the context of motivations.

<sup>15</sup> Himmelfarb, G. *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians*, Vintage Books, 1992

## Different perspectives of the truth

This particular debate about labels is a very old one. Turn, for example, to the *Anti-Jacobin Review* of 1797 where James Gillray, (writing in the aftermath of 'the Terror' of the French Revolution in a parody of Southey's humanitarian poem "*The Widow*") depicted intolerance, fanaticism and violence masquerading as enlightenment and virtue<sup>16</sup>. It exposes what it considers the hypocrisy and naivety of the faith of the Jacobins in their interpretation of the condition of 'the poor' and in the agreement by 'the poor' with that interpretation.



### The Friend of Humanity and the Knife-Grinder Scene, The Borough

**Friend of Humanity:** "Needy Knife-grinder! Whither are you going? Rough is the road, your Wheel is out of order. Bleak blows the blast; your hat has got a hole in't, So have your breeches! Weary Knife-grinder! Little think the proud ones, Who in their coaches roll along the turnpike-road, what hard work 'tis crying all day "Knives and Scissors to grind O! Tell me, Knife-grinder, how came you to grind knives? Did some rich man tyrannically use you? Was it the Squire? Or Parson of the Parish? Or the Attorney? Was it the Squire for killing of his Game? Or Covetous Parson for his Tythes distraining? Or roguish Lawyer made you lose your little All in a law-suit? (Have you not read the Rights of Man, by Tom Paine?) Drops of compassion tremble on my eyelids, Ready to fall, as soon as you have told your pitiful story."

**Knife-grinder:** "Story! God bless you! I have none to tell, Sir. Only last night a-drinking at the Chequers, This poor old Hat and Breeches, as you see, were Torn in a scuffle. Constables came up for to take me into Custody: they took me before the Justice. Justice Oldmixon put me in the Parish Stocks for a Vagrant. I should be glad to drink your Honour's health in A Pot of Beer, if you would give me Sixpence; But for my part, I never love to meddle With Politics, Sir."

**Friend of Humanity:** "I give thee Sixpence! I will see thee damn'd first. Wretch! Whom no sense of wrongs can rouse to vengeance. Sordid, unfeeling, reprobate, degraded, Spiritless outcast!" (Kicks the Knife-grinder, overturns his Whell, and exit in a transport of republican enthusiasm and universal philanthropy.)

This parody is valuable not only because it attacks the comfortable romantic imaginations (or labelling) of the poor and the consequent hypocrisies inherent in that position, but also because it represents the divergences of view about the label 'poverty' itself<sup>17</sup> -- divergences that have continued to the present day -- and because it suggests that the label of poverty may be entirely uninteresting to

<sup>16</sup> I took this delightful phrase ("masquerading as enlightenment and virtue") from an article by Ian Haywood, "The Renovating Fury": Southey, Republicanism and Sensationalism, <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ron/2003/v/n32-33/009256ar.html>.

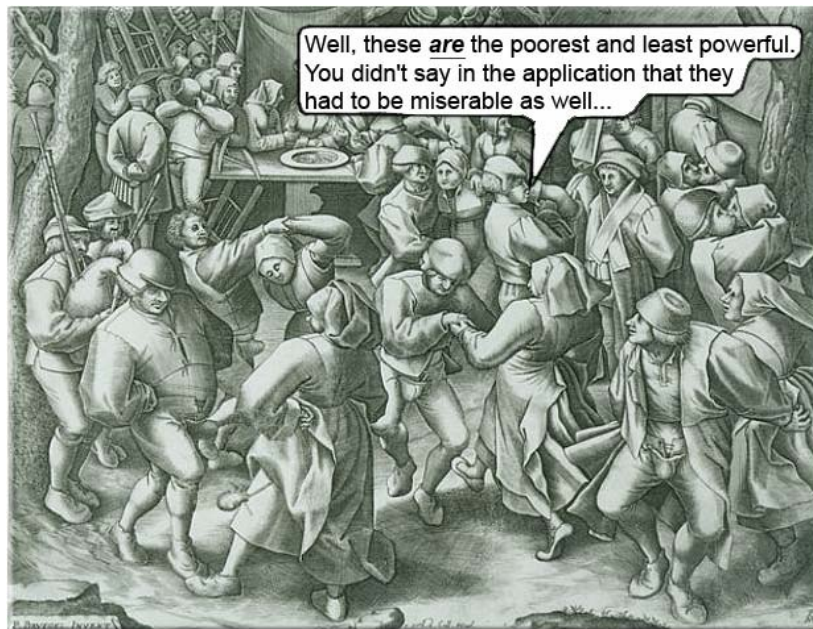
<sup>17</sup> It also, by the by, shows how times have not really changed at all in the deliberate use of an imaginary sob-story (the story of the poor widow, scorned by rich passers-by, who is inherently a 'good' person but for the neglect of the surrounding world) to engender shallow pity for the implicit state of all people who are classed as 'poor'.

the knife-grinder himself, even though he may be doing a variety of things to ensure the quality of his life<sup>18</sup>.

## Labels are valid principally for the creator

As Kant so clearly identified, the validity of labels is never with reference to some possible external 'truth' since the labels are a creation of human beings – so the validity can only be for the creators of the labels and to their utility in categorising actions in a manner satisfactory to the creators. It is commonplace to say that the 'terrorist' for one person may be the 'freedom fighter' of the other. And since people of different environments, backgrounds and education will see the same picture in different ways it is quite clear that the different labels they bring may only be reconciled with one another by mutual interest. This therefore also means that there is much scope for disagreement about the nature of a situation, the factors that lead to the situation, or the actions that might lead to its improvement. But, whether help is requested not, people remain wanting to do something.

In addition to their merely transitory and subjective validity, labels also have the problem of isolating only a particular aspect of a person's life. They may in fact be very independent, happy, intelligent and fulfilled people despite also carrying around with them the label of 'poor', 'oppressed', 'marginalised', 'criminal', 'sex workers' or whatever.



## The cracks appear

Much of the debate concerning the validity of various types of development practise has not really reached the general public who give their money or volunteer their time. As a result, with the enormous increase in the numbers of the development organisations in the post-Second World War period, and the growth of the development industry as a career path, there has been a widening gulf between:

- (a) the expectations and motivations of those who contribute money to agencies<sup>19</sup>;
- (b) the aims of those who represent the agencies to the public and who manage the programmes;
- (c) the understanding and perspectives of those who work for the agencies in the field.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> And this brings with it, of course, the hint that his understanding of quality of life may be entirely different from that of the Jacobin.

<sup>19</sup> The history of the changes in motivation for giving between the Second World War and the present is highly interesting, as it reflects the change of levels of comfort of the general public in European countries, but this cannot be explored here.

There are a number of possible reasons for this gulf. The people who give, in general do so in the trust that the agencies do what they seem to suggest with their advertising. But, as has been suggested, there are increasing questions as to:

- whether the interventions are truly benevolent (i.e. that the interest of the work be not so much in serving others, as in seeking profit, curiosity, pleasure, employment, travel, or even, as in Booth's words, a motivation to find "their own salvation while seeking vainly to bring salvation to others"<sup>21</sup>);
- whether the aims as stated to the public are in fact being met;
- whether the analysis (framing) of the problem matches the complex realities influencing the situation of the person being targeted by the beneficence.

## Poverty, injustice, suffering

Most people working for development agencies are used to the idea that there is no one type of poverty, no one form of inequality, no one type of injustice. Thus:

- President Nyerere of Tanzania was famous for his espousal of a 'human dignity' approach to development.
- The Millennium Development Goals provide an economic measure of poverty.
- There are a number of different 'Quality of Life' Indices.
- Different people and agencies target the particular inequalities, sufferings or injustices in which they have an interest.
- There are those who espouse relativistic definitions, and those who go for a fixed level.

This range has existed for centuries. The range follows the motivations for compassion. Most people who act out of compassion do so because they do not like the thought that some people (invariably of a particular type) undergo some particular form of suffering whilst being unable to do much about it. Inevitably, the reason for their having a particular form of compassion is subjective – embedded in their own experience of life as well as in their cultural framework that determines what is right and what is wrong. This in turn implies that there are particular types of people who they believe deserve support more than others, and particular types who 'deserve what they get' – the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving'. Different cultures, groups, and communities will have very different perceptions as to who deserves support and who does not.

A very simple example of the failure of communication this can lead to is the use of the word 'marginalisation'. Many agencies have found that when they try to find out who in a community is 'marginalised', the people they talk to are mystified. What exactly does that mean? Some people deliberately keep themselves apart from the main group, and different sub-groups choose not to mix with other sub-groups. Who marginalises whom? Similarly the concept of 'vulnerability' – ask who is more vulnerable and there is confusion since all people can be considered vulnerable in one way or another at different times or in different situations.<sup>22</sup>

This type of problem is a very common one for development workers to face. When working with any particular group, members of the group are in general far quicker to spot what the workers want and the ways in which workers use categories than is the worker to have even a glimpse of local realities. The group invariably exploits the worker for its own benefit by using the language the worker tries to use. So if the workers want poverty, they'll get poverty. If they want gender imbalance, they'll get that. If they want injustice, that can be thrown in for no extra effort. Another scenario, of course, is that

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<sup>20</sup> I remember a conversation with someone from the headquarters of my own agency in 1979. We were looking at a project in a village in Tanzania. I suggested to him that he was unaware of the realities of local life. He chillingly replied "My reality is the only one that is valid".

<sup>21</sup> Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London*, vol 1 p126 London 1892

<sup>22</sup> The concept of 'vulnerability' has been much abused by development agencies. Its use suggests 'risk'. Risk implies that one type of situation carries a greater risk than another. It should be a comparative term, but rarely, if ever, is the situation labelled as 'vulnerable' compared in any measurable way with another possible situation. Again the use is emotive whilst being presented as logical.

there is a battle of wits or even that the group just says yes and pads off to do their own thing. It is in this way that the different purposes are matched – the same language is used, but each side can claim they are achieving something different.

## The moral maze

The centrality of moral judgement and attitude in the labels accorded either to individuals or their social environment is just as problematic when considering the 'scientific' or supposedly morally neutral view of poverty. In order to avoid subjective and emotional bases for aid, the idea here is to apply morally neutral policies for its provision (i.e. generalised provision of services, of support, of legislation).

The most recent proponents of a supposedly morally neutral approach, which in public policy terms can be traced back to the Elizabethan Poor Laws of the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries, are Rothstein and Uslaner<sup>23</sup> whose starting point is the centrality of trust:

“At the individual level, people who believe that most other people in their society in general can be trusted, are also more inclined to have a positive view of their democratic institutions, to participate more in politics and to be more active in civic organisations. They also give more to charity and they are more tolerant towards minorities and to people who are not like themselves. ... Cities, regions and countries with more trusting people are likely to have better working democratic institutions, to have more growth in their economy and less crime and corruption.

... Trust also is part of a social conscience — the belief that the various groups in society have a shared fate and that it is the responsibility of those with more resources to provide for those with less. ... Yet, helping those with fewer resources does not simply involve taking from the rich and giving to the poor ... . Instead, we argue, the policies most effective in reducing inequalities are universal social policies.

... Our argument is that universal programmes that cater to the whole (or very broad sections) of society, such as we find in the Scandinavian countries especially, lead to a greater sense of social solidarity which spurs generalised trust which then lead to more equality in turn.”

The universal programmes of which Rothstein and Uslaner speak are the improvements in economic equality and in equality of opportunity – the latter being seen in relation to public education, labour market opportunities and gender equality. They contrast this approach with selective welfare programmes whose disadvantage they see as follows:

“Selective welfare programmes on the other hand, tend to stigmatise recipients as “welfare clients”. They demarcate the rich and the poor very clearly and those at the bottom are made to feel that they are less worthy, not least because of the bureaucratic intrusion felt in the process of implementation. Universal programmes are connected to citizens’ rights, while selective welfare programmes have trouble with legitimacy because they have to single out the “deserving” from the “non-deserving poor”.”

Whilst this kind of argument is very alluring, it suffers from two main problems.

The **first** is that the society generated is just more willing to give charitably. This may in fact be a worth-while conclusion (or at least more honest) in that it suggests that the aim is not to eradicate ‘poverty’ or any other form of suffering, but to allow the continuation of the multiple ways in which individuals and states choose to understand the problems of others and react. In other words, those feeling good are those who are giving and they will continue in their own ways to select their particular categories of deserving from the non-deserving. A rather odd argument for a policy that is supposed to be values-free!

The **second** is that it is unclear which is cause and which effect – trust or equity – and in their conclusions they point to the pessimism of their vision as they claim that lack of equity and lack of trust are locked in a never-ending vicious cycle. So if they are in a vicious cycle they fail to suggest how policy can break it.

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<sup>23</sup> Rothstein B. & Uslaner E.M., *All for All: Equality and Social Trust*, LSE Health and Social Care Discussion Paper Number 15, first published in April 2005 by LSE Health and Social Care

They also fail, though, to deal with the issue that dogged the approach of the Elizabethan Poor Laws, notably that the generalised measures never had an effect on the existence of poverty and that more and more resources had to be channelled from the state to cover the support of those deemed as 'poor'<sup>24</sup>.

The labels in the above example are quite subtle in their application – they are more often implied rather than stated – but no matter how value-neutral they are purported to be they none the less reflect a very particular set of values.

## Values, trust and hypocrisy

Return now to the more overtly values-laden approaches<sup>25</sup>. For some people there is nothing problematic about a values-laden approach. All it means, after all, is that those who give aid or support do so on their own terms. It is their perception that counts, and especially as, according to them, they are the owners of the resources or privilege, it is theirs to dispense with as they please. Furthermore, since they will claim they can't help everyone in the world, they could say it is inevitable that some form of selection must occur, and that their particular means of selection is as good as any other. It should be noted that this argument does not depend for its validity on whether those being helped agree with the way their situation is defined.

The problem with this is the fact that purported benevolence (by governments, NGOs or individuals) is so often in one way or another *hypocritical* that leads to the deep-seated unease amongst those working in the industry with a large proportion of current development practise, supposed philanthropy and ostensible compassion.

Few if any agencies care to talk openly about their own hypocrisies. This might be understandable to some, but this makes it difficult to trust the openness of their criteria for giving aid. To what extent are they accountable and to whom? To what extent are they honest about their results? To what extent are they honest about their motivations?

It could be argued that most development agencies are clear about their criteria for selection or analysis. The current American governmental policies on aid are clear not only about their moral standpoint, but also about which types of person and country can benefit from their aid – agencies wanting American funding have to sign contracts not only that they will not benefit specific types of people, but also that they won't work with any that do. Many religious agencies are clear that only the people belonging to their religion should benefit. A wide variety of targeted programmes exist only for people with some specific disease, or who are members of a particular ethnic group, or who have a particular gender, or who have a particular age range or even a particular occupation.

Unfortunately, whilst the criteria for selection are clear, the realities faced by the workers often make it impossible to match those criteria, or else a lot of invention has to go on to make it seem they are applied. Very good examples abound in programmes for people with AIDS, or for children supposedly made vulnerable because of AIDS. Similarly, groups are quite ready to claim for themselves the criteria for aid whether or not there is a match.

## But there is real suffering

Whatever the argument about labels, victims do exist. People suffer disasters, and are exploited, abused, neglected, expelled, terrorised and killed.<sup>26</sup> Countless treatises on the art of development, after they have made their criticisms on the basis of a variety of failures, come back to this point and the authors beat their breasts in anguish over what positively can 'be done'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> As has, indeed, been the effect of the policy on the Nordic countries.

<sup>25</sup> It should be noted that a desire to reduce inequalities or promote rights is just as value laden as a desire to help people who are labelled in a particular way.

<sup>26</sup> Some killed, of course, as the result of development policies that provide armaments to poor countries, which falls into the category of poverty alleviation.

<sup>27</sup> One such author is James Ferguson in his book *The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Cambridge University Press 1990.

## ... and many people do benefit

Undeniably, many people in the world have benefited from the development industry. Some have got medicines for some of the time, some have set up small businesses, some have had access to water and to other resources, some have survived another day, some have received the armaments necessary to blow to pieces those they see as their oppressors, homes have been rebuilt after disasters. It would be madness to deny this. And of course there are the millions of people who are benefiting directly from the development business as a result of employment and the foreign exchange and commercial opportunities brought in the train of the expatriates who still dominate the industry.

## But many situations evade easy categorisation

Whenever I have started to probe the reasons for differences between people and households in a variety of urban and rural communities, I am nearly always drawn to the sheer complexity of the processes that lead to a particular situation. Take, for example the problem of chronic illness and disability, which is very strongly associated with poverty because the amount of time that has to be devoted to the care of the person concerned, as well as because that person finds it hard or impossible to work, or to interact with others. In every community there are households with chronic illness who are well supported by others around them, and households with the same chronic illness that are not well supported. Why this difference? Every time I have asked this question the first response has been "*It depends what that person or family were like before their illness*". In other words if the family or person had been seen to be pulling their weight in the community, being kind, fulfilling their obligations, they would be supported. If not, then mostly they would be helped only if they gave payment or their inheritance. I have heard the same response when asking the question why some households look after foster children well, and others do not. The situation is therefore not one of simple stigmatisation, fear or whatever, but one based on human interactions and the perceptions of those interactions. The challenge then becomes for the society "Even if you do not like a person or household, can you change the support mechanisms that exist to include that person?" And there is no easy answer to that in any society. Again, the question of motivations crops up.

So the problem of labels begins to look not as a problem for achieving consensus on labels, since no easy labels are applicable, but on how to resolve complex situations that everyone recognises but which few are prepared to resolve.

## Spectator sport

There is a fundamental mismatch between two sets of reality: on one side there is the set of desires of people to contribute money or resources or expertise which are channelled through professional agencies to remove or alleviate poor conditions. On the other is the set of complex realities of the people they believe they are helping – realities which fail to be captured by the labels or frames currently in use, and which are so complex that current and past policies are woefully inadequate.

The generalised goals of aid or development agencies that talk of the war against poverty, or the mitigation of poverty, or empowerment of women, or human rights are mostly cant – pious words used insincerely – and they are also used hypocritically. The labels that are used can never reflect the range of realities of people, their interactions and their environments. Whipping up public anger on the basis of such labels is deceitful manipulation. But the expectations of people are so high about the spending of their money that the agencies can hardly do otherwise, and so both the public that give money and the agencies are locked into a mutually reinforcing cycle of the maintenance of 'development' programmes using descriptions of situations that are so clearly inadequate and misrepresentative. The viciousness of this cycle is fuelled by the competition between agencies for funds from the public.

It is this aspect that is suggested in the title of this essay in referring to poverty as a spectator sport – one in which people pay for and contribute to an event in which they play no part, and to which they have no accountability. It is a theatrical event in the sense that a series of artfully contrived pictures or presentations are provided to a public that demands a certain type of show. Those that give are removed in every possible way from the situation they believe they are benefiting, and the agencies make sure they are even more removed by keeping the descriptions simplistic and the reporting

minimal. As a result the agencies themselves have little accountability either to the people who contribute money or to those supposed to be benefiting. If situations get a bit difficult, or funding dries up, they just move on.

A possible defence by the implementing aid agencies is that they are professional, that they employ people with experience of local situations who make judgements on the basis of extensive exploration with the people they serve and that detailed explanation of these processes is simply not wanted by the donating public. Unfortunately, although this is true at one level – that professionals are employed – it is equally true that the great bulk of their work is with little value in relation to the changes they claim to be making. Again this is a problem of the great generality of the labels tied to the objectives. There is no **one** poverty, no **one** inequality, no **one** injustice, no **one** power, no **one** exploitation. There are countless types of each category resulting from the myriad types of human interaction even within one small group of people.

## ... and the competition of the analysts

There is therefore another aspect to 'poverty as spectator sport': it is the competition between professionals about the analyses they apply – which drives them further and further from ordinary realities which people can sense for themselves in their interactions. This competition is furthermore one of the different 'wills' to establish the dominance of their particular identity.

The labels and frames of analysis that are used are therefore irrelevant – what is driving the problem is, on the one hand, the need to be benevolent, with the agencies trying to meet that need; and, on the other, the clash of wills between agencies, professionals and intellectuals over the particular labels or frameworks they deem to be 'the underlying factors' or the most likely to achieve 'results'. It seems to matter little whether anyone actually asks for benevolence since such discussion is entirely over their heads and of great irrelevance to them – except insofar as they have to put up with multitudes of different people claiming to represent their causes in different ways. However, because it is clear that, in some instances and for some people, benefit is indeed obtained, then it would be churlish to claim that benevolence is of itself bad.

## Taking a step back

Talking of alleviation of poverty or inequality (or whatever the generalised label of the moment) is only done within certain moral contexts (the analyses themselves are products of those moral contexts, or of the 'moral wills' of the professionals), and the morality of the situation is always determined by the donor, not by the person who is labelled or whose situation is so partially described. This is very clearly seen in the examples given above when communities decide to offer or withhold support to particular households. Quite often the aim of an aid programme is 'how to make those people more like the vision we have of ourselves' or how to help those "who have been like ourselves".

If this is the case, then talk of 'eradicating poverty', or helping the most marginalised, least powerful, least healthy or weakest is pure cant and hypocrisy unless one adds to this the constant refrain "as long as those people are doing what we think is right and proper" – in the image of ourselves.

Even if no agency would ever dare do this, its acknowledgement would at least provide some balm for those in the development business who feel so strongly the inadequacies and hypocrisies of what they (and I) do. It might also take us a step closer to seeing a different type of vision for 'development'.

At the moment the development world is very cosy, as much for those who work within it, as for those who sustain it. Little coteries hug themselves in small self-righteous groups, clinging to their particular cause. What is unacknowledged is that such a world is based on the need for a constant supply of beneficiaries, or victims. And this supply is guaranteed because of the diversity of understandings of poverty, or of inequality or of abuses of power. It is not that 'the poor are always with us' in the sense that one type of poverty will always exist, but that whatever the society there will always be some people **categorised or labelled** as poorer in the same multiplicity of ways and for the same multiplicity of reasons.

Without thinking about it, without questioning it, people outside of the development industry probably recognise this truth. People in the street seem to live quite happily with a whole line of different charity shops each with their own particular niche. They realise that so far no one has found a solution to the

problems arising from the differences between people, but they still want to help out. They want to believe in the ability of the organisations to which they give because it makes them feel that in one small way they may be doing somebody some good. The same goes for many of those who contribute their work to aid organisations. This is not necessarily the type of person who will burn themselves alive because of the lack of progress on world poverty or the status of women, and it would be mad to accuse them of the hypocrisies discussed in this paper. We simply are organisms that muddle our ways through life with a multitude of conflicting attitudes, motivations, desires, habits and interactions.

## It's like any political game

One way of looking at the situation is to think in terms of the ways in which people believe that political parties represent ideologies. In most modern democracies they don't, and politicians in private acknowledge that they are there to attract the largest number of voters – which means diminishing the number of contentious issues and establishing broad-based positions with the maximum appeal and the minimum of accountability. Their principal job in reality is the management of conflicting opinions in their constituencies. Yet they also know that it is important to give the impression of having an ideology. There thus results a mismatch when people who wish their political party to pursue a particular ideology see that their expectations are not being fulfilled. Modern development agencies seeking sufficient funding to prop up their vast empires must do the same. The French have a phrase for this process, the 'pensée unique' which signifies the need for the media to pursue as bland a path as possible, thus making all the big media say pretty much the same things, and staying well away from the issues that might drive either advertisers or public away. It is only the small agencies, like the small media, who can pursue their particular ideological paths, and they will attract the small number of donors who share that ideology.

However, as for the people who give in blind faith to the local charity shops, so the majority of people vote for political parties in the blind faith that they might, just might, do some good. Passionate ideologues will always have their place and will always make a lot of noise, but most of the time they are easily sidelined.

## The war is with ourselves

The question is not how to keep on bashing at a multiplicity of visions of poverty, power or whatever and pretending they represent one global vision, but to acknowledge the huge diversity of types of poverty, types of inequality, types of injustice; to acknowledge that for the multiplicity of situations there is a multiplicity of approaches, motivations and end points. This may be less sexy, but it is definitely closer to the truth.

The other aspect referred to above, the need to ensure that those on the receiving end are involved in the thinking, planning and assessment of benevolent acts, is something that is promoted endlessly but rarely done in a truthful way. Agencies are simply too frightened of their donors (individuals, agencies, governments or foundations) and of failure to allow this on any scale. It seems to me that the only way out of this is that some kind of understanding is reached – at least between the donor agencies and implementing agencies – that failure is ok, that fuzziness is ok, as long as some kind of honesty can be achieved and as long as the benefits are agreed in some way to outweigh the disadvantages. Unfortunately, honesty rarely, if ever, seems to be repaid.

Another suggestion, which is also unlikely as an achievable goal, is to re-establish the complexity of human interactions, likes and dislikes at the centre of development practise. There is in fact little value in shouting at one another with the various flags we like to use, since there is no common basis for an understanding of the flags or even frameworks. There is no common 'mankind' to whom we should all be addressing ourselves. The war is not with 'those in power' or 'men' or 'the wealthy' or even with the 'ignorant people who fail to see the benefit of our programmes'. The war is with ourselves. The labels and frames we use have no value except, perhaps, as starting points for joint exploration with the groups and societies for which we may feel, in our variety of ways, compassion.<sup>28</sup> Again, very few agencies are likely to want to do this since no end-point or objective is defined, and it could lead to the

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<sup>28</sup> One of the reasons why Arthur Schopenhauer put compassion at the centre of his philosophy – all true morality being founded for him on compassion.

discovery of truths that may be unpalatable to the desire for simple victims – people may in fact prefer to fuel their compassion with lies in order to avoid facing up to the fact that their compassion may be misplaced.

A simple exercise may bring this home. Think for a moment about the variety of neighbours, acquaintances, or colleagues you have ever known. Which of them would you help if they looked like they were in difficulty, and which of them would you be very reluctant to help? What are the criteria for your decision? What emotions or experiences led you to that decision? What purpose lies behind a decision to help or not to help? How do you come to think they might need help in the first place? What makes you interested in their particular problem? How do you verify whether they needed help? What makes you decide to help in a particular way? Everyone's answers to these questions are different. That is exactly what development is about.