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Post-development Politics and Practice:
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One of the most common criticisms of post-development theory relates to its call for alternatives to development. Critics feel that if post-development theorists would like to completely reject contemporary development initiatives they ought to present a more detailed description of what they mean by 'alternatives to development' as the 'agenda for action' proposed by post-development theory is not immediately evident.[2] From the perspective of some critics, a critique without a 'positive programme' is politically irresponsible – by undermining 'development' without providing an alternative response to the problems development purports to address, post-development theory 'leaves only fragmented remains … an agenda-less programme, a full stop, a silence, after the act of deconstruction' (Blaikie 2000:1038-1039). For those who are deeply concerned with the question of how to respond to the problems of poverty, inequality and oppression, this position has little appeal, and indeed should be strongly resisted.

Implicit in the debate between advocates and critics of post-development theory, is a disagreement about how 'we' – the privileged – should respond to the plight of those less fortunate than ourselves. Many development theorists and practitioners have a strong moral commitment to helping 'the poor' and are offended by post-development theory's suggestion that such 'help' often does more harm than good. However apt post-development theory's critique of the messianic presumptions of the 'developers' and of the arrogance of the whole notion of 'helping the poor' may be; it does seem that we need to respond in some way to the plight of those who are less privileged than ourselves.[3] How can we take on board the many valuable insights of post-development theory without seeming to advocate indifference and inaction in the face of the misery that many people in the world experience daily?

In this paper I try to provide a response to this question. I begin by looking at some of the alternative strategies offered in post-development literature and set out to show that while there are several problems with these alternatives, to read post-development theory as advocating indifference or inaction is to read it uncharitably. Secondly, I draw on the experiences of the NGO Enda Graf Sahel in Dakar, Senegal to suggest some ways in which the insights of post-development theory can be taken into consideration without leading to inaction or indifference in the face of the suffering of those who occupy a less advantaged position in contemporary structures of power and privilege.

'Alternatives To Development': Supporting NSMs And Transforming Power Relations

While I agree that post-development theory has been stronger on critique than on construction, post-development theory seems to offer us at least two ways to respond to the problems which it argues

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[2] For criticisms of this aspect of post-development theory see Nederveen Pieterse (1998:364 and 2000:188), Blaikie (2000:1038-1039) and Dower (1993:87).

[3] This is true even if, following post-development theory, we problematise notions like 'poverty' and question the desirability of the lives of those in 'developed' countries. Some people do live miserable lives and those of us who do not may well have some kind of moral responsibility to try to reduce this misery.

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'development' has failed to solve. Firstly, it suggests that we support the 'local' and 'new social movements' as it is argued that local 'grassroots' initiatives are best able to improve the lives of the communities of which they are an element. Secondly, it suggests that we ought to work to undermine the relations of power that cause injustice and oppression and that such work includes working within privileged societies. Each of these strategies holds more promise than some critics have allowed, but neither is without its flaws.

Much post-development theory suggests that what is wrong with 'development' is that it seems to involve outsiders deciding on behalf of others what these others need and how these needs can be met. Post-development theorists do not think that such 'outsiders' – such as NGOs, foreign or even national governments, and international financial institutions – can legitimately decide what is best for communities they little understand. Rather, we should look to 'the local', to 'new social movements' or 'popular organisations', as agents of desirable social change.[4] These movements are not 'outsiders' and are thus more legitimate and effective actors within their communities. Members of advantaged societies should support such movements, both in their own and in other societies, but should guard against becoming involved with them in ways that entail paternalism or an imposition of foreign values.

Post-development theorists' optimism about the local and NSMs has met with much criticism. Some of this criticism comes from those who see the state as a more likely agent of desirable social change.[5] Other criticism relates to the absence of any criteria for deciding which NSMs to support. Post-development theory does not say that only NSMs which endorse x and y should be supported, but rather seem to imply that as long as the group is rooted in the community in which it works, its efforts are legitimate and likely to be beneficial. Critics rightfully point out that there is insufficient reason to believe that all new social movements will truly act in the interests of the poor and oppressed.[6] By placing their faith in such movements without providing sufficient criteria for judging which local groups really will advance the interests of the poor, post-development theorists wash their hands of the

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[4] See for example the final chapter of Escobar (1995).
[5] See for example Schuurman's (2001) discussion of 'emancipatory spaces'. In this paper I will not deal with this criticism.
[6] See Nanda (1999, 2002), Storey (2000).

A further issue that needs clarification is the question of *how* to support such NSMs. How are we to provide them with our encouragement and support, while avoiding the paternalism and condescension of earlier 'development' initiatives? What kind of relationship should 'we', working for NGOs, academic institutions, governments and the like, have with these NSMs?

In addition to providing support for the 'local', post-development theorists suggest that one contribution that 'we' can legitimately make, is to recognise the complexity of the causal relations that lead to impoverishment and oppression and to seek to transform these relations, particularly by working to correct the ways in which 'our' societies contribute to the impoverishment and oppression of distant others. Ferguson (1990:286) speaks of how teaching and advocacy in the West can help to advance the cause of those negatively affected by Western governments' imperialist policies. Yapa (1996, 2002) points out that it is wrong to understand poverty as located 'over there' with the poor and thus to assume that in order to address poverty one needs to intervene in the poor community or region. Rather, we should see that poverty arises within a complex nexus of relations and that this nexus extends into non-poor communities and regions. It follows, then, that one can help to transform the relations that cause poverty and oppression without necessarily intervening in the poor community itself. Thus, argues Yapa (1996:723) '"My solution" is aimed at fellow academics who, like myself, are deeply implicated in the problem and whose power lies primarily in our capacity to engage the discourse critically.' While writers such as Yapa and Ferguson speak particularly of the role that 'first world' citizens can play within the 'first world', similar comments can be made with regard to 'third world' elites – and by 'elites' here, I mean to refer to all those 'third world' citizens who have access to similar privileges as those of the citizens of the 'first world'. One way that such elites may be able to respond to poverty is through working within the privileged sub-sections of 'third world' societies so as to try to change the way that these sub-sections relate to the rest of their societies. More broadly, such elites can work at disseminating information and providing support to assist in the erosion of the complex network of causal relations from which impoverishment and oppression result. I should also stress here that to argue in favour of such a role is not to argue that this is the *only* role that such 'first world' citizens and 'third world' elites can play, but simply to stress that this too is a legitimate way for the privileged to respond to poverty and oppression. Such a role could complement the work of 'local' movements and of those who provide support to such local movements.

For those whose interpretation of misery and oppression emphasises material deprivation, the idea that an intellectual can 'fight poverty' from the comfort of an air-conditioned office, may not at first seem persuasive, but it is unfair to dismiss this strategy out of hand. Post-development theorists convincingly demonstrate how the non-material – discourse, knowledge, culture and the like – needs to be taken on board both in defining desirable social change and in thinking about how to bring about such change.[8] The role that Ferguson, Yapa and others propose 'we' can play is an important one if we are to change the structures that cause poverty and misery rather than just 'treating the symptoms' such structures

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[8] Post-development literature such as *The Development Dictionary* (Sachs 1992) draw on post-modern insights to show how discourse and knowledge are not 'neutral' but themselves play a role in the oppression and exclusion of some people by others.

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9 I should also note that neither Ferguson nor Yapa argue that this is the only role 'we' can play. Both allow that 'we' may also play a more directly interventionist role, but they would like to stress that it is incorrect to view the academic working to change discourse on poverty as less involved in responding to poverty than the practitioner 'in the field' trying to implement some or other solution strategy aimed at reducing poverty.

However, there is a problem associated with this strategy, especially in the version which stresses that 'we', the privileged, should work only or primarily within 'our' societies. Some post-development theorists make assertions along the lines of 'culture A may only be legitimately criticised by members of culture A or according to the values of culture A' and give this as the reason why 'we' should stick to working within 'our' societies. This kind of position opens post-development theory up to accusations that it embraces a politically problematic relativism, as this sort of assertion implies that there are no values that hold at all times in all places, but rather that different groups have different but equally valid value systems. Such a relativist position leaves little space for any kind of 'forward politics' – if all value systems are equally valid, why fight in favour of some values – indeed why seek to be ethical at all? Furthermore, this approach sits uncomfortably alongside other elements of post-development theory such as its strident critique of the 'Western world' – it is incoherent to condemn the consumption levels and individualism of 'Westerners' and then to say that each culture can only be judged by its own values.

Clearly then, while post-development theory is not 'critique but no construction' (Nederveen Pieterse 2000:188) as some critics aver; the 'construction' on offer remains a little flimsy. In order to better theorise such alternatives it is useful to look at the experiences of those who have engaged in the difficult task of trying to respond to problems such as poverty, inequity and oppression, in the light of some of the insights of post-development theory. It is here that the experiences of Enda Graf Sahel are instructive.

Enda Graf Sahel (EGS), as it is called today, has been around, in various forms and under various names, since 1975 and forms part of the larger *Enda Tiers Monde* (Enda TM) network.[11] It began as one of the first fields of experimentation for Enda TM and initially focused its attention on Dakar, particularly on the suburb of Grand Yoff. While its core remains in Grand Yoff, the EGS network now stretches across most of Senegal and reaches into several other West African countries.

For thirty years EGS has been involved in various efforts to improve the lives of disadvantaged people in Dakar, and more recently, in many other parts of West Africa, both rural and urban. Their ways of going about this have evolved over the years in response to much internal reflection and debate. Initially, their approach was a fairly typical community development approach, which drew on international discourses of aid and development prevalent at the time. They saw themselves as there to help the poor and they thought that fighting poverty entailed the transfer of money, knowledge, resources and other things external to the poor community (De Leener et al. 1999:8). Today, the EGS team look back very critically on the approach they adopted when they began 'development work' in 1975. They sarcastically describe the way in which they whole-heartedly took to the game of 'victim, persecutor and saviour', presenting the poor as victims, the neglectful state as the persecutor and themselves as the 'good cowboys' heroically rescuing the poor (Enda Graf Sahel 2001:230-232). After a few years, they were forced to recognise that the population did not view them this way and in fact was at least as likely to turn to other 'saviours', such as religious leaders and even politicians, in times of distress. Looking back they say that during their first decade of existence they were little more than

[10] The information in this section is based on various Enda Graf publications (see bibliography) and on field work done in Dakar Senegal with the organisation itself. My understanding of the history and general evolution of the organisation is based on many helpful discussions with various members of the Enda Graf Sahel network.

[11] *Enda Tiers Monde*'s full English name is Environment and Development Action in the Third World. It is an international non-governmental organisation that was founded in Dakar, Senegal in 1972. Enda Graf Sahel was previously known as Enda Chodak and is sometimes also referred to as *Enda Sahel et l'Afrique d'Ouest* (Enda Sahel and West Africa).

'a transfer point in the development aid system' (De Leener et al. 1999:7). While the community did not regard them as harmful, they were not particularly impressed by these would-be messiahs' attempts to 'rescue' them from unemployment and poverty, and certainly did not feel that their position in the community was an essential one. Eventually they were forced to admit that their projects had all failed and that they were marginalised within the community they had set out to 'save'.[12]

In many ways this period of crisis within EGS represents on a smaller scale the larger 'impasse in development' which occurred at much the same time. They relate their change of direction to a broader crisis in development saying that EGS's contemporary approach 'originates firstly in an assessment of [their] own experiences, but also in the failure of thirty years of development in most African countries' (EGS 1996). They were forced to admit that their 'development' initiatives had born little fruit and that what was needed was more than small adjustments in their approach. Rather than abandoning their work, or continuing to blind themselves to the failure of their initiatives, they set out to transform their approach so that they could more effectively help to improve the lives of those living in the communities in which they worked. Many of the reasons they give for the failure of their previous approaches touch upon themes in post-development theory, such as the inappropriateness of imported models and 'expert' knowledge, the insensitivity of most 'development projects' to people's own knowledge and creativity, and the arrogance of imposing the values and ideals of 'development workers' on the communities they claim to be helping.[13] This period of reflection led to a number of attempts to change the functioning of their organisation in such a way as to better respond to the expressed needs of the communities in which they were active. They evolved from an organisation which set out through various 'expert' interventions and projects to 'rescue the poor', to a network of groups, horizontally and fairly haphazardly related, which provide support for a variety of community initiatives.

I will not here at length describe the evolution of Enda Graf Sahel, but will rather try to draw on EGS's experiences to make a few comments relating to the issues raised in the previous section of the paper.[14] As mentioned earlier, post-development theory suggests at least two alternative strategies for fighting poverty: supporting the 'local' and NSMs, and working to erode the distant causes of poverty. EGS's recent work provides some insights on how NGOs can play this role, and more broadly on how it is possible to take on board some of the insights of post-development theory while continuing to respond to the problems of those less privileged than ourselves.

Providing Support for Popular Organisations

Enda Graf Sahel provides support for many groups that could fall under the broad category of NSMs. Indeed, it is not possible to clearly distinguish between EGS, the NGO, and the larger network of community based organisations (CBOs) which are loosely affiliated with EGS. EGS describes itself as

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[12] Their own account of this period and the reasons for the failure of their various interventions makes interesting reading – see for example chapter 4 of *Pauvreté, décentralisation et changement social* (De Leener et al. 1999).

[13] I should note here that while much of the literature and internal discourse of EGS makes similar points to those made in post-development theory, I would hesitate to call what EGS does 'post-development practice' as I am not sure quite what exactly this means and as this is not the way in which they would describe themselves. While some members of EGS, particularly the coordinator, Emmanuel Ndione (see Ndione et al. 1997 and Ndione 2002), have participated in the post-development debate, most of those affiliated with this network are not familiar with this debate, nor do they have a clear position with regard to it. Nevertheless, their current way of acting in the community takes on board many of the insights of post-development theory, although they have for the most part achieved these insights independently of post-development literature and the broader post-development debate.

[14] Enda Graf Sahel's own literature (see Ndione 1992, 1993; Ndione et al. 1994, De Leener et al. 1999, and Enda Graf Sahel 2001) provides several discussions of this evolution.

a 'network of actors' and many of these actors are drawn from CBOs. Rather than recruiting staff members through advertising for people with particular skills or qualifications, EGS tends to draw people who are already working in the community into their organisation. According to their vice-coordinator, Babacar Touré (2005), what is important in the choice of new staff members is their capacity to fit into existing social dynamics of change in the community. EGS prefers to bring people who are already part of these dynamics on board, rather than recruiting people according to their specialist skills or qualifications. It seems that frequently EGS begins by working with those involved in community associations, and then sometimes draws these people into the organisation itself or into particular projects for which they have funding.[15]

The evolution of one of the branches of Enda Graf Sahel, Enda Graim, demonstrates this nicely. Enda Graim[16] is situated in Thiès, Senegal's second largest city and works both in Thiès and particularly in the peri-urban and rural areas around Thiès. While Enda Graim is a relatively new organisation (it began in the late 1990s), it grew out of an already existing associative movement in the rural area of Fandène just outside Thiès. Several of the current personnel of Enda Graim had been actively involved in various associative activities, particularly associations providing a form of basic health insurance to people in the villages of Fandène.[17] These associations began to cooperate and were given support by Enda Graf Sahel, which was also active in Thiès at the time. In this way, Enda Graim gradually emerged, such that it is difficult to say whether Enda Graim is best described as an 'NGO' or as a community based organisation. One of its staff members describes it as a 'hybrid' between a community based organisation and an NGO.[18]

Enda Graf Sahel tries to provide support to the various community based organisations which are part of its broader network. One of the most important roles that EGS plays is that of putting such organisations in touch with each other.[19] As an NGO working throughout Senegal, EGS is able to facilitate contact between different local organisations with similar needs so that they can provide each other with support and can learn from each others' experiences. However, they do also try to do more than just put the various organisations in touch and help keep contact between them. Once such networks are set up, EGS is able to support them in various ways, such as providing them with funds for particular projects and with appropriate training.

An example of a network initiated and supported by EGS is that of the VAF network – *valorisation des activités des femmes* (valorisation of women's activities) – which brings together around fifty women's groups, which are also broken down into smaller networks according to region and profession.[20] Most of these women's groups were associated with EGS before the creation of VAF, but in 2003 it was decided to bring them together through the creation of VAF. The VAF network allows the women to better coordinate their activities and to learn from each others' experiences. They are also able to trade

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[15] In discussions with Mamadou Ndiaye and André Wade, who co-ordinate Enda Graf Guediawaye and Enda Graim respectively, it was clear that these branches of EGS expanded as those already working in the community were brought into EGS.

[16] 'Graim' stands for *Groupe de Recherches d'Appui aux initiatives Mutualistes* – Research group for the support of associative initiatives.

[17] Interviews with André Wade, Victor Tiné, Ferdinand Mbaye and Charles Wade, Enda Graim, 29-30 June 2005.

[18] Interview with Charles Wade, member of Enda Graim, 30 June 2005.

[19] EGS 2001:266 and Ndiaye 2005.

[20] The discussion of the functioning of this network is based on interviews with Hélène Diouf, Yacine Diagne and Constance Tine. Hélène Diouf is coordinator of ASFED (*Association Sénégalaise de femmes pour l'entraide et développement*) and vice-president of APROVAL (Association des Professionnelles pour la Valorisation des produits locaux), both of which are part of VAF. Yacine Diagne coordinates the broader VAF network. Constance Tine coordinates RAP (*Réseau des Apprentissages Populaires*) which is a member of VAF.

goods and skills – for example rural women farmers can provide urban women who make fruit juices and jams with their surplus products. EGS also provides some training for the women, such as training on various methods to improve their processing of local products (fruit juices, jams and the like). In addition, the VAF network helps the various women's groups find new partners as they can refer each other to partners who can potentially provide technical or financial support.

One of the ways in which EGS also seeks to support local organisations is by opening them up to ideas and approaches of which they would not otherwise be aware. Popular organisations do not have access to the same amount of information as do NGOs and they also sometimes do not have the skills needed to decipher such information.[21] They also tend to be focused on the local and the immediate which prevents them from being able to see the distant causes and effects of their situation.[22] NGOs have a role to play in providing a different 'take' on the reality experienced by local groups and to interpret some of the experiences of local organisations. For example, a local organisation may be trying to alleviate the effects of unemployment in a particular area, but they may not be aware of the reasons for the increases in unemployment, nor have the information necessary to be able to make prudent decisions about how to respond to unemployment in their particular area. NGOs can play an important role in this respect.

EGS takes into account the fact that the populations with whom they work have often had their beliefs and way of life disparaged. Many development projects, well-meaning though they may be, encourage people to see themselves as incapable of solving their own problems and present models from outside the society as solutions to these problems. EGS believes that it has a role to play in revalorising the people's own strategies and belief systems. Because many disadvantaged communities have had their own way of seeing the world denigrated, it is difficult for them to reject values and ideals which have effectively been imposed upon them and to reassert their own way of seeing the world. EGS sees its role as the facilitation of the reassertion of denigrated worldviews and value systems and the questioning of those that dominate (Ndione et al. 1994:55-56). They can help members of such populations to look upon themselves and their communities differently and help them 'emancipate themselves from the burden of received models' by questioning these models and the assumptions and power relations which undergird them (EGS 2001:297).

This last role is perhaps one of the hardest to delineate in practice. How does one really go about revalorising denigrated value systems? It is not really feasible to launch a programme which has as its aim the revalorisation of disparaged ways of seeing the world! What would one do in this programme? However, there are several ways in which EGS plays the role they describe above. An example is an initiative of Enda Graim to promote the *noon* language which is spoken by some of the communities in the region of Thiès.[23] Until recently this language was not recognised as one of Senegal's national languages and was only a spoken language. Through pressure from groups such as Enda Graim, *noon* has now been recognised as a national language. In addition to advocacy in favour of the *noon* language, Enda Graim has begun literacy classes in *noon*. They provide basic literacy training for *noon*-speaking adults who cannot read and write, as well as special *noon* literacy training for literate people who want to learn how to read and write in *noon*. Radio broadcasts in *noon* have also been arranged. Providing *noon* literacy training obviously brings similar benefits to general literacy training,

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[21] Babacar Toure (2005) drew my attention to this problem and the way in which NGOs can play a role in providing and interpreting information that popular organisations do not typically have.

[22] André Wade (2005) drew my attention to this problem.

[23] Comments on the *noon* language programme draw on a discussion with Charles Wade of Enda Graim and also to some extent on Enda Graf's 2004 report of activities (EGS 2005).

9

but Charles Wade of Enda Graim, stresses that these initiatives to promote the *noon* language are particularly valuable in terms of the revalorisation of the cultural heritage of the *noon* people. The speakers of *noon*, who number around 35 000, used to be embarrassed of their language and those who could not speak other languages felt stupid and ashamed. By seeing their language being promoted, their assessment of the value of their cultural heritage has changed, and they are no longer ashamed of their language, and by extension of their culture and themselves.

In the previous section some of the problems with the post-development theorists' notion of 'supporting the local' were identified. Critics may well ask '*How* can we support local movements?' and may also wonder *which* local movements to support. The ways in which EGS supports various local movements in Senegal described above provide several pointers in response to the first question, but what about the second concern – how does EGS decide which local movements to support and to bring into its network? EGS does not have a particular set of criteria for deciding who to work with, but they do have a set of values which they encourage and thus it is likely that they would be sought out by local movements sharing these values and that they would in turn tend to seek out such movements. But is this really sufficient to address the concerns of critics of the idea of supporting local movements? I will turn to this question in more detail further on.

Transforming Power Relations

As mentioned earlier, post-development literature suggests that one role that 'we' – those who occupy a position of relative advantage within current relations of power and privilege – can play, is to try to transform the relations which cause others to experience poverty or injustice. When our focus is solely on 'helping the poor', we risk implying that poverty has its causes with the poor – that poverty is caused by the lack of knowledge, expertise, entrepreneurship, fertile land or perhaps even good fortune on the part of the poor. Post-development theorists suggest, rather, that we need to look at the relations between the rich and the poor to understand the origins of poverty.[24] In this way the problem of poverty and injustice are closely tied up, as poverty is often the result of an unjust relationship between two groups of people.

EGS's own understanding of poverty and how we ought to respond to it corresponds with that of post-development theory. They argue:

> Poverty is the result of a long process. For this reason we prefer to speak of impoverishment and of the mechanisms which create poverty in each of us. As far as we are concerned, we do not fight against poverty, but against everything that creates poverty in our lives (De Leener et al. 1999: 15).

By defining their struggle in this way, they suggest that their 'battlefield' is not just to be found among the poor and disadvantaged, but rather that they need to struggle against these mechanisms of impoverishment wherever they may be found. Today, EGS has a branch in Belgium, Enda Intermondes, which contributes to some extent to this struggle. This organisation gives its objectives as the demystification of the North-South divide, the valorisation of popular expertise in both the South and the North, and the promotion of cooperation between popular organisations in the North and those in the South (EGS 2000:63). By establishing a branch in Europe, EGS can be seen as acknowledging

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[24] It should be noted here that post-development theorists also question the way in which poverty is understood in much development literature and some post-development theorists seem very sceptical about the value of the notion poverty at all. However, most would surely allow that certain people do live in a state of deprivation which they deem to be unpleasant and from which they yearn to escape. It is to this state that I refer when I speak of 'poverty' here.

that their struggle is not one that is located only in Africa, as many of the causal chains causing impoverishment in Africa have their origins in Europe.

Relatedly, EGS is currently setting up a programme dealing with ethical trade issues.[25] This programme hopes to contribute to attempts to change the kind of international trade relationships which are skewed towards those in the 'first world'. This programme will work within West Africa to promote further awareness of trade issues and disseminate information with regard to trade treaties, and is also likely to involve attempts to lobby those who are involved in determining trade relations, both in West Africa and further afield. This programme will thus contribute to attempts to fight against the structures which cause poverty, rather than simply alleviating poverty itself.

EGS has already had some involvement in ethical trade issues through Enda Diapol's participation in the Cancun meeting of the World Trade Organisation in 2003.[26] Aware that much information and reporting on such meetings does not reflect the interests and concerns those in the 'third world', Diapol sent three West African journalists to Cancun with the aim of assisting in the improvement of reporting about this meeting. Diapol also assisted in the dissemination of information on this meeting with the aim of increasing awareness among West Africans of the ways in which global trading relations, particularly in relation to cotton, are skewed against them. Such activities help exploited farmers to better recognise their position and the causes of this position, and thus facilitate growing solidarity among such farmers in order to resist such exploitation. NGOs, by having access to information and by having the skills needed to interpret such information, can play an important role in terms of disseminating information which can make those disadvantaged by exploitative trade relations more aware of the complexities of their situation and thus better able to respond to them.

Sensitivity to Difference and the Problem of Cultural Relativism

Post-development theory, like a lot of other contemporary social theory, is concerned with the need for sensitivity to difference, and very critical of the way in which many 'development' initiatives have imposed particular values and derided the values of those in the 'underdeveloped' world. It is this concern for sensitivity to difference that is behind their preference for local movements and their caution about 'outsider' attempts to address poverty. Advocates of post-development theory hope that such strategies may make it possible to respond to poverty and related problems while avoiding the cultural imperialism which has gone hand in hand with many development initiatives. However, as mentioned earlier, this approach opens them up to accusations of cultural relativism and to the extent to which they do succumb to cultural relativism, their ability to construct a positive political programme is compromised.[27] How does one manage to maintain sufficient sensitivity to difference and resist cultural imperialism without sacrificing an adequately detailed positive programme?

Some of EGS's recent experiences vis-à-vis how to decentralise their institution without losing a sense of coherence and unity, provide some insights with regard to this question. During the 1990s, EGS began to promote their own organisational decentralisation. The motivation behind this decentralisation was a concern that centralisation tends to involve the imposition of a particular approach or way of doing things, and that if the various groups within the expanding EGS organisation were to be able to

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[25] Interview with Mariama Samb, coordinator of ComEthic, Enda Graf Sahel.

[26] Enda Diapol (*Enda Prospectives Dialogues Politiques* – Prospectives for Political Dialogue) is a separate entity from EGS but it has its origins in EGS and works closely with EGS. The information that follows is based on the Enda TM 2003 report and Enda Diapol's 2004 report.

[27] This is so because if all cultural values are equally good, there is little motivation for fighting for a particular set of values, and any positive political programme will have to be built upon certain values, even if these are only very broadly defined.

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respond appropriately to their different contexts, such an imposition needed to be resisted. Hence, a strategy of decentralisation gradually arose as the various sub-units within EGS were given more and more autonomy and encouraged to develop their own approaches and strategies.

However, recently the organisation has felt the need to try to redefine what it is that unites them (see EGS 2005). They realised that while the various EGS staff did have a sense of belonging to the 'Enda Graf family', their sense of contributing to a common project was rather vague and impalpable. As a result they initiated a research project on their own organisation in an attempt to define what it is that held them together and guided their diverse programmes. The tension experienced by EGS between the need for coherence within their organisation and the need for autonomy for the various components of their organisation, is in many ways the institutional equivalent of the tension discussed earlier between the need to avoid cultural relativism and the need for sensitivity to difference. While EGS did not want to impose a particular approach – and thus a particular set of values – on its various components; without a sense of what held these components together, the organisation could not maintain its coherence.

EGS thus set about identifying some common values that united them as an organisation and that they sought to promote in the community in which they worked. A discussion session bringing together the broader EGS network led them to conclude that their intervention in the community, or indeed *any* intervention, could not be considered to be 'value neutral' and that they were promoting a particular set of values, even if only implicitly. In attempting to make explicit these values, they spoke of values such as solidarity, equity, autonomy, respect for others and for shared goods, conviviality, reflexivity, and protection of the environment (EGS 2004b, 2005).

They also created some organisational structures and practices aimed at facilitating the further elaboration of a common set of values and orientations. A Coordinating Council was established in which the various sub-units within EGS should all be represented and which should meet fairly regularly – more or less monthly – to help coordinate the activities of EGS as a whole. Furthermore, they decided to organise a number of orientation sessions, called *boussoles* (compasses), which would bring together people working on a particular theme with the aim of finding a 'common north' which would serve as a lodestar to orientate their activities, but would still allow the various programmes a large amount of flexibility. The compass metaphor is meant to capture the idea of a there being a general common direction, but many different paths as a result of the diversity of contexts in which the various people within the EGS network find themselves.[28] Over the last year and a half several such *boussoles* have been held on themes such as agriculture, the economy, communication and so on. Each *boussole* is supposed to bring together all those involved in the programmes related to the theme of the *boussole*.

These recent developments at EGS indicate a recognition that on an organisational level decentralisation, and the sensitivity for difference and context it enables, must be balanced with some kind of unifying guiding orientation, or else the organisation will lose coherence. Likewise, in relation to post-development theory, it could be said that while post-development theorists are correct in wanting to present an 'alternative to development' which is not overly prescriptive and which is sensitive to difference, in order for an alternative programme to be workable, there needs to be a broad

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[28] The idea of the *boussole* became clear to me during discussions as part of one of the *boussoles* (on agricultural networks) which took place from the 13th to 15th June 2005 at Enda Graf Sahel's head office. This idea is also briefly explained in one of their publications (see Ndione et al. 1994:12)

guiding framework. There *are* several values which are implicit in much of post-development theory,[29] as in any other approach no matter how non-prescriptive, and making them explicit will help to clarify the political project proposed by post-development theorists.

Of course, the balance between avoiding prescription on the one hand and incoherence and vagueness on the other, is a difficult one. It is not yet certain whether EGS's attempts to achieve this balance within their organisation have been successful. The values defined as being in common to the organisation certainly avoid being prescriptive but it is not clear that they are sufficiently defined to really draw the organisation together. It is still too early to tell if the meetings of the ConCoord and the *boussoles* will be able to provide the organisation with sufficient coherence. Nevertheless, the recognition of the need to establish a sense of unity while avoiding prescription and insensitivity to difference, and the commitment to find a way to do so, is an interesting starting point.

The problem of cultural relativism ties into the question mentioned earlier with regard to the criteria for deciding which local movements ought to be supported. If not all local movements will necessarily promote the broader interests of the communities in which they work, how is an NGO like EGS to decide which community organisations to support? Having a clearly defined set of values and objectives could function as criteria for making such decisions, but could have the disadvantage of being experienced by the community organisations as an imposition from outside. EGS's experience has taught them that when they insist that particular values be respected by the organisations with which they work, these organisations tend to present a 'front' of cooperation, while operating according to their own values behind the scenes. During their early years of existence, EGS strongly promoted democratic and egalitarian leadership structures, but while the people pretended to go along with these requirements, in actual fact leaders were chosen according to local social hierarchies. EGS also insisted upon strict accounting practices, but in response the people presented 'too perfect' accounts which disguised the real ways in which they spent the loans given by EGS.[30] It seemed that insisting upon particular values did not lead the population to adopt these values, but did function as a barrier to openness and honesty between EGS and the community.

Nevertheless, providing support for any community organisation whatsoever could be seen as politically irresponsible. EGS professes to advance their values in their cooperation with community groups and acknowledges that not all community organisations work for the interests of the broader community,[31] but they avoid insisting on a rigidly defined set of values or practices. This is not a completely satisfactory response to the concern expressed by critics of post-development theory regarding how to decide which 'local' movements should be supported, but EGS's experiences demonstrate the difficulty of finding a conclusive way to be fit into and be relevant to the community without completely diluting one's own orientation and set of beliefs, and without being 'captured' by possibly unscrupulous community organisations. Currently, EGS does not support every community organisation that asks for their aid and does try to encourage certain values within the community, but at the same time is very cautious not to impose such values, nor to unintentionally encourage the population to 'pretend' to embrace the same values as EGS by making their support conditional on the acceptance of a particular set of values or the practices entailed by such values.

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[29] Solidarity, conviviality, tolerance, frugality, humility, and respect for the environment seem to be values informing much post-development theory.

[30] Early EGS publications discuss this problem – see Ndione (1992, 1993).

[31] EGS lists the criteria of a 'good' community organisation - see De Leener 1999:47, which suggests that they believe it to be possible to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' community organisations.

13

Conclusion

Looking back on the period of crisis that led them to radically change their approach to 'helping the poor', the authors of one of EGS's publications note:

> … we asked ourselves if we ourselves had not in some way contributed to the impoverishment of some people through our practices, through the promotion of values and ways of seeing things which encouraged impoverishment, domination and exclusion and which strengthened this culture of 'development'. This interrogation was a key moment in our journey. (Ndione et al. 1994:17)

As with the post-development theorists, EGS began to feel very uncomfortable with the idea of 'development' and with many of the strategies and assumptions that came along with it. As an NGO working in a 'developing' country among a poor community, they could not simply criticise 'development', but had to decide whether their discomfort ought to push them to withdraw entirely from 'development' work or to radically reorientate their approach. Opting for the latter option they began to carve out a path that would allow them to continue to play a role among the 'poor', while distancing themselves from practices which while apparently 'helping the poor', actually strengthen relations of domination between the rich and poor. Their experiences, a small sample of which have been summarised above, can assist those who sympathise both with post-development theory and some of the criticisms levelled against it, to think of ways in which we can reconcile key aspects of the post-development critique of 'development' with a continued commitment to respond to some of the problems which 'development' purported to address. If EGS is correct, it is possible for 'us' – the relatively privileged – to play some role in improving the lives of those less fortunate. There are ways in which we can provide support to community movements and there is a role for us to play in undermining the relations of power and privilege that are the distant causes of the suffering of many in impoverished communities. However, whatever role it is that we may play, it is one that is likely to require continual self-interrogation and adjustment.

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