

# South “Too Far” for Northern NGOs

by Mark Waller

The relationship of Northern aid agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) with the South is far from the “partnership” they like to project, says a study released this week.

The study “Voices from Southern Civil Societies” points to inequalities despite the shift from the imperious paternalism of development aid practices during the 1990s.

The study, which was commissioned by the development department of the Finnish foreign ministry and co-ordinated by researchers at Helsinki University, aims to bring a new tone to bilateral development work. It was conducted in seven sample countries with which Finland has development links—Kenya, Namibia, Nepal, Thailand, Vietnam, Mexico, and Nicaragua.

The study seeks to give a Southern perspective to development aid relations with the North. ‘Strengthening civil society’ has been the vogue phrase of development policies since the early 1990s and is usually equated with supporting Southern non-governmental organisations. But the study stresses that civil society in developing countries is massively diverse.

The Nepalese report compiled by staff at the Ne-

pal South Asia Centre defines civil society in Nepal as a conglomeration of NGOs, community organisations and emerging social movements. The report of the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at Nairobi University says civil society in Kenya also includes social and cultural groups, and religious, professional and cooperative organisations.

The North forgets often that local organising in the South is neither new nor a creation of development aid, the study says. The report on Kenya points out that the spirit of *harambee*—pooling of resources for mutual help—has in fact been partly weakened by foreign-funded NGOs.

Assistance from the North is clearly seen as a double-edged sword. On the plus side it has brought a welcome focus on democracy and good governance. The Thai report drawn up by the Project for Ecological Recovery notes the willingness of Northern NGOs to learn local culture and work at the grassroots level. But the majority of reports stress that relations between Northern and Southern organisations are fundamentally unequal.

“Whoever provides

money, commands and controls,” says the report on Mexico prepared at the Chiapas-based Centre for Research and Advanced Study in Social Anthropology (CIESAS). Southern civil society organisations (CSOs) resort to “dressing up information to create space for activities that are considered important” by

state structures that undermine pressure for social services. The countries we’ve heard from ultimately need to find their own national conditions for civil society that are not shaped from outside.”

Reports in the study are critical of the negative effects of donor funding on

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Northerners, the report says. In Kenya “organisations cannot think about their policies without a donor in mind.”

Outi Hakkarainen, a researcher at Helsinki University’s Institute of Development Studies and one of the co-ordinators of the study says, “It’s striking that the reports tend to refer to Northern organisations as ‘donors.’ Northerners, on the other hand, like to see themselves and their Southern counterparts as ‘partners.’”

The influence of foreign money on CSOs in the South is “huge and not always healthy,” Hakkarainen says. “It tends to be blind to the effects of regional and

civil societies. In Nepal they have created the image of a “dollar-farming sector.”

Northern organisations expect openness and access to information from the South but are rarely open themselves, the reports say. The study points out that the stress on project funding by donors undercuts the ability of Southern civil societies to get resources for day-to-day activities.

“Much of the time of CSOs in Mexico is taken up with finding financial resources for their survival as organisations,” says Lourdes Angulo of CIESAS. “We don’t really understand the nature of the donor

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for others under the name Belly Treasures in upstate New York. "My grandmother says, 'It's disgusting. Why would you want to show your body like that?' But I just think it's the most beautiful thing, why wouldn't you?"

Legato said women are learning to appreciate their bodies and once had portraits painted and busts made of their heads, so why not a cast of a pregnant body? She particularly pointed to the increase in older women becoming pregnant as part of the tide in the changing self-image.

As women wait longer to become pregnant—6 percent of all pregnancies in the United States occur in women over 40—the issues of body image lessen. Instead of looking for clothes to hide a growing tummy, women are more concerned with finding fashionable clothes that fit and with staying in shape throughout the pregnancy.

"Older people have a strong sense of who they are," she said. "I also think that older women no longer emphasise the physical but count on their other achievements and roles."

The change in the way women view pregnancy is reflected in the growing number of magazines geared toward pregnant women, from *Fit Pregnancy* to *American Baby* to specialised websites such as "Pregnancy Today" and Parent's Place.com.

"I think the pregnant pictures of Demi Moore and Christie Brinkley were really inspiring for women," said Dr. Marianne J. Legato, founder and director of the Partnership for Gender Specific Medicine at Columbia University. "These were women who thought their bodies were beautiful—that their pregnant bodies were as beautiful as any other cover girl."

#### Varied Use of Casts

The cost of a belly cast ranges from US\$150 for a plain cast to US\$1,500 for a bronzed bowl. But the decoration is up to the mothers and the artists. The plaster casts can be decorated by the families or by individual artists. Some paint the moulds and hang them on the wall. Others use it as an opportunity to include older children in the upcoming birth. One woman lined her belly bowl with sheepskin and used it as a cradle for the first few days after her child was born.

Carla Vincent, who lives in Maryland, asked Langois and Lynn to decorate the cast of her torso with one arm wrapped around her belly. The artists asked Vincent to fill out a short survey about her favorite colours and where the statue would go. The end result: a lavender bust with a blue jewel in the belly and an ivy tendril around the arm.

"My husband really didn't understand it until he saw the pictures. Then he thought it was really neat," Vincent said. "It's hard to remember how you looked when you were pregnant."

"It's a decorative art piece and it's something that sparks conversation," said Kris Fritzsche of the cast of his wife's belly. "It has a distinctive shape and people aren't really surprised when they find out what it is, but they're interested and they love the concept."

Legato said she's glad to see that the role of the husband is incorporated as well.

"Every pregnancy is unique and in a healthy woman, it's a beautiful experience to be savored and enjoyed, including the changes in the body," she said. "Many

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organisations we deal with from the North. We don't understand their purpose because there is a lack of information coming to us from the North."

At the same time, Angulo says that the pressures that increasingly shape the role of CSOs are a clear product of outside leverage. "Privatisation and global economic determinants are the pressures that most define us," he says.

"In Kenya there are CSOs that want to effect social transformation, and there are private enterprises that want to access donor funds," says Karuti Kanyinga of the IDS. "The latter are real entrepreneurs, they carry briefcases filled with excellent proposals. In most cases they have no impact at all, but they are very vocal and influential."

Montree Chantawong of the Thai Project for Ecological

husbands are just enchanted with their wives' pregnant bodies."

For more information:  
Mama's Belly: <<http://www.mamasbelly.com>>  
Belly Treasures: <<http://www.bellytreasures.bigstep.com>>

Partnership for Gender-Specific Medicine: <<http://partnership.hs.columbia.edu>>

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Source: Women's Enews, <<http://www.womensnews.org>>, 30 September 2002

Recovery says Northern aid tends to empower mainstream development policy locked into structural adjustment, the global market and privatisation. "Though aid may carry an excellent goal and is seen by the public as acceptable, it tends to work in such a way that it eventually helps the state authorities to preserve their power," Chantawong says.

Officials at the Finnish foreign ministry hope to draw on the proposals in the reports to reshape approaches to development aid for civil society. "Civil society should be a channel for the poor to demand their rights," says Christian Sundgren, head of information and NGO work at the development department.

Civil society workers are waiting to see if such sentiment will eventually be reflected in official development policy.

Source: Inter Press Service, <<http://www.ipsnews.net>>, 10 October 2002