
The Great NGO Game

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Some time back I wrote an article about what I termed the interlocking directorates of non-Governmental organizations which, while pretending to be objective assessors of aid work, ended up giving each other lots of money. As it turned out, I did not then know the half of it. Discussing with a distinguished ambassador of another country the changing face of the UN, the preponderance of white as it were, I was introduced to another dimension when he mentioned that, not only were many of our new arbiters from the same set of countries, they also came from the same backgrounds. In short, he said, they came from NGOs, they planned to go back into them, and thus they saw themselves as serving the interests primarily of that particular community.

Indeed the UN, in terms of the time and energy and money expended on them, seems rapidly to be turning into the creature of the NGOs. To some extent this was I think a bright wheeze of the West, which saw this as yet another source of authority. Whereas they could not obviously use bilateral aid to push agendas that were at variance with the policies of the countries they were working with, NGOs could claim to have higher ideals. That the NGOs tended to represent the more arcane interests of their Western funders was not immediately obvious. In any case the required purposes could be achieved much more obliquely. It was also a wonderful way of ensuring that funds supposedly meant to benefit poorer countries were not swallowed up in the maw of extreme poverty. Whereas in the old days aid workers lived on shoestrings, now they have very healthy packages, with benefits that support the lifestyles – and the mortgages, etc. – to which they were accustomed at home. Indeed so satisfying was this redeployment of funding that the idea soon developed of supporting not just one set of Westerners, but two or even three. So the practice developed of not giving aid direct to the recipients, but feeding it in through the UN, which now has a bureaucracy that rivals Kafka. Despite this, the UN decided it did not have the capacity to implement everything for which it had received funding, and so it decided to contract out to NGOs. In many countries this meant international NGOs, as it could be argued that neither government nor local NGOs had capacity. Unfortunately this concept was extended to Sri Lanka too, despite our comparatively efficient government and the expertise of many local NGOs, in part because of the chaos after the tsunami, but also because obviously Sri Lanka is a very pleasant place to live, and the more people who can be funded to have a good time here, the better. I hasten to add that this does not mean all aid workers are hedonists. Some of them are actually quite idealistic. But a survey of the NGO vehicles parked outside hotels at night (or indeed near particular restaurants at lunch time), the weekend crowds at resort hotels, the quality education at well performing international schools – all paid for out of money supposed to benefit the Sri Lankan people – suggests that, once again, the West has found a way to have its cake and eat it too. How absurd all this was came home to me when an American, certainly one of the most idealistic, expressed some surprise about the fact that the LTTE used to help themselves from UN vehicles taking in aid. It surprised me in turn that this had not been obvious, but then I remembered President Clinton's wonderful compromise about homosexuality in the military, don't ask, don't tell, and realized that perhaps the Americans had thought earlier that the UN handed over the trucks to the locals, and it was only then that the LTTE helped itself. But this made it easier for me to deal with the suggestion that the Americans had a right to monitor the distribution of their assistance. The point was, in theory they did not fund Sri Lanka, they funded the UN, and therefore they should monitor the UN, leaving it to the UN to monitor whatever they disbursed. But, in actual fact, since I had found by then that the NGOs I thought were so generous were in fact merely sub-contractors of the UN, it would obviously take much ingenuity for the poor US to find out what exactly was happening to its money. Indeed I felt bad about this, because the US had been highly principled about not wishing the LTTE to benefit from its funding. They had also been positive about assisting in the type of economic development that the East had required. How much better it would have been, I thought, had the US gone back to its old system of bilateral donations and, if it did not think government capable of implementation, used the private sector instead, thus strengthening Sri Lankan capacity too? What the US I felt would be horrified by, if it ever got over its don't ask, don't tell, don't see blindness, was what some of the NGOs had been up to in the Vanni. Until last week, I had been prepared to think that the circles the LTTE had run round them had been accidental, the product of their own wish for an easy life, and the doggedness of LTTE desires. Even if one or two individuals had been more committed, as for instance the Norwegian People's Aid employee (not a Norwegian, I hasten to add) who had not noticed that the LTTE had taken all his vehicles for their own nefarious purposes, the organizations themselves I thought were not really following an anti-government agenda. But then I met a rather intense Swiss MP, who said he was the President of the Swiss Labour Organization, SAH as it is called, which had been part of the Solidar Consortium. Solidar, which has never been registered in Sri Lanka, also includes NPA and the German organization ASB, which had become one of the principal implementers for UNHCR. NPA, after its little adventure with the vehicles, is closing down its operations in Sri Lanka now, which is a pity because there is much need of demining, which was its forte. The Swiss MP told me that SAH too would be leaving, which I had not heard before. More importantly, he told me – and said I could quote him on this - that he had been told by the Solidar partnership that it was the Sri Lankan government that had not wanted the civilians held hostage by the LTTE to be released. The impression I had was that it was not the Swiss part of the consortium that had given him this information, but that it had come from Solidar itself. Coincidentally, just that week I had found that Solidar had its fingers in a number of pies. The minutes of what was termed the UN Protection Group claimed that ‘In a daily meeting of Security Operations Information Centre comprising UNDSS, UNOCHA, SOLIDAR and UNOPS analysis of satellite imagery and other information is being used to try to identify numbers and locations of IDPs in the Vanni and in particular in the no-fire/safe area. The number of civilians in safe area is thought to be between 70,000 to 100,000 individuals.’ I was not sure whether it was appropriate that the UN should be dealing in satellite imagery of conflict areas on a daily basis, but I could see that permission might have been given for this by the Ministry of

Defence, given our continuing cooperation with the UN. But what was Solidar doing as a member of the Security Operations Information Centre? Did this explain the extraordinary anxiety of the West to ensure that Solidar continued to be represented in Sri Lanka? And then, did all those who had moved heaven and earth to ensure this know that Solidar was spreading the story that it was the Sri Lankan side that did not want the LTTE's hostages rescued? Whom could such a story benefit except the LTTE? Ironically, this particular bit of information had not been shared elsewhere in the UN system, so that the poor High Commissioner for Human Rights was still claiming that 'According to UN estimates, a total of 150,000 to 180,000 civilians remain trapped in an ever shrinking area'. But then suppressing salient information has ever been the practice of the UN, which only circulated internally the information that the LTTE was conscripting one person per family, when denouncing this loud and clear might have actually saved some of the poor victims. Pusillanimity could have been understood then, when the UN might have thought that it would have to live with the LTTE for a long time to come. But why discretion now, when surely the aim of all humanitarian workers should be to rescue the people who are trapped, and stop the LTTE taking advantage of their presence? In such a situation why are the real figures kept secret, and why does the Solidar Consortium mislead the poor Swiss MP with falsehoods about the situation of the LTTE's victims? One can only speculate. But would it not be easier if these shadowy entities were winkled out of the system in which they seem to have entrenched themselves, so that we could go back to the simple relationships and the simple ideals that our poor people need? Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha Secretary General Secretariat for Coordinating the Peace Process