Re-Thinking Development in Conflict

Lessons and Impressions
from the African Great Lakes

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ABSTRACT

Based on a review of contemporary development literature and substantial experience in relief work in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa, this thesis asserts the need to ‘re-think’ development and relief work in conflict situations.

Recent ‘development’ has been a process of prescriptive global modernisation based on models created following World War II when periods of conflict and resolution were well-defined. Western ideas became institutionalised into the form that many international development agencies remain in today. Much development in practice is not only inappropriate, but also increases the vulnerability of poor communities and adds to the likelihood of conflict.

Colonial powers imposed western systems upon traditional orders, distorting and exploiting issues of kinship and ethnicity for short-term economic gain. With a focus on the South Kivu province of the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire), and recent events in the Great Lakes Region of Central Africa, links between power, poverty and conflict are discussed and social and economic consequences examined.

Contemporary humanitarian emergencies are complex, caused by and resulting in a multitude of social, political and economic issues. Conflict permeates society, exacts a high toll on civilian population and further impoverishes vulnerable communities. Such emergencies require comprehensive solutions. Poverty and conflict, and accordingly relief and development work, are inextricably linked.

Localised long-term ‘vulnerabilities’, rather than short-term ‘emergency needs’, should be the focus of relief assistance. Peace is essential for true sustainable development, but the international community does not act as a cohesive whole for the elimination of global conflict and poverty. Some political leaders also promote conflict to their own ends. Therefore, continued conflict is a likelihood and appropriate interim interventions to safeguard community welfare must be continued.

NGOs and individuals have a crucial role and must remain committed and open-minded in order to promote truly beneficial development in a local context. Individual recognition of the historical, social and cultural dimensions of contemporary crises and understanding of the root causes of conflict are crucial for the effectiveness of international relief and development work towards long-term peace and local prosperity.
"American, French, I don’t care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you’re an Englishman. You had King Leopold of Belgium and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA. You all learned it from the English."

Voice of Kirpal Singh

Michael Ondaatje
_The English Patient_
1993:286
PREFACE

I have written this thesis as both a personal learning exercise and to highlight 'lessons and impressions' gained from experience in international relief work in a conflict situation. Thus, I hope to make a small contribution towards refining global development practice and trust that the expression of such views may aid others in similar employ. I would have liked to have better understood the issues discussed within this thesis before commencing work in Africa myself.

The thesis is specifically written from the perspective of an expatriate, transient in a complex environment of profound culture and conflict. It is a philosophical discourse following a period of further research and reflection as opposed to the many technical reports that I have produced over this period in the field. With the benefit of hindsight, the actions suggested within this thesis may be somewhat contradictory to the purely 'technical' recommendations that I have previously proposed.

Having experienced a certain evolution of consciousness during the process of compiling this thesis, I understand that the international community does not, as a whole, act in favour of eliminating global conflict and poverty. Rather, it is the good will, knowledge and respect of individuals within their associated agencies that can effectively act to influence good change and combat poverty under a shadow of prevalent and recurrent conflict.

I have been a part of the conflict described on the following pages and I have felt the loss of colleagues and personal friends. As the final words of this thesis are typed, combat continues in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo.

Jonathan Andrews
Grafton, Auckland
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Many people from both the local and expatriate communities in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo assisted with information for this thesis. They are too numerous to name here and an attempt to list key contributors is included within references following the main thesis text.

Much information is drawn from Oxfam publications. The work of Chris Roche from Oxfam’s Programme Development Team must be acknowledged and his model of ‘The Changing Emphasis of Support’ from his article on ‘Operationality in Turbulence’ has been used as a basis for Figure VII in Chapter 9 (Roche, 1994: 18). The comprehensive review of ‘development’ by Gustavo Esteva (1992) is much referred to as a basis for Chapter 2.

Many sources of information were found to have a political bias, such as several quotes referred to by Dr. Theogene Rudasingwa, the current Ambassador of Rwanda to the United States. The author has attempted to exercise discretion in their selection and only uses quotes from the least emotive abstracts that he feels reflect the reality of the situation. Information is also drawn from American-run business data systems, and it is recognised that these sources are also not entirely objective nor complete.
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