DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION ACTORS

Have NGOs and their work lost their meaning?

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Il·lustració: Hansel Obando

For some time now, people have been asking me whether the work done by NGOs still has any meaning, or whether they are a vestige of our society that is now obsolete. And the next question is whether the NGOs themselves should continue to exist. It makes you seriously wonder whether they're right. And if they're not, we need to have a good explanation as to why. When cooperation started in the 1960s, it basically stood on three legs, generosity, transfer and assistance.

Transfer because it was about transferring money, trained people and knowledge from us to the countries that at the time were called the Third World, and in return, information and knowledge were transferred back to the donating countries. In those days, if you wanted to know what was going on in Latin America or Africa or India, the only practical way was to read the NGOs' newsletters or listen to someone who worked there and had come back for a break.

The second core component of cooperation, together with transfer, was generosity. The driver of cooperation, initially closely tied to Christian movements, was the kindness or generosity of those whose basic needs were covered and now wanted to "help" those who needed it, far from home.

And the third leg, closely linked to the second, was a strong assistential component. This component, with cultural and anthropological roots, seeks to solve a problem as quickly as possible. When someone has a temperature, we look for something that will lower it. Over time, this component, so inextricably fixed in our society's DNA, was perceived as erroneous or insufficient. When we treat a fever, what we're doing is treating a symptom. When we treat hunger, what we're doing is treating a symptom. But the symptoms are symptoms of problems, and if we don't treat the problem, the cause, the symptom will inevitably come back. Experience has shown us that assistance alone is incapable of bringing about structural change. And, therefore, it fosters dependence and often hinders the development of the community and its members.

The foundations crumble

The three legs on which cooperation used to rest have been worn away by the passing of time, the experience gained from the actions taken, the assessments performed by the organisations themselves and the changes that have taken place in the world. NGOs and the people who work in them have a natural tendency to reflect, because of their training, their innate inquisitiveness and their global vision. And this has led them to evolve, as international cooperation has almost always arisen from this exercise of reflection, responsibility and maturity. This is why there has always been a natural evolution. And this is also why you will find very few people who will still argue that these are the pillars of cooperation.

The first leg to crumble – spontaneously – was assistance. It wasn't necessary to wait for big changes in the world, or globalisation, or any other reflection to realise that assistential projects were not enough to turn around the situations that they sought to solve or remedy. All organisations have found at some time that there are projects where it is not possible to make any dent in the situation, in spite of the continual investments of time and money. And they failed because their approach focused on the symptoms and not on the causes. Unless we go to the causes, unless we ask why the situation has been allowed to deteriorate so much and without engaging with the proposed beneficiaries in deciding how to approach the situation, the problems and dependences become chronic.

Assistance is only meaningful at the beginning or at specific moments when, for whatever reason, it is necessary to save lives and respond to an emergency situation. It may be a requirement, but it is never the solution. In emergency situations requiring humanitarian aid, it may have meaning. In an earthquake, a refugee camp, a serious flood or a drought that is causing famine, we cannot spend time on analysing the causes. Lives have to be saved. As many and as quickly as possible. The time for analysis will come later when the situation is minimally stabilised. However, even in emergencies, new approaches are being implemented that are much less interventionist.

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> the fight for structural changes or the demand for rights or for support for processes

Seeing that it was not the solution and that it could even hamper putting in place the real solution, NGOs started to frame their actions within an analysis of the causes and what was later called the focus on rights. It has been a logical path that the vast majority of organisations have followed as time has gone by and as they have acquired experience and maturity. Whether this path has been known or has been explained is another matter. Why haven't they explained to the outside world, to society and their partners, the changes in approach that have taken place in their work? Basically, for three reasons. Because not enough emphasis has been placed on communication and education, because it is not always easy to explain the actions taken on these parameters, and, above all, because it has always been much easier to get the public to dig into their pockets using images and stories of assistance on the ground than by explaining the fight for structural changes or the demand for rights or for support for processes. It is much easier to ask for money to build a school, a well or a hospital than to ask for money to support a community's participation process. And this has hampered many educational initiatives, because the priority was to raise funds to be able to continue working.

The second leg, transfer, has been shattered by globalisation and internet. Nobody today would think of asking an NGO what's happening in the Democratic Republic of the Congo if there's something they want to know. And nobody needs an NGO to get to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Even so, some people have thought that internet and a travel agency are enough to get to any place and "help" or work. And it's true, you don't need an NGO to go there and find information. However, to avoid making the same mistakes that were made hitherto, it would be a good idea to ask first and allow their experience to help you avoid repeating mistakes that are now a thing of the past. So, from time to time, we should explain that we don't need to collect blankets for Africa, that you don't need to hand out sweets to children wherever you go, and remind people that dignity is a fundamental part of our dealings with everyone. And that our culture is as respectable as theirs. And it would also be very helpful, as a slightly deeper analysis is needed in order to understand the plundering of resources that is taking place in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Without this analysis, nobody would have ever heard of coltan and we wouldn't even know what it is.

The third leg, kindness, generosity or solidarity, has been dismantled more recently. Analysing the macroeconomic figures has made us realise that the main battle in fighting poverty today is against inequality. And it has turned the concept of generosity toward the concepts of justice and injustice. Basically, we now know that the planet has enough resources to enable everyone to live with dignity, and unequal distribution of these resources is the reason why there are people who cannot live life with dignity. Introducing the concept of inequality in the equation may seem a minor and rather academic change. However, it has caused a shift in perspective and the "donor" has changed from being an agent moved by generosity to becoming part of the problem. This discovery deserves a

chapter to itself, as when we have put the spotlight on inequality, we have discovered that this turns around many things.

We have discovered that when we are discussing inequality, we are not talking about petty inequalities; we are talking about obscene inequalities and the fact that the world's 9 richest citizens have a fortune equivalent to that of half of the world's poorest citizens. Yes, half. That means about 3.5 billion people.

We have also discovered that the North-South divide has volatilised. The situation in the countries receiving the cooperation is not very different from the situation we have in our own countries. In other words, not only is there obscene inequality in Africa or India but also obscene inequality here. It is no longer necessary to compare north and south, as we used to do. In sub-Saharan Africa, there are 16 people with a net worth exceeding 1 billion dollars, who share their land with 350 million people who live with less than 2 dollars a day. In our country, the salaries of senior managers in Ibex-35 companies are 250 times higher than the average salaries of their employees. Yes, 250 times.

We have discovered that 7 out of every 10 people in the world live in countries where inequality has grown in recent years.

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We have discovered that when making any political decision, if it is first determined whether or not it reduces inequality, and the decisions made are geared toward reducing it, the changes are much more impactful than with our projects. We have discovered that with this approach, the classic component of cooperation, namely kindness, generosity or solidarity (which created an unequal relationship between donor and recipient) is automatically replaced by justice and fundamental rights. And, as we have said earlier, the donor is no longer someone who can be generous or not, but someone who is part of the problem and, therefore, is also responsible for solving it. Inequality is corrected when everyone moves toward the mid-point.

And the third role?

Generosity has been transformed into the fight for global justice and fundamental rights. And assistentialism has been transformed into combatting the causes, focusing on rights and supporting processes. But… what about the role of transfer? Is there any replacement for that?

Yes, there is. In a world overwhelmed by crises, pandemics, states that demand indefensible privileges, societies who close in on themselves in the face of difficulties, the NGOs have a role in reminding us that there's still only one planet. They have the obligation to make us reflect that if we only focus on what is local, we will not solve the big issues, and what is happening here is not that different from what is happening in Chad. And we have to have a global vision of the situation.

Unfortunately, we can't expect politicians who are only voted by citizens of the same country every four years to have a medium and long-term vision and to make decisions for the good of the planet and of citizens who cannot vote for them. The fight to protect the environment is a clear example that, paradoxically, the laws of the democratic system are to the detriment of the common interest.

It is now clear that NGOs are unable to solve the problems on their own. For example, there are studies (Oxfam Intermón) that say that only 5% of the money that "disappears" in Africa is due to corruption. Thirty per cent is diverted to illicit business operations such diamonds, arms, coltan, etc. But by far the largest share (65%) disappears as a result of the tax evasion and tax avoidance practised by large multinational companies in these countries. Each year, this 65% would represent double the development cooperation funds sent by all of the world's countries to Africa during the same year. In other words, legally, in justice, Africa should receive twice what it receives from generosity or solidarity.

These examples have existed for years. Foreign debt has always been one of them. Years ago, we said that condoning these countries' illicit debt would be tantamount to multiplying the cooperation figures by many thousands, simply with a stroke of the pen. And unfortunately, companies and rich countries continue to exploit the resources of the poor countries. Coltan is a good example of this situation. There are many other examples that clearly show that NGOs are only minor players when it comes to financial weight. That's why new strategies and new ways of working are needed. After analysing key moments in mankind's history, one of the conclusions that Duncan Green points out in his book From Poverty to Power is that major changes only occur when three factors come together.

The first factor is visionary, combative citizens. That is, a group of citizens who become aware that a situation is unjust, unsustainable and fight to change it. These citizens, who start the process, do not always live to see the change happen because some changes are very slow. But it is combative citizens who denounce it and put it in the public spotlight. In Spain, one example could be the first conscientious objectors. At that time, not even the rest of society understood that it was necessary to eradicate military service.

The second necessary factor is effective government. I imagine that the words have been chosen with exquisite care. It doesn't say a good or a bad government. The government headed by the recently deceased De Klerk in South Africa defended apartheid as one of its basic tenets. However, that same government, which today we would not consider to be a good government, understood that it had to release Nelson Mandela from the prison on Robin Island. And on that 11 February 1990, that act marked the final step in eradicating the apartheid regime in South Africa.

And the third essential factor for making change is a trigger. When Rosa Parks sat on a bus seat that wasn't meant for her on 1 December 1955, I'm sure that she didn't get up that day thinking "today I'm going to do something that's going to change the world!". She couldn't even imagine what consequences her act would have. But what she did was to set in motion a process that has brought about all the other changes in the status of the Black population in the United States. Triggers are not something we can foresee or induce.

But we can do something about the other two necessary requirements. We must be active, visionary, combative citizens. And also have a political impact. Only citizens can start a change. And only citizens can convince a government to be effective, and that is done with political pressure.

> Cooperation and NGOs not only still have meaning, but they continue to be key players

That's why organisations and movements are so important. They are the guarantee of change and evolution. So, in spite of the figures, the changes in the core pillars of NGOs and movements, and a superficial analysis which may suggest the idea that they have lost their meaning and justification, it turns out that they are as meaningful as ever, or perhaps even more so. Cooperation and NGOs not only still have meaning, but they continue to be key players.

And why do they still have meaning?

They still have meaning because the movements and organisations are run by active citizens. Because, in times of economic crisis, governments and societies turn inwards and tend to think that the problems come from outside their borders and the solution must be found inside them. Because, as we said earlier, the political system, democracy, in which the citizens who live within the country's borders (and not all of them) only vote every four years, is unlikely to take into account medium and long-term measures because they don't win elections, and it will not propose global solutions because they will only be voted by local people. Because no-one will perform these global analyses in a world where there is little interest in undertaking them and little interest in listening to them. Because everyone talks about globalisation, but no-one seems prepared to understand that it's real and that what happens here is not isolated from what happens there, nor can any solutions be put in place without thinking what's going on outside. Interdependence is not AliExpress or Amazon … it's much more than that. Because we need to exert a lot of political pressure if we want to have mature, transparent democracies. And to have "effective" governments that are willing to make changes.

For all this and much more,

- We need someone who talks to us about Global Justice and organisations like

LaFede.cat that can become powerful think-tanks for these concepts.

- We need someone to talk to us again about human rights like Amnesty International, because it seems that by dint of saying it again and again, governments and media can end up convincing everyone that they are illusory.
- We need someone to continue telling us that borders are an invention, and a profitable business, as Helena Maleno and Caminando Fronteras denounce.
- We need thousands of small NGOs to support thousands of communities to gain access to opportunities that otherwise they would never have.
- We need Oxfam Intermón to continue researching inequality and tax evasion and tax avoidance so that we have information and cannot ignore the magnitude of the tragedy. Now we know that the world's richest people doubled their fortune during the pandemic while 99% of the population have become poorer.
- We need the platform for fair taxation and all its partner organisations to work for the elimination of tax havens.
- We need Punt de referència, Migrastudium, Noves Vies, and other organisations to take care of the people whom we allow to live alegally in our country. Even if we only do it for selfish reasons, that is, to prevent people from resorting to crime because they have no legal means of making a living.
- We need Cáritas and its FOESSA report to tell us from time to time, without mincing words, that these inequalities in our own country are unsustainable.
- We need Greenpeace and Greta Thumberg to keep telling us that we won't have a planet left to live on if we don't react. (This the clearest example of how, without NGOs, the world would move inevitably toward self-destruction by pure inertia).
- We need initiatives such as the Catalan Centre for Business and Human Rights to analyse our footprint as a country beyond our borders and to avoid the "anything goes" outlook because it's far away.
- We need organisations that work for rights in our country too and remind us that we have them. The pandemics, and certain political processes, are trampling them here too. And defending them here is strategically important to prevent them from being lost everywhere else.
- We need to defend the welfare state, not to preserve privileges, but because it is effective in reducing inequality.
- We need Fair Trade and campaigns such as Roba Neta (Clean Clothes) so we don't forget that globality, and our personal comforts, can hide "other lives" that are hard to uncover.
- We need the NGOs to continue being able to put themselves 'at the service of' and go beyond 'their logo' and act as consolidators and mediators between social demands and institutional spaces. And to continue working to connect the struggles of citizens in rich countries with those of citizens in poor countries. As they are already doing.

And many more examples for which we don’t have enough space here

Let’s not forget this. None of these things will be done by anyone else, except the social movements and the NGOs. NGOs and the 0.7% allocated to development cooperation are still essential. The NGOs we need now are nothing like those that were started in the 1960s. And the 0.7% we are still asking for is very different from the first 0.7% in 1969. But organised citizens have also been a necessary – and indispensable – counterbalance for an economic, political and organisational system that is so imperfect that it is in constant danger of capsizing. They have never stopped pushing forward. They have always had a clearer vision of where to go. And they have always proposed more egalitarian and more collective solutions to achieve progress. And it’s the same now as it was 10, 20 or 100 years ago. There’s no point in looking for evidence to argue that they are not needed. They are and will continue to be indispensable.

And they are, and will continue to be, a thorn in the side of all those who, from their complacency or ignorance, don’t want to see why and where we must advance, all of us together.



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