BETWEEN TWO CATASTROPHES
NGOs and research for transformation

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Introduction

I was asked to speak on the role of non-governmental organisations (NGOs)and service organisations (SOs) in the transition from research supporting resistance to research supporting transformation. What I have to say is largely based on a report which I completed about a year ago for the Career Information Centre. (CIC)

The report came out of a research project initiated jointly by CIC and CRIC, its sister organisation in Cape Town. At the Natal end the process involved intense collaboration between myself and CIC. If what I have to say carries any weight, much of the credit must go to CIC. The brickbats can safely be reserved for me, however, since I was left to come to my own conclusions and I shall, in this paper, try to take some thoughts one step beyond.

Before starting I would like to make a distinction between those organisations which are set up to service a particular mass based organisation, and those that are constitutionally independent. The Trade Union Research Project (TURP) is an example of the first kind, while CIC is an example of the second.

As a matter of convenience I will refer to the first kind as SOs and to the second as NGOs.

SOs, in this sense, do not make their own policies but are directly tied to the agendas of the organisations to whom they provide a service. NGOs, whatever their links with mass based organisations, must take their own policy decisions.

Since this paper is mostly about research policy, or perhaps rather the factors which I think frame research policy options, it may be taken as directed more at NGOs than at SOs.

Theory and Strategic Planning

Transformation will not be the work of a day, and NGOs committed to transformation will have to engage, as a matter of urgency in long term strategic planning. That implies that they develop a theory of how development is worked in the world we inherit, and that they have some sort of vision of how they work their place in it.

They will of course, choose the theoretical framework they find most credible. That choice will affect the research they do and how they interpret it; the constituents they chose to work with; the other organisations they work with and how they do that; the programmes and projects they initiate; the kind of information that is generated by all these choices, and how it is interpreted and what further research is initiated in consequence.

I would argue that the transition initiated on February 2, 1990, is essentially about

the recomposition and deracialisation of the establishment necessary to maintain the formal economy. The racist line of exclusion will be displaced and fragmented but the new line of exclusion will nevertheless mark the new lines of power which are already in play.

If NGOs believe it possible that an establishment able and willing to deliver to all South Africans on a sustainable basis can be created, they will devote their energies to process its recomposition. That would be about increasing formal provision of services in an incremental way; gearing education to the needs of the formal economic and development sector; opening up career paths in such a way as to facilitate individuals in their personal transitions into the condition of modernity.

In this case, the short and long term strategies of NGOs would be the same:

- The theory is growth.
- The economy is urban-centred.
- The state embodies the national interest.
- The name of the game is access (and the demand will be formidable).
- And the consequence of failing is catastrophe.

In contrast, underdevelopment theory predicts that the growth strategy will actually result in the further immiseration of those who the metropolitan interests constitute as peripheral.

It is not too difficult to imagine how that would happen with the further stratification of labour, the creation of a large pool of marginalised casual labour, growing unemployment and further pressure on people's access to independent productive resources such as land. Catastrophe here, is the grinding reality of everyday life for millions of people.

Alternatively, the growth strategy would end up in the peripheries being pushed beyond the boundaries of South Africa and we can already see some of the ways that works in terms of the PWV region's thirst for water or the progressive exclusion of foreign migrants from the South African labour markets.

The ecological catastrophe which threatens to derail the global development agenda is also most acute at the peripheries. The logical consequence is that the metropolitan chain will eventually collapse its own resource base. The urban sector will turn its hinterland into a desert precisely as the consequence of its need to control resources in order to sustain itself. (For a description of the global urban hierarchy, see Armstrong and McGee, p41ff.)

As their resource base shrinks, the metropolitan interests are likely to become increasingly aggressive and competitive in their assertion of control. I do not envisage a single grand apocalypse but a process which will be as uneven and contradictory as that of development, indeed, a process which is precisely the continuation of uneven development. As Tom Nairn reminds us, 'uneven development' is a polite academic phrase meaning 'war' (1977:345) It's not always evident who or what is on what side at what time or even how many sides there are. It's not a neat war which is one reason why we must admit the partiality of theory.

Nevertheless, the threat of economic collapse consequent on the failure of growth remains. The catastrophe is, in this view, the implication of dependency which is

precisely the coin of underdevelopment.

NGOs which find this theoretical frame a more credible way of describing the processes they find confronting them must, I think, consider empowerment as a process of reducing people's dependence on the urban-centred economy, rather one of increasing their access to it.

And the urgency of this decision lies not only in the manifest incapacity of the formal economy to provide for everyone, nor just in that peripheralisation of catastrophe to which we give the name underdevelopment, but as a strategy for survival.

So, then:

- The theory is underdevelopment.
- The economy is defined by metropolitan interests.
- The state is located by a disjunction between the international system of states and its own internal history. It creates a force field in which major actors contest to construct the national in their own interests.
- The name of the game for NGOs is helping people develop a productive capacity autonomous of the global economy.
- And we are placed between twin peaks of catastrophe.

In placing us between two catastrophes, the critique does not of itself yield any self-evident policy. Rather, it produces a problematic of policy, because the objective must be to produce counter-flows to the most powerful forces shaping society; to work, as it were, against history. It does not leave NGOs with a simple either/or choice between access on the one hand, and helping people to act and produce for themselves on the other. Rather, it requires a different kind of access to metropolitan resources. And it requires engagement in the struggle within the establishment (remembering always that NGO staff are themselves part of the establishment) in ways which are, hopefully, now becoming possible.

Tensions in Development

In practical terms this problematic is characterised by a number of tensions which I will try to spell out below.

The tension between long and short term strategies

Reducing people's dependence on the urban-centred economy can only be a long term strategy. Most commentators emphasise the necessity for peripheralised people to organise themselves if their needs and priorities are to become part of the national agenda. I will argue below that such organisation should aim to articulate production rather than demand. That is the long term strategy. More immediately, NGOs will only be able to facilitate autonomous development if the recomposed establishment allows them the space to do so and if NGOs themselves create that space using the opportunities presented in the fluidity of transition.

NGOs will be minor actors within the recomposed establishment. While the major actors will want to construct the national in their own interests, the NGOs will want to promote a construction of the national which accommodates their interests. They

will therefore be concerned to promote the multiplication and devolution of the sites of decision making.

They will also have an interest in the greatest possible freedom of information in all sectors of political and economic life. Tight control of information is a sensible option only for those that have the ambition and power to dominate a particular terrain. Being one of the weaker parties to the establishment, NGO capacity to contest the agendas of more powerful actors will relate to their ability to research those agendas and demonstrate their consequences.

The tensions between NGO strategies and their resources and capacities

Without funds, of course, there will be no capacity and it is already evident that funding is becoming much tighter. To get funds, NGOs have to make promises, otherwise known as proposals. They also have to make promises to their constituents. They need to be sure they can deliver on their promises and that they are clearly defined so that people don't expect what was never promised although there are difficulties here to which I will return below.

Part of the NGO interest in the recomposition of the establishment is to amplify NGO capacity by engaging established institutions in their work.

Some initiatives, for example the location of various NGOs and SOs within the liberal universities, indicate one way in which this can be done. Universities, of course, are large and baggy institutions and many organisations are barely noticed. NGOs should be concerned to engage the partner institution as a whole and inform its practices and culture beyond the extent of its participation in a particular project or programme.

To stay with the example of the universities, NGO research should be used to pose problems that create the pressures to transform university research agendas as well as the content and methods of its teaching.

At the same time NGOs must ensure that their research is effectively networked within the NGO community itself, both within development sectors and across sectoral lines. Given that different NGOs have different histories and cultures - that is, different imaginative points of reference - this will not necessarily be any easier than the relations between NGOs and partner institutions.

NGOs have an interest here in promoting mobility of staff within the NGO network so as to broaden the range of people's experience. This is particularly important for research. Training programmes should also attempt to take account of the needs of the broader NGO network.

Mediating the tension between metropolitan resources and peripheral needs

Obviously this is the tension which lies at the heart of the transformational development project.

Ensuring that resources really do facilitate and production really does benefit the peripheries, rather than circulating back to the metropolitan advantage, will be a profoundly difficult task. This is particularly so since social stratification in the peripheries is substantially produced within the terms of the metropolitan/periphery

relationship. People who gain power in the peripheries are generally those who have the best access to metropolitan resources; political connections, access to capital, control of access to markets and goods, access to education.

The aid syndrome is, of course, precisely about the creation of dependency on development agencies. But the pressure for dependence is not one-sided. Since NGOs are metropolitan agencies, people are likely to want to use them simply for access so there is likely to be a tension between the NGO's strategy in relation to the people and the people's strategy in relation to the NGO.

But that response is partly conditioned by the unconscious promises of development workers. As one of the participants in the CIC project put it, aid tends to be directed at those who will look good in the city and it certainly helps if they speak English. Their achievements, often the result of considerable struggle, become the means by which we confirm our own identities. In doing that, we replay that missionary scene in which 'the progressive' is costumed after our own image as the aspiration to the life styles of urban modernity.

Peripheralised people, however, do have other strategies for survival, some of which are marked by their history of resistance to incorporation within the colonising economy. One function of NGOs would be to help people locate that resistance within the context of global development. Beyond that, NGOs need to put much more effort into understanding the productive knowledge and skills which fall outside the formal economy; in seeking to expand the resource base relevant to those skills as well as introducing and developing new skills and technologies appropriate to sustainable development.

It is in this area that I think research has the greatest potential to transform the imaginative co-ordinates of the NGOs themselves, but to do this NGOs will need to talk to people who won't necessarily look good in the cities. They will need to talk to people in the local language, not just as a means of communication, but to speak to the imagination put into play in that part of the people's lives which relates a different set of aspirations to those played in the Ohlsson's ad.

That would involve paying closer attention to the position of women in development, since it is they who retain and have continued to develop skills in cultivation and food preparation, and it is they who are most disadvantaged in terms of access to formal education and the formal economy.

Perhaps less comfortably for us, it would also involve a better understanding of such figures as the Sangoma or the traditional leader and their potential to play a positive role in development.

The promotion of democratic forms of social organisation is, of course, an essential part of the development process but the underlying ethos of social movements will have a profound affect on what they actually achieve. In my view there are therefore three things which should inform the way researchers think about organisation:

* Organisation for production.
* Production for local consumption.
* Demand to enable, rather than displace, control of resources.

Resources will not in fact be locally defined if production does not have as its

primary goal the satisfaction of local needs. If the aim is to supply distant markets, it is not the producer who in fact defines resources, but the upstream and downstream of a production pipeline dominated by capital and the metropolitan market (Armstrong and McGee, 1985:64).

A priority on production would not preclude demand. A production-based rural social movement would, for example, seek to ensure that state land policy and legislation opened as wide a space as possible for it to achieve its own policy goals, such as redistribution of land. The difference then, is between demand which is designed to enable people to act in their own interest and demand which insists that government act for them.

This relates to the fourth tension which will characterise the development problematic for NGOs.

The relation between welfare and development

People who are debilitated by malnutrition and related diseases aren't in a position to do much until their basic welfare needs are met. The research problematic here will be how to make a crisis response the first step in a development response.

This raises another question of profound moral difficulty: how do NGOs identify sites of intervention which have a development potential? The scale of need in South Africa is overwhelming and resources are limited. If NGO resources are directed to areas without productive potential, they will sustain an insatiable demand and the cycle of deprivation will not be broken. NGOs will have to accept the limitations of their own resources and calculate the productivity of their interventions.

But they must also look for ways in which those currently excluded from all capacity can be drawn into the development of an appropriate resource base in the long term.

The relation between politics and development

While development is profoundly political, its politicisation on party lines will institute political patronage and the use of development as a political weapon. Leadership within the oppositional movements are aware of the necessity for development to be impartial. Many of those who experience violence on a daily basis are less generous. They respond to a logic of war rather than development and NGOs are frequently challenged as to the ideological identity of their clients. The political movements themselves therefore regard political education as an urgent priority.

Moreover, most of the movements whose future lies within civil society and which NGOs will need and want to work with, have very clear political identities.

In short, one can't go very far in South Africa without bumping into a political affiliation and many NGOs themselves have strong political sympathies.

While political education as such is also about maintaining political loyalty and should be left to the movements concerned, NGOs have to decide how to respond to requests for assistance in training and other programmes. They will need to consider a number of issues:

- Engagement in programs as part of their relationship to political movements

which can be expected to form part of the recomposed establishment.
* The relation between that engagement and their long term strategies.
* Their credibility and how that affects their ability to engage with particular communities.
* The extent to which they will be identified through association with a particular political alignment and what that implies about their ability to engage in non-partisan development.
* The development role that political or affiliated movements actually do play as the process of transition works itself through.

Conclusion

It is now a fairly common perception that NGO and other development workers need to mediate the relation between local needs and national imperatives. In my report for CIC I too espoused that position and it remains implicit in much of what I have said here concerning NGOs and the recomposed establishment.

I think, however, that the emphasis on the national as the other pole of development needs to be qualified. Perhaps because of its particular history, progressive South Africans have thought of the taking of national power as the singular goal of liberation and have, since 1991, thought of the international dimension as qualifying, however radically, the effectiveness of national power.

I would suggest that the national is but one moment, a key moment to be sure, in the international system. So I think it is the international and the local which should form the two poles of the NGO imagination while the weight due to the national derives from its strategic location in the global systematic. It is already an old slogan: Think globally, act locally.

Obviously the international connection which is most immediately and urgently felt is that with funding NGOs. There has been considerable emphasis recently, on the fact that the agendas of funding NGOs are often formed by the metropolitan context and that they are liable to overlook or ignore the peculiarities of local circumstances. The point should not be forgotten and the best international development workers (I am thinking of those who are themselves committed to transformation) are acutely aware of it. At the same timed, they often have considerably more experience of the kind of development problematic that South Africans are only now beginning to face.

It should also be recognised that the agendas of funding organisations are not simply formed by the politics of their countries of origin, but are also influenced by their partner organisations. Local NGOs are never going to be short of arguments to have with international partner organisations but I do think the latter have much more than money to offer and I think local NGOs have much more than the position of recipient to offer in return.

Following that, and I hope the point is obvious, South African NGOs need to be actively making contact with other third world NGOs, so as to develop a more global imagination; to network information, ideas, technologies and strategies; and to be able to respond in solidarity to events elsewhere.

It has recently been suggested that the old slogan should now read; 'Think globally, act locally and think locally, act globally'. We need to become participants in what I hope it is not too optimistic to call the global counter-movement for transformation.

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