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Aid and Development : On Being Prophetic in 21st Century

Introduction

Thank you for the honour of inviting me to your conference and for asking me to give the keynote address. I was asked to be controversial and to provoke you so I'll do my best.

Within the overall title of 'Global Challenges: NGOs influencing the Development Agenda', my thesis is that we in the NGO community are in danger of no longer being prophetic. Looking at some of the trends in the development and humanitarian world, the system is stacked against a prophetic stance on tackling poverty. The threat is not just external but internal - as agencies, we are too egocentric and some of our practices are in fact aping the system whose structures and ideology cause the very poverty we were founded to get rid of. I am borrowing the term 'prophetic' from theology and applying it to the current humanitarian and development discourse. My use of the word 'theology' should not really raise any eyebrows. It is right it should be used to analyse political and social phenomena since, from Augustine to the Catholic social theorists that formed the European Union, theology has played its part in shaping the society we live in. We also live in an epoch where religion is resurgent.

I take a brief look also at the external environment for the future and ask how we can return to being prophetic to respond adequately to some old and some new challenges in both humanitarian and development work.

I hope that provokes you enough to stimulate a debate among yourselves that leads to transformation. I speak as someone who has worked for Catholic aid and development organisations for 24 years and has been associated with many peer NGOs for as long, including some of your international coordinating bodies or equivalents in other countries. And, coming from a tradition that regards itself as universal and does not recognise boundaries, I would also like to bring in something about Australia, my adopted country for at least a few months longer, until either my visa runs out or I am deported.

The Prophetic Tradition

Kofi Annan called NGOs the "conscience of the world". NGOs, then, should stand firmly in the prophetic tradition. Fred Kammer, a Jesuit and former President of Catholic Charities USA, a member of the Caritas Confederation, formulated the 'Cycle of Baal' which serves as a model for examining not just the prophetic tradition of the Ancient Hebrews but our contemporary world. In Christianity, that tradition starts in the Old Testament where the Hebrew people slipped from obeying the justice-oriented precepts of Yahweh, the God that created them and to whom they were covenanted, to disobedience. They forgot Yahweh when they became not stewards of creation but owners and when they aspired to be not more human but more acquisitive. In their greed, they then forgot the *anawim*, the poor and oppressed, the care of whom was a measure of their faithfulness to Yahweh. The result was a worshipping of false gods who did not criticise their greed but wanted only rituals that would encourage fertility or growth. These Gods were called the Baals. The people then forgot not only the poor but the web of relationships that originally defined their community. The result was chaos, selfishness and self-destruction. The prophets then appeared. They would read the signs of the times through the lens of the justice-oriented precepts of Yahweh. They would stand up and denounce the injustice to the poor as a sin against

God.. They would be messengers of what would happen if the false gods continued to be worshipped and the poor left abandoned. They would ask for conversion and a return to right relationship, with the flourishing of the human person firmly at the centre as a sign of their worshipping the Creator God of liberation and justice. They would protest in its original meaning, *protestari*, to testify for something, not just engage in denunciation. They would unmask the evils and give a message of hope. The prophetic style had to be outside the authority structure and would, of course, be the cause of tensions. And the prophets would be immensely unpopular. In the end, they would triumph because their words were founded on important truths surrounding what it is to be human.

Reading the signs of the times, denouncing injustice and the worshipping of false gods who abandon the poor, conversion leading to right relationships, testifying for something, giving a message of hope. That is our agenda for today. I want to concentrate on looking inwards as the way we can deal with the unpredictable in the future demands changes to our internal systems.

Reading the Signs of the Times and Unmasking the False Gods

Looking Inwards

An obvious sign of the times is an increase in the number of disasters. Even in 2006, a so-called 'normal' year when there was no equivalent a tsunami, 23,000 people were killed, 143 million people affected and there was an economic loss of over \$34 billion. But the tsunami illustrates well the false gods. If you read any evaluation on the tsunami, you will know that we all earned maybe 6 out of 10 on our school report card. It would be the same for the response to the Pakistan earthquake and much of what passes for development in Africa, to mention only a couple of instances. In terms of the tsunami, evaluations were unanimous in saying that lack of coordination among NGOs, a lack of appreciation of local coping mechanisms and NGOs and a lack of appreciation of people's cultures and religions were behind the reasons we were not as good as we let on. So the first false god we unmask is ego – the putting of agency first rather than beneficiaries, the lack of humility in listening to the local people and being sensitive to another's culture and religion.

Let me illustrate this with reference to Caritas. In tsunami-struck countries, our local Caritas member responded with their own resources within hours, yet the recognition of this even by our own members is scant. In Galle in Southern Sri Lanka, a group of priests with connections to the Buddhist community and who had built up self-help groups in the area banded together to mobilise the people within hours of the disaster. When our ERST team came, the priests were completely marginalised by the young Americans and Europeans who composed the team. They were priests in soutanes and therefore conservative in their view without realising that the status of all religious leaders requires them to dress accordingly in Sri Lankan society. Instead of creating a harmonious working environment, these brash Northern youngsters had managed to undermine local resources and morale, all in the name of humanitarianism. This is not washing dirty linen in public but transparency. I am sure many of you have good examples too. Let us go from the anecdotal to some research material.

At the latest meeting of the Global Humanitarian Platform, described as the biggest gathering of CEOs from the NGO and UN humanitarian systems, in July 2007, this distinguished gathering, had a talk from Antonio Donini of the Feinstein International Centre at Tufts University in the US on the research they had been doing on local perceptions of humanitarian action. In summary, the research showed that "the official humanitarian enterprise remains a select club in which the rules are set by rather peculiar set of players who are generally far-removed from the realities of the people they purport to help."¹ It is dictated by the interests of governments, international organisations and civil society in the North, including boardrooms of the private sector and the

¹ Antonio Donini, "Looking Ahead: Making our Principles Work in the Real World", presentation at the Global Humanitarian Platform Meeting, Geneva 11 July 2007.

military. The North controls the money, power and ability to make strategic choices affecting the lives of others they only dimly understand. The second 'peril' is institutionalisation, resulting in strong pressures for NGOs to act like businesses or even a government. Humanitarian work used to have a sense of 'voluntariness' but has now become a career, with the work defined by management objectives, standard operating procedures and human resource development tools. While the need for professionalism should not be absent, too much stress on these elements "create structures and organisational patterns that tend to stifle innovation and the questioning of the status quo"². This further alienates local initiatives and the use of local knowledge and accountability mechanisms. The third peril is what Donini terms the 'black swans', the unpredictable events that have a severe impact on people's lives. He cites Chernobyl, the demise of Yugoslavia or the Soviet Union and HIV/AIDS in Africa as examples. The traditional humanitarian approach is woefully inadequate in such settings. He concludes by stating that the humanitarian enterprise is more vulnerable to political manipulation much more than is appreciated.

The second false god we unmask is arrogance. In the response to the Pakistani earthquake, the UN set up operations, we all flew in people from outside to be 'efficient' and did our best. One of the results was poor tents, which could not resist the snows of a harsh mountainous winter, were erected on the orders of the UN who closed their ears to what our local diocesan Caritas told them. Few indigenous NGOs were invited to the coordination meetings and, even if they could have come, they would have had to cope with the tyranny of the English language without translation. A huge source of local knowledge was lost to the enterprise. This was also one of the first times the UN had used its new 'cluster approach' which we have all been corralled into. That means specialisation when we are dealing with people's lives which are multi-faceted and call for a holistic approach, and is yet another model from the 'Northern club' imposed on the South. Earlier this year, I attended the Executive Board of the World Food Programme. The ambassadors attending the Board stressed improving performance, management and accountability and to seek more and more coordination to further the MDGs but nothing about increasing local capacity and listening to the needs of beneficiaries, let alone be accountable to them. The military has now become a major hazard to us all as they take on a role as 'humanitarians', not of course out of altruism but to win the hearts and minds of the people to their particular ideology. Their presence as coalition forces alongside us, especially when foreign staff is involved, means we are regarded with suspicion and that suspicion led to the deaths of 85 aid workers last year – ironically, most of them local people.

Regarding the question of institutionalisation, there is little doubt that we have become compromised by the system. Grants from donor governments often have to be spent in very short periods, resulting in wastage, lack of community involvement, and therefore ownership, and resulting in huge mistakes that militate against the 'do no harm' principle. In post-tsunami Sri Lanka, some of our members disconnected themselves from the coordinating mechanism and the link with the local Caritas which is part of the local society as it is rooted in the local Church. The pressure to act quickly came before essential planning for scaling up local capacities and the transference of knowledge. In their haste to spend and to account to their governments, they bought inadequate boats and sidelined some of the local coping mechanisms and trashed – at least for a time – the reputation of our local Caritas, a dangerous thing to do when you are a minority faith in a country where some members of the majority faith are trying, through politics, to undermine, even ban, your work for all members of the community. Another Caritas from outside was so keen to have the support of companies in their own country that they received, without checking, clothes for Sri Lankans which turned out to be fatigues for modern-day European youth. They sent a Tamil, accompanied by an expat, to Colombo airport to receive the stuff and were immediately arrested and the Tamil retained for longer than the expat. The local Caritas had not been either consulted or informed. If they had been, they would have told the expat Caritas there

² Ibid p. 3

was a war on. Although these examples sound anecdotal, they form part of a pattern of desperation. And unmask the false god of selfishness.

In my preaching against this with some of our members, especially from Europe, they reply that their survival is at stake. They need government resources, media visibility and the humanitarian imperative, not partnership principles between members of the same family, comes first. Mind you, it only seems to come first when the media spotlight is on an emergency, not with many of the 'neglected emergencies'. If survival for any member means harming the poor we are meant to serve then we have entered into what in strategic planning of an organisation is called the "living death" stage, where survival means betraying the reason we were set up.

We are also being courted by big business to show us that they are now sensitive to our calls for fairer practices with the workforce and for more environmentally sound policies and they want partnerships with us, including of the financial variety. We have already taken on some of their language and practice, further reducing our credibility. I know of some of my peers who spend an extraordinary long time trying to get an upgrade to business class. After all, human antagonism is essentially at the heart of capitalism – I want to sell my labour to you for as much as possible and you want to buy my labour for as little as possible. Antagonism is not the best breeding ground for integral human development. In the neo-liberal model, it does not seem to me that we can adopt either the marketing methods of big business or even the accounting mechanisms without losing hold of our values and a vision of what being human and authentic development are.

Unmasking the False Gods of APEC

*How far that little candle throws his beams,
So shines a good deed in a naughty world*

says Portia in Shakespeare's, 'The Merchant of Venice', and what we all at this conference hope to do in our working lives is to make good deeds shine out. It is certainly what we tell those who donate to us. But do the beams of our candle of 'development' really result in the flourishing of the human person and communities, as we say? Is what we support not more and more dictated by what governments and bodies such as ECHO in the European Union are willing to give us – which means dancing to their tune of short or medium term political agendas rather than beneficiary-perceived needs? Is there too close a link between economic growth and the development discourse?

A scan at one of the documents of Baal, the recent report from the Australian Government to APEC, *APEC and the rise of the Global Middle Class*³, is symptomatic of today's neo-liberal thinking. Let me quote just one sentence for us to illustrate the problem: "Growth in those economies [world's emerging economies] is lifting millions from poverty into a position where, for the first time, they can start to enjoy some aspects of lifestyles that were once the preserve of citizens of wealthy economies." Their definition of 'middle class' is "people whose rapidly rising incomes give them significant discretionary spending power". The "development' behind this is clear – no longer the Cartesian 'cogito ergo sum' but 'Tesco ergo sum', my human identity has been reduced to that of a consumer and that is where my 'development' will lead me. If you cannot consume, because you are too poor, infirm, elderly or it is inimical to your cultural norms, then you will be excluded or be at the mercy of the emerging middle class. Such policies will lead, of course, to a consumption which is completely unsustainable and one which militates against what really counts for human happiness, is geared obviously towards those that do not live a dehumanising poverty and wants to raise them to a higher level – the middle class – so that they will then invest in health care and education for everyone, including those at the bottom, when the reality is that they would invest in private systems for themselves. And, by the way, they will finish off the planet.

In this first part, I have tried to say that we have set up false gods internal to our systems or those we work with which do not put the needs of the beneficiaries in prime place. We are also working in a system which is redefining our human identity as one of consumers and leads to exclusion. In the second, much briefer section, I want to read some of the signs of the times in the future.

Reading the Signs of the Times

Looking Outwards

Looking at the global hazardscape, we can expect more of the same – a future shaped by economic globalisation of the neo-liberal kind, extraction, exclusion and unsustainability.⁴ The high birth rates in many countries of the world are providing a supply of unemployed young males for the next thirty years, many of them from Islamic countries or originally from Islamic countries who are increasingly alienated by their adopted country. According to the UNDP, one out of every 35 persons on the planet is a migrant, people going to traditionally welcoming countries such as the Netherlands and Australia are now finding themselves much less tolerated. The ecological crisis is now well documented. Jared Diamond, in his study on how societies succeed or fail⁵, lists five factors for collapse, two of them are environmental, two caused by whether neighbours are

³ APEC and the Rise of the Global Middle Class, Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, September 2007.

⁴ Ambiguity and Change: Humanitarian NGOs Prepare for the Future, Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University 2004.

⁵ Jared Diamond, Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed, Penguin 2005

hostile or remain friendly and the last by the choice the society makes to address the problems. Millions will become environmental migrants. The flow from the countryside to the cities resulting in mega slums is due to continue, resulting in cheap labour and the spread of pandemics while also possibly, more optimistically, being the site for self-organised political action for the common good. HIV/AIDS will be killing between 5 and 10 million people by 2015, having a huge effect on poverty. There also may be new pandemics on the horizon. And we will have to work in an atmosphere of fear of the other as the war on terror goes on and marginalised youth will supply a steady demographic stream to the ranks of terrorists.

Being Prophetic

Given both these scenarios of the past and the future, how do we become prophetic? How do we testify to a humanitarian or development system that is more humanly authentic in the future? How do we give a message of hope?

The first is the need for dialogue – of life, action, experience and exchange. If government money is really essential for the common good to be extended to the poor, then an honest dialogue of all NGO actors with government has to ensue, shorn of all ideology with the interests of the beneficiaries taking centre stage. We have to change the aid game. This means, first, reducing competition among yourselves so that you can speak with one voice. It would seem to me that ACFID would be the ideal forum to begin this transformation. It means pressing for accountability systems that, while providing adequate information, arise out of local participation and capabilities, not a sophisticated Northern audit system from people far removed from the poor. It means pressing for acceptance of a more holistic development model. In villages devastated by the tsunami, often communities would ask for the temple, mosque or church to be rebuilt first. Yet there was great reluctance to fund this from both governments and NGOs – yet such a centre, which was also a locus for the community to cohere after being devastated, was usually the coping mechanism people required to address other needs.

Donor insistence on measurable outputs should be much broader than the number of latrines supplied. Measurements of human fulfilment should be drawn up. Caritas Australia is currently involved in trying to produce tools that measure ‘success’ in humanitarian or development programmes, not just according to Sphere or other such standards but those values contained in Catholic social teaching. We all have altruistic values at the heart of our agencies, whether they are faith-based or not. Those values are founded on an ethical system that resonates with all humanity – that the human person, including the most vulnerable, is more than an economic unit, that liberative aspects of culture do not impede authentic development but have to be part of it, that communitarian values still hold sway in many parts of the world, that respect for the human being and respect for the environment go hand in hand.

The second way of being prophetic is to foster humility. Every piece of research I have read about the failure of the development or humanitarian enterprise states that one of the main reasons is a lack of investment in local capacities. There are numerous factors behind the reluctance to invest. Many governments now demand a national in situ to oversee the programme – the bwana syndrome. Many NGOs say they need the visibility when that results in less effective development and reduced participation by the local partner. We are in danger of worshipping the false god of reification – making people the objects of what we want seen as development rather than the subjects of a development that arises from their own perceived needs. That requires a dialogue that calls for time, transparency and a sharing of humanity, of ourselves, not just project frameworks and output indicators.

A third way of being prophetic is to tell the truth. This would result in more communal advocacy efforts on trying to persuade governments to think outside the box on humanitarian and development issues. That also requires more work with our constituencies. In an extensive report on NGOs published by the Feinstein International Famine Center at Tufts University in 2004, they

quote an EU official saying that NGOs should “take a more indirect and long-term approach, devoting more attention to educating individual donors. He also argued that NGOs need to realise that “unity is powerful” when making a stand on situations like Iraq rather than allowing institutional survival to take precedence or letting governments ‘divide and conquer’ them”.⁶ Further on in the report, two analysts make the point that “what will make the difference to global poverty in the years to come will not be the number of villages that are served or children that are sponsored but how grassroots action is connected to markets and politics at multiple levels of the world system, a collective task in which the ability of [development NGOs] to work together - not individual competitiveness – will be critical.”⁷ All of us have to work on our agency egos, reducing them, decreasing competition, exchanging experiences and speaking and lobbying as one. In SCHR, we used a peer review system to critique one another’s work and learn.

A fourth way of being prophetic is to put values back into the development and humanitarian discourse. The value of solidarity as something that states there is “neither a you nor a me only an us”⁸. In our work we must insist on policies that build up the human community – the bonds of family, community in society not a rampant individualism, commitment to the common good rather than the common greed, affectivity not just efficacy in our work, the option for the poor as a way of looking and judging the world, ensuring the market works for human beings not the other way round. We must work with such issues with our constituencies not just in campaigning but in development education.

Lastly, we can be prophetic by unmasking the threads of structural injustice that link the pathological aspects of our world. There must be cross alliances between NGOs that work abroad and NGOs that work for justice in Australia, between groups working for the original people of Australia as well as for migrants, asylum seekers and the new poor of the elderly and disabled.

I would submit that a stress on values, increased advocacy to change public policy, increased power transference to Southern partners and, linking domestic and international justice issues, increasing development education and, above all, having cross alliances with one another are the future, a future that resonates not just with those of us whose development vision comes out of faith but with those of goodwill in the humanitarian and development business who see the internal contradictions that lead to failure and will make us less able to cope with the unpredictable future. One thing is clear – human beings in their environment must be at the centre of our analysis and be the object of our enterprise, not the market, not esteem, not the ego. In the 2nd century, an early father of the Church, St Ireneaus, said that the glory of God was a human being fully alive. That should be our aim.

In saying this, I hope I am not being too moralistic or ‘po’faced’ (but what can you expect of someone who has just completed 12 years of working in the Vatican?). I am aware I am not being ‘pragmatic’, of not living in the ‘real world’ but being prophetic means challenging what the ‘real world’ is. At the end of the day, we will be judged not by Ernst and Young or AusAID but by the poor themselves.

⁶ Ambiguity and Change: Humanitarian NGOs Prepare for the Future, Feinstein International Famine Center, Tufts University, 2004 p. 65

⁷ Ibid p. 73

⁸ A quote from Albert Nolan O.P.