Classroom Discussion Guide for

*Snakes in Paradise: NGOs and the Aid Industry in Africa*

This volume is designed to offer students, aid-practitioners and politicians food for thought on an issue that often is presented as self-evidently good and uncontroversial – development aid pursued through non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Much in the aid-business has been taken for granted but closer scrutiny reveals that we had better not take anything for granted. Experiences, performances and outcomes are diverse, even if some trends seem clear. Below are a number of topics covered in the book, followed by questions to contemplate and discuss. The list of topics does not reflect the order of chapters in the book and the answers are not ‘given’. Often, there is no obvious right or wrong answer but the questions seem to me necessary to contemplate – before you, perhaps, chose to engage yourself in some kind of aid work, directly or indirectly. And if you are already involved, a moment of critical reflection is never out of place.

**Development – a controversial concept**

Development is a much used – and misused – concept and there appears to be little consensus about what it really means. It is a positive concept, but in what way? It means change of some kind. Often it has been used synonymously with ‘growth’ and ‘westernization’. Others oppose such connotations and emphasize ‘growth’ is too narrow and that development must be culturally appropriate. Others yet use the term in a more open-ended manner where the end product of development is not known. To some this invokes excitement – development is an adventure. Others feel an urge to know the outcome beforehand and want to control it. It is, however, questionable if development is controllable. That depends, among other things, upon *how much change* we are talking about and *at which level* of society development is supposed to take place.

- What do you mean by ‘development’?
- Is it something that just happens, or can it be orchestrated?
- Can it be a process without losers (at least in the short run)?
- Is it transferable from one country or culture to another?

**Development aid**

Development aid is a tricky business. It is often declared that development aid is a temporary effort aiming at facilitating and encouraging ‘self-help’ and ‘development from below’. This is not the least so when aid is pursued by – or channeled through – NGOs, i.e. non-governmental organizations. In order for development in poor countries to happen from below, people normally need some form of organization. If they do not organize spontaneously for progressive social or economic purposes, it is widely believed that they need to be empowered to do so. Many NGOs claim that empowerment and local capacity-building is what they do. This leads us to a number of questions concerning the fundamentals behind NGO-organized aid activities:

- What does development from below actually mean?
- How much development can realistically be expected to happen from below?
- If it does not, what can possible reasons be?
• Are there certain aspects of development which need to be pursued from above?
• Which groups/categories of people are more likely to organize for progressive purposes in a poor rural setting, and which are not?
• Can foreign NGOs trigger development processes from below if/where they do not happen spontaneously?
• Should they (why/why not)?
• Who determines what is ‘progressive’?

Civil society and civil society organizations
A strong civil society is commonly seen as a prerequisite for development, economic growth and good governance. Civil society is often equated with organizations (CSOs), a ‘third sector’ located above family somewhere between the State and the market. It is assumed to be democratic. Organized citizens are often seen as a necessary counterweight to greedy capitalists, power-hungry politicians and self-seeking bureaucracies. Much development aid today is directed at strengthening civil society in poor countries. African societies, where family, clan and tribe often mean more than cross-cutting associations, tend to be seen as undemocratic and in need of modern forms of organization. It can be questioned, however, whether CSOs are triggers of development or if they rather represent its outcome. In 19th century Europe and USA, new kinds of CSOs (co-ops, thrift societies, trade unions, political parties, interest groups, charity organizations) were established in response to broad and far-reaching socio-economic change (e.g. urbanization, industrialization, education, democratization). But they were not the cause of that change.

• Can civil society be the trigger of development (if yes, please explain)?
• Is there a universally applicable definition of Civil Society or are there many kinds of civil societies in the world?
• Do NGOs represent civil society?
• Can civil society be created or strengthened from outside without foreign, pre-constructed models being imposed?
• Is the primary objective of CSOs to assume the role of watch-dog and to keep an eye on undemocratic governments?
• Are CSOs democratic themselves?

The State
The State in Africa has often been seen as one of the continent’s biggest obstacles to development. It has been depicted as all-powerful but also as ineffective, corrupt or failed. For several decades, donors have imposed policies to ‘roll back’ the state and to reduce its role in less developed countries. More often than not, African politics are said to be characterized by ‘bad governance’. Its opposite, ‘good governance’ is assumed to be represented by today’s Western, democratic, market economies. The West, then, is presented as a model for Africa to replicate. Good governance, it is assumed, can be brought forth by education and through pressures from donors and NGOs/CSOs. The problem with this analysis is that it assumes a universal role for the State and universally valid objectives for it to fulfill. It can also be said that governance is good when policies work and bad when they do not and that there is no good governance per se.
Good governance then, is circumstantial. Moreover, African states have been found to be weak rather than strong and, hence, with limited influence or ability to implement policies. To roll back the state was perhaps not the best idea when nation-building is still an unfinished project.

- How would you define ‘good governance’?
- Can nation-building be done from outside?
- Is your own country free from corruption and/or bad governance?

The heterogeneous world of NGOs
NGOs have often been promoted as a more efficient alternative to ‘bad’ states. NGOs are of many kinds and the term appears to be misleading since it merely says what an NGO is not. Commonly the label NGO is reserved for intermediary organizations engaged in charity and/or development work in poor countries. NGOs sometimes are very efficient, perhaps more so when doing relief and charity work than with development (which is a more complicated undertaking). Northern NGOs are either independently financed or (increasingly) channel donor money to projects and counterparts in Africa. There is a problem here because he who pays the piper also calls the tune, *viz.* there is a risk that the NGO (or the donor behind it) assumes control over activities and priorities at the local level. This risk is accentuated because organizations in Africa are not always formed for the reasons or with the objectives that Western supporters assume. This also means that projects and local organizations may become less flexible and less adapted to local circumstances and preconditions. Many experiences have accumulated showing that NGOs often (but far from always) do not effectively promote ‘development from below’, that they in fact often do not empower clients/beneficiaries to own or design projects, and that they often foster new forms of dependencies. It has even been concluded that northern NGOs and INGOs (and behind them donors) represent a form of neo-colonialism.

- Is neo-colonialism unavoidable?
- If not, how can NGO-supported (or donor-financed) development be maintained while effectively safeguarding ownership among those aid is aimed to help?
- Should donors and NGOs maintain support to groups or projects which are based on prioritizations with which the donor/NGO disagrees?
- How important is the milieu (in a broad sense) in which organizations operate for their choice of operations and for the outcome of their undertakings?

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