NGOs and the Political Economy of Development: An Irish Perspective

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Author notes

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Abstract

In Ireland the role of development NGOs is rarely interrogated. There is, rather, a shared discourse across the government, NGO and academic sectors which does not really encourage critical enquiry. Yet, in light of the recent Oxfam and Goal scandals, we must ask, as critical-engaged intellectuals, if development NGOs are now 'part of the problem' or 'part of the solution' to use a 1960s phrase. After a brief context- setting section *Why Now?* which discusses recent events around the NGOs, we start our enquiry with a set of *Deconstructions* of relevant terms such as 'development', 'civil society', 'human rights' and the term 'NGO' itself, too often referred to in reverential or uncritical ways in the NGO literature and more widely. We then move on to consider whether it is a case of *Irish exceptionalism* which explains why the political economy of development and NGOs debate in Ireland seems so insulated from international debates. Finally, we open up a *Discussion* which tries to pose some of the main matters arising from our enquiry. We understand our discussion might seem challenging to some, but we think we are right to pose the issues and hope we might spark an open debate on whether NGOs are part of the solution or, rather, part of the problem. This debate is too important to be left to the NGOs alone.

Why now?

As reports broke in early 2018 that senior Oxfam GB officials had paid for sex during the Haiti emergency with probably underage girls, it was noticeable that there was not really a shocked reaction in the 'development sector'. Shaista Aziz – a past aid worker with Oxfam and other organisations declared that "I wasn't surprised. Nor was I surprised when it became clear that it had been covered up and that further allegations of sexual abuse, bullying, harassment and intimidation in the aid sector soon followed" (Aziz 2018). Was there then a shared and accepted understanding that the power relations between the big NGOs and the 'developing' countries would probably lead precisely to such abuses? It transpired that this was clearly not an individual case of abuse but, rather, a structural feature of these large, well-funded, well-connected and still widely respected organisations. NGOs are part of the problem it would seem at first glance, from both a gender and a majority world perspective.

In Ireland we have had the quite different, but equally damaging in its impact, debacle in relation to Goal the third largest development NGO in the state. A U.S. government report in 2016 expressed concerns around three areas: "procurement system weaknesses, mishandling of conflicts of interest and inadequate financial function" (Mac Cormaic 2017). The story which emerged of collusion and bid-rigging in Southern Turkey, where the aid operations in Syria were centred, eventually went far beyond these seemingly innocuous phrases. In fact, the U.S. Office of the Inspector General was investigating "actors alleged to be directly engaged in corruption and conflict of interest [that] included both field office staff and members of Goal's senior management team" (Ibid). In the event both the US and Irish funders of Goal decided to accept the resignation of a senior officer (as happened in the Oxfam case linked to sexual abuse) and a commitment to "put their own house in order" as sufficient remedy. We might well surmise that

Oxfam and Goal were perhaps deemed by governments to be "too big to fail" as were the major banks in Ireland and elsewhere when the 2008-09 financial crisis broke. Again, this points towards NGOs being clearly part of the problem of unregulated contemporary globalised capitalism it would seem (see Wallace 2004 for more on this).

However, to understand the underlying dynamics of the politics of development NGOs we need to further examine critically the overall discursive structures and power relationships related to the aid infrastructure to assess if the NGOs are part of the problem or the solution to development needs. This is a more specific question than that raised by Dambisa Moyo in her influential critique of development aid from a very different position to our own, namely a pro market 'neoliberal' perspective (Moyo 2009) which questions whether aid 'works' as it were. We are, rather, asking whether aid systems, including control apparatuses such as monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems, are silencing or oppressing the voices of marginalized people rather than promoting equality, ownership and accountability for those affected by poverty and voicelessness as they claim. The latter, we presume, might help to reduce power abuses whilst power- blind M&E systems could potentially re-produce or worsen the top-down features of the aid sector and hence function oppressively.

Social transformation and empowerment to achieve social justice are important goals of development and critical discourse analysis alike, the latter seeking to establish the role of discourses in creating unequal power relationships. Hence we will now apply critical discourse analysis to 'deconstruct' some of the key terms such as development, civil society and NGOs in order to confront these concepts with development practice. The Oxfam and Goal scandals around sexual and financial abuse respectively must be seen as part of this broader set of structural issues and cannot just be seen as aberrations. Rather, they highlight for us the general

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power dynamics of the NGO/majority world relationship, the *macho* modus operandi most of the more aggressive ones adopt, their cavalier attitude towards due process, and the prioritisation of the organization above development goals, which explains the denials and cover- ups that have occurred in both cases. We see the events described in a nutshell above as just the tip of the iceberg, not an anomaly, and symptomatic of a much wider structural malaise that is not really acknowledged (at least openly) in the NGO milieu. We would argue that the many sincere members and supporters of the development NGOs deserve the type of open, self-critical analysis we are trying to foster here.

Deconstructions

Deconstruction does not mean the same as to destroy, rather it is a double movement of simultaneous affirmation and undoing (see Derrida 1981). It was originally deployed in philosophy and, for example, by feminist theorists to expose the male bias of the European intellectual tradition. Deconstruction has also been deployed in relation to development studies (e.g. Crush 1995, Munck 1999) opening them up to post-modernist perspectives. It seeks to expose the fault lines, the ambiguities in key concepts and to reveal the contradictions inherent therein. The influence of discourse studies in particular has been quite influential in critical development studies, for example with the emergence of the 'post-development' school. A fundamental insight was to consider the way the inter-connected power, knowledge and discourse of what we call 'development' has served to establish the dominance of the West over the Third World after the end of formal colonialism (see Cooper and Packard, eds 1997).

'Development' can, without much exaggeration, be seen as the dominant central organizing concept of our era. It is a concept that emerged in the social sciences as a means to deal with the disorder created by progress towards modernity in Europe. The development of capitalism out of

the old feudal order led to the twin processes of urbanization and industrialization which led to poverty, unemployment and social exclusion. The source of disorder was seen to lie in laissez faire, essentially meaning operation of free market regardless of their impact on nature and society. For Auguste Comte, widely regarded as the founder of sociology, progress was "the development of order under the influence of love" (cited in Cowen and Shenton 1995:34). Positivism was a system of thought developed by Comte and transmitted into modern science which guided developmental knowledge as an altruistic system: sociology would guide 'development' to establish 'order and progress', thus acting as a trustee for the development of society.

A quite distinct discursive construction of development and its Other, namely 'underdevelopment', emerged in the aftermath of World War II and the decline of classic colonialism. As the United States, the now dominant global power, moved to consolidate its hegemony, it articulated a new notion of 'underdevelopment'. By declaring the post-colonial regions of Africa, Asian and Latin America as 'underdeveloped', the US set in motion a neo-colonial strategy to systematically change this 'Third World' to achieve progress towards the US model of development. This new development project offered a universal blueprint for national economic development under US tutelage. In the event the modernisation project was replaced in the 1990s by the globalisation project, which turned away from national development towards a new global development model based on privatization, the retreat of the state and the freeing up of Third World markets to the now dominant North Atlantic corporations and their local allies in the Third World.

As to the role of the NGOs in relation to the above processes, the self-image of the NGO - and NGO activists in particular – is very different from the role NGO's actually play in the

contemporary political economy of globalisation. Thus Dochas – the Irish umbrella body for development NGOs – states that "our work is driven by the belief that our support for people and organisations in developing countries can bring about real and positive change" (www.dochas.ie/our-work). We, as authors/activists, would know many development workers, and have no doubt whatsoever that most are committed individuals. So how do we square the ostensible aims and objectives of NGO's and their staff with the verdict of Hardt and Negri in their influential alter-globalization text *Empire* that humanitarian NGOs such as Amnesty, Oxfam and MSF "are in effect (even if it runs counter to the intentions of the participants) some of the most powerful pacific weapons of the new world order- the charitable campaigns and the mendicant orders of Empire" (Hardt and Negri 2000: 36)? Their 'moral' intervention around development can actually be seen as a frontline force of imperial intervention; we need only think of the so-called 'humanitarian wars' of the 1990s (supported by many NGOs), or we could look back further to the role of the religious orders in the making of colonialism, an issue still very much of the present in the case of Ireland.

The NGOs in Latin America show an almost paradigmatic evolution from the radical rhetoric of the 1970s to fully compliant agents of neoliberal globalization in the 1990s, and are thus a useful case study in terms of our research question. In the 1970's, the NGOs in Latin America had provided humanitarian support for the victims of the military dictatorships and consistently denounced their abuses of human rights. With democratization in the 1980's and 1990's, the NGO's began to shift their critique towards the state in general and in defence of a somewhat nebulous 'civil society' (see Biekart 1999 for an insider account). In Latin America we became gradually clear that the NGOs shared much of the discourse of neoliberalism in regards to the supposed evils of the state, especially when it was a left-of-centre government in power as in the 2000's. It was very noticeable that NGOs did not support strikes or the mass protests against

budget cuts in the 1990s. As James Petras puts it: "The basic philosophy of the NGOs is to transform 'solidarity' into collaboration and subordination to the macro-economy of neoliberalism by focusing attention *away from resources of the wealthy classes towards self –exploitation of the poor*" (Petras 1997:13). This is a view widely shared amongst progressives in Latin America yet not widely recognised in Ireland for example. Nor, for that matter, is there much cognisance of parallel debates and critiques in the countries of Sub Saharan Africa where the bulk of Irish Aid partner countries are located (see Amutabi 2006, Shivji 2007).

What happened then in the 1980s with the NGOs generally was a certain confluence between their anti-statist project and the hollowing-out of the state by the neo-liberal technocrats. In part the NGOs were facing the dilemmas of any social movement poised between the need to remain faithful to its objectives and the advantages of institutionalization. It was also part of the price of success in so far as the NGOs had gained considerably in influence and prestige which they now wanted to bring to bear in a more coherent way.

But also, precisely at around this time, the state was beginning to retreat from some of its traditional roles in managing society, and the NGOs were presented with an opportunity (as well as the danger of co-option of course). The possible role of the NGOs in 'filling the gap' left by the retreating state was taken up explicitly by the World Bank in the 1990s. It was clear that, on the ground, development NGOs in particular were beginning to fulfil some of the functions abandoned by the state in the neo-liberal 'revolution'. The World Bank became very concerned with the role of 'civil society' in holding together the atomized individuals (consumers) created by the neo-liberal transformation. They began to see the need for structural adjustment 'with a human face' to avoid the worst effects of social disintegration and political instability. What the World Bank economists began to do was to foster the concept of 'social capital' to complement the neo-

liberal strategy. The NGOs would be seen as an integral element in this drive to create some degree of social cohesion and make up for the retreating state. From a progressive standpoint, the apparent co-option of the NGOs by neo-liberalism was deeply disturbing, and for many activists in Latin America, the NGOs were now seen to be openly 'in the service of imperialism'. These conflicted experiences do not seem to have really impacted on the NGO world-view in Ireland.

The contemporary NGO scene more broadly was also shaped by the 'humanitarian wars' that followed the breakup of the old Soviet Union in the 1990s development and security became inseparably linked as did the relationship between many international NGOs and the armed forces of the imperial powers. In the new era of 'biopolitics' - derived from Foucault's notion of [biopower](#), and the extension of [state power](#) over both the physical and political bodies of a population - the NGOs moved into a crucial role in the new power paradigm of the neoliberal world order. From the liberal trusteeship of the past – that took rights and freedom as its reference points – there was a shift to an openly neo-liberal movement under the guise of humanitarian emergencies. As Mark Duffield puts it: "Emergency has provided a means of generating the world of peoples, ignoring existing laws, conventions or restraints; it has allowed the colonization of new countries or increasing a presence where a foothold already existed" (Duffield 2007: 48). The US military-industrial complex that critics referred to in the 1950's, was being replaced by the military - NGO complex in the post-Cold War era. We note also that Irish NGO's humanitarian budgets increased during the past 5 – 10 years, whilst work on human rights and participatory political empowerment processes seem to be shrinking or simply "mainstreamed" into livelihoods and humanitarian work.

The political terrain that the NGOs see themselves working on today is that of 'civil society' (see Kleibl 2017). It is assumed that there is a shared understanding of what civil society is and it is

also taken for granted that it is "a good thing". The romance with the concept of civil society had begun in Eastern Europe and Latin America in the 1980s under very different struggles for democratisation. By the time it was mainstreamed in the 1990s it had been co-opted into the new global governance architecture designed by the IMF and the World Bank, increasingly dominating the African continent (see DuBois 1991) and across the Global South. It entered development discourse as the underpinning for 'governance' which was arguably just another way of subjugating the Third World to the needs of imperialism. The virtues of 'empowerment' and 'bottom up' development were harnessed to assist the new free- market driven economic development strategy. We saw, in this period, a marked 'NGO ization' of the social movements that had played such a key role in the earlier democratization struggles, not least in regards to the women's movements in many regions of the Global South (see Alvarez 1999).

In the post- Cold War era the already 'domesticated' concept of civil society was scaled up to the global level and a new concept of 'global civil society' emerged (see Munck 2006). Never clearly defined, it was variously taken to mean the international NGOs, transnational advocacy networks and/or global social movements. It was and is seen to coordinate civil society organisation in different countries within a new 'global' framework. It helped provide legitimation for the NGOs operating on humanitarian, environmental and rights-based issues. But global civil society describes a very heterogeneous grouping – ranging from non-profits to businesses, radical peasant movements to well-established INGO's, etc. – which is hardly captured adequately by the impressionistic definition that they were all, somehow, doing 'globalisation from below'. It is unclear what implications the term of 'global civil society' might have in relation to the established inter-state system, and its ambiguous and contested politics leave it at best as a liberal aspiration.

There are further reasons why 'global civil society' cannot have a transformative dynamic and at best can only act as a palliative for the unsustainable economics of neoliberalism. Because it values conversation as an objective in its own right it can never reach a consensus to act as a collective agency as that would bring dialogue to an end. It disallows and cannot comprehend mass movements for social change, be they the labour movements or the Islamist movements. Furthermore, even a cursory analysis of 'global civil society' (and its INGO constituents) show how they fail utterly any tests around representation and accountability which are, of course, key to any transformative social movement. The issue of representation is particularly relevant when dealing with movements around migrants, market traders, bonded labour or indigenous peoples given INGOs are most often based in the Global North. There are no clear democratic mechanisms to ensure representativity, let alone accountability, which would entail a dismantling of the authoritarian bureaucratic structures of the INGOs themselves to start with.

The overarching paradigm most development NGOs operate within today is arguably the 'human rights' frame, also taken as a given and as an uncontested human good (see Bartholomey and Breakspear 2004). Indeed, one of the defining features of the globalisation discourse was the global institutionalization of human rights. They were to become the meta-narrative of the new era, part of the benign spread of Western modernity to the Third World under the aegis of the free market in capital, finance, land and people. There was very little reflexivity on the Western origins of human rights and their ambiguous impact. As Baxi reminds us "overall human rights discursively was and still remains, according to the narrative of origins, the patrimony of the West" (Baxi 2002:24). It legitimised the 'humanitarian wars' of the Balkans and more, giving cover for NGO integration with the imperial war machine. It generated and was based on, a comfortable liberal cosmopolitanism which, much like the concept of 'global civil society', had a direct parallel with the belief in the civilizing mission of colonialism characteristic of an earlier

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period of 'North-South' relations.

We need to ask who decides what human rights are and when they are being violated. It would seem that it is Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights have the definitive and authoritative voice to do this. Amnesty decides when one is a 'prisoner of conscience' and when one is not. When these powerful originations speak those in the South are obliged to listen and we, ultimately, obey. It is not that those in the South are unaware of human rights abuses - witness the struggle against apartheid, dictatorships and gender based violence – it is about an imperial theft of decision-making power. As Neera Chandhoke asks "which human rights do global human rights NGOs consider worthy of defence, and which human rights do they consider it possible to defend? Or do they defend only those rights which these organizations find it possible to defend?" (Chandhoke 2005: 363). It seems clear that there is a form of 'soft imperialism' operating here on a discursive and practical terrain.

The problem goes deeper when we consider the narrow definition of 'human rights' as civil / political rights more or less to the exclusion of social and economic rights that we could argue are central for the self-empowerment of the peoples of the Third World. Thus we see Human Rights Watch can intervene in regards to the breaches of social and economic rights only if there has been negative discriminatory (i.e. civil) acts. From a global social movement perspective much of this discussion is somewhat beside the point. There was a move in Canada some years ago to translate labour rights into human rights. The logic was that this would offer some respite from the neoliberal onslaught. Ultimately, this strategy failed and most involved realized that individual civil rights was no substitute for the collective organization of labour in pursuit of working class objectives against capitalism's commodification of labour and nature. An appeal to mystical transcendental values is no substitute for the hard work of organizing for democracy in the social,

economic, political and cultural spheres. The same principle might apply in terms of a critical

review of the dominant rights- based development discourse. The point is that we need to debate

these issues critically and not simply accept the dominant liberal perspective as the only one.

Irish exceptionalism?

Against the above backdrop we now consider whether there is a form of Irish exceptionalism that

in the main (apart from Goal) seemingly insulates Ireland both from the scandals that have

recently surfaced and the internationally accepted critical understanding of the political economy

of development. Irish NGOs seem to operate in a political and discursive world that sees them as

exempt from the colonial aura surrounding other European nations. Furthermore, the critical

debates about the role of INGOs in facilitating the extension of the modern, harmonious and

dialogue- orientated Western civil society model to the rest of the world remains mainly un-

reflected on, whilst the structural violence producing inequalities and fuelling conflict in the

global South continue unremarked on. Apparently unaware of the debates in Latin America in the

1980s and 1990s, some Irish NGOs seem to quite complacently bask in the progressive aura of

Ireland's international image and aid policy in particular. There is a general sense we have found

during interviews, that Irish NGOs in the main see themselves as faithfully implementing Catholic

social thinking (though not too aware of the fraught world of Latin American liberation theology

for example) and influencing Irish Aid to maintain a progressive stance as compared to the openly

neo colonialist US or UK overseas aid models.

In brief, the Irish NGO world-view would very much see itself as part of the solution to

development needs. There is not, we sense, a particularly open attitude towards critical dialogue

while the NGOs have 'a place at the table' as they see it, where they can talk with funders and

policy makers on an equal footing (for an attempt to open just such a debate see Mc Closkey

2012). So we now consider what justification there might be for such a Panglossian view of the political economy of development and the role of the NGO therein.

Many of the bigger Irish NGOs such as Trocaire, Concern and Goal frame their mission statements around principles of Catholic social teaching and/or the advancement of human rights. The implementation of their missions and poverty alleviation programmes are generally orientated by state policies and driven by results-based-management (RBM), a compulsory project management system adopted by Irish Aid and many other Western donors for grant receiving NGOs. In 2016, Irish Aid channelled over €165.6 million through civil society organisations, amounting to 23% of total ODA. Whilst Irish Aid underlines that its partnerships with both international and local civil society organisations are integral to its work, it remains unclear if and how the above mentioned power relationships between international and national NGOs in a postcolonial context are understood and dealt with in practice. Or, put another way, how Irish Aid makes sure that it is local citizens and their respective organizational and community structures that are being strengthened and enabled to shape their own communities' development.

Irish Aid's largest civil society funding scheme is the Programme Grant, a competitive mechanism which provides multi-annual funding to Irish civil society organisations for ambitious programming aimed at long-term sustainable socio-economic change. In 2016, a new round of the Programme Grant was launched and a total of 13 organisations made successful applications. The resulting grants range from €500,000 to €20 million per year for the 2017-2020 period. Whilst competition might be seen as a useful dynamic for economic growth, we observed that the move from previous institutional funding to specific programme funding- based on NGOs' capacity to contribute to the achievement of Irish Aid's policy goals and the Sustainable Development Goals- might have negative effects that - in a general sense - might go against the principle of solidarity.

Some Irish NGOs, that were previously known for their independent human rights based work, became competitors and were getting increasingly concerned about their own growth and this led to potential mergers with other NGOs. On 17th February 2017 an Irish Times article entitled "Goal considered merger with Concern before Oxfam - Concern plan ended when Goal's board opted for a rival merger pitch from Oxfam Ireland" outlines the situation of the Irish NGO scene which is that NGOs are now more in competition with one another rather than acting in solidarity. Or, to put it another way they were now acting as businesses would, not surprising given the large amounts of funding at stake. It seemed that Irish NGOs had to align their own development programmes and their respective focuses with Irish Aid priorities and they had to make sure to upgrade their results-based monitoring and evaluation capacities, leading to a shift in priority from politically empowering work to more technical and managerial work (see Khoo 2017: 198-200). The price of 'being at the table' is that you have to follow the rules of the game. The NGOs know this of course but seldom openly acknowledge it, let alone allow an open debate amongst their supporters and the wider development community.

It is noticeable that over the last decade the amount of donor or institutional funding channelled through Irish NGOs has increased in relation to the overall NGO budget available for development and relief work. Today Trocaire's unrestricted funds for development and relief work is down to 28.1 % of the total (cf. Trocaire's annual report 2017), Concern's stands slightly above with 29,6 % (cf. Concern's annual report 2016) and in the case of Goal unrestricted funds made up only 2,7 % of their overall income in 2016 (cf. Goal's annual report 2016). This means that by and large the majority of Irish development and relief NGO budgets (between 97,3 % and 70,4 % in the cases of Goal, Trocaire and Concern) are influenced and to a certain extend controlled by institutional donors and their development priorities, Irish Aid being one of the more influential donors especially for Trocaire and Concern. We get to a point where we have to

consider if an NGO is not really a GONGO (government organised non-governmental organisation); when do we get to the tipping point?

The proportional increase in institutional funding incorporates the danger that several donor policies, including RBM, fuse with individual, and some might say unique, Irish NGO organizational histories, values and missions and hence, influence their human-rights based orientation and certainly the amount of advocacy work directed against Irish government decisions or policies. This might not be a linear or on the surface observable influence and change, it rather happens in a hidden and discursive manner. However, the consequences are concrete, they impact on NGO practices and ways of working.

Critical scholars such as Ziai (2015) have sought to problematize the system of donor policy conditionality, highlighting the fact that it confronts local partners or beneficiaries with Western development concepts and related hierarchies of social problems. Social problems and their root causes are quite complex and context specific. Applying external problem definitions, and in many cases solutions, to other regions of the world carries increased potential to colonize non-Western life-worlds with external thoughts and ideas of development (see Kleibl and Munck 2016 for this argument). From a postcolonial perspective, this has of course, in different manners, always been the case since colonialism started. However, we feel that RBM has reinforced this tendency and Irish Aid as well as Irish NGOs have not sufficiently reflected about the power dynamics this entails and the consequences it produces.

When further inquiring about the current situation of INGO programme implementation modalities with Irish NGO workers we gathered that RBM was initially perceived as an interesting process, designed to produce better results for the poor. Now, however, it is more likely to be seen as a rather inflexible management process that incorporates local social

development into a set of 'global organizational indicators' that are mostly defined at offices in Ireland. These 'global organizational indicators' then frame the concrete development programmes implemented in countries of the Global South. From our perspective, this top down development process has little to do with participatory democratic development from below, or empowerment understood as a process that changes the nature and direction of systemic forces that marginalize women and other disadvantaged sectors in a given context (see Batliwala 1994).

RBM, and the way it is applied through global indicators, tends to homogenize social and political problems affecting the lives of people living in the Global South, as if problems could be solved the same way everywhere, ignoring the historical, economic, social and political power relationships that created social inequality in an often violent way. Theories of change, which drive the objectives, expected outcomes and impact of results-based project frameworks, if not elaborated in a strictly participatory way reinforce Western hegemony and domination over the global South. Indeed, knowledge about 'development' presents itself as technical in the context of most results-based frameworks. Cooper and Packard remind us that 'development is fundamentally about changing how people conduct their lives, and the very claim to technical knowledge is in itself a political act' (Cooper and Packard 1997:19).

The orientation of many Irish development initiatives, despite the measurable good things they are promoting, hence appear fixed from the top, directed downwards as a results-based programme framework to local partners and beneficiaries that implement or benefit from projects. This dynamic will not change naturally to a more desirable social justice orientated grassroots empowerment project that most Irish development NGOs in principle desire to carry forward. In reality, Irish NGOs, as most other INGOs, depend substantially on government funding which secures its employee's salaries and funding for partner's work. During an informal conversation

with us, one Irish NGO worker explained the situation as follows: "INGO funding exacerbates the North/South divide. If we would support our local partners in accessing funding from donors directly, we would do ourselves out of the job". With this statement in mind, it appears clear that INGOs from their position in the aid chain tend to actually exclude local NGOs and social groups from accessing direct funding and hence decrease the potential for supporting locally grown initiatives for development. At the same time, Irish NGOs themselves are sharply restricted in terms of unrestricted funds and can only work within strict boundaries and procedures as defined by their institutional donors.

But what if, as most INGO's claim, their interventions do actually lead in practice to an improvement in the lives of their beneficiaries? And maybe the latter are seen to willingly accept the advice and control of the experts? Are our questions and deconstructions of the aid system then not unnecessarily critical in a context where good progress in the name of social development is being done? Indeed, many of the INGO workers we talked to have naturally defended their way of working, as the following interview statement outlines: 'Given all the focus on accountability, transparency and value added in recent years we have invested extra resources (finance staff mainly) in building the capacity of local partners on finance systems and accountability and also increased our monitoring checks on partners'. On the other hand, what if all the upward looking accountability, monitoring and financing crowds out solidarity and reduces the power of decision-making of already marginalized citizens of the Global South?

Whilst we know some INGO staff on the ground who do critically reflect on their part in upholding postcolonial North-South power relationships, trying to act as a partner "protection zone" against directives articulated through potentially oppressive global organizational indicators from above, they have little space to turn the dynamics towards local development ownership. The

situation is exacerbated through the positioning of INGO grant managers in overseas offices. The backdrop of this situation is that donors are increasingly channelling their development aid through local offices and embassies and INGOs, concerned about losing direct access to locally managed funds, further decentralize their fund- raising and compliance staff as well.

An Irish NGO representative in an African country we talked to confirmed that within the overall budget of more than € 4,000,000 only € 20,000 were free/voluntary funding which could be applied to development initiatives without the need to consider Western government donor priorities and RBM as its management tool. Hence, the great majority of programme funds applied from Irish NGOs in countries of the Global South appear subordinated to Western donor priorities and related INGOs "global organizational indicators". The question of whether Irish NGOs then remain part of civil society – clearly operating outside the government and private sector spheres – is at the very least highly debatable.

It is also no surprise that a more explicit business language is being applied as part of INGOs discourses and their practices; this includes for example the recruitment of business development advisors for international offices. Business advisors are the people making sure that INGO budgets grow or at least remain stable and that donor requirements are met. This situation further contributes to the difficult intermediary role INGOs play in an African context and raises questions about the relationship between INGOs and private sector actors and their joint impact on local development. What appears clear to us in this context is that the presence of some INGOs in countries of the Global South does not lead to the empowerment of local communities, a danger that Irish NGOs are clearly not immune to.

The dominant focus on donor fund raising and financial growth might ultimately affect INGOs partnership ethos and North/South solidarity, including their fight against gender based violence

and corruption insofar as it subordinates their vision and mission to financial considerations. The subordination of solidarity to financial growth then makes the INGOs mission equivalent to the mission of any private sector company where power abuses such as sexual harassment happen all too frequently as part of the day to day struggle to survive in the ever more demanding system of capital exploitation. From our analysis carried out so far, the opening statement of Shaista Aziz above, and her lack of surprise about the widespread sexual abuses recently uncovered within INGO structures make sense and Irish NGOs are certainly no exception (see Power 2018).

Standing back from the particulars of the research reported on above and reflecting on the troubled consciences of some of our interviewees we wonder if politics or the lack of politics is the underlying issue. Development, human rights and poverty reduction are somehow portrayed and felt as if in some way they are 'beyond' politics. As with faith- based organisations, and here the intimate connection between faith-based and development organisations in Ireland comes to the fore, politics is left outside in the mundane world. Yet as we have shown throughout, development is a highly political affair, as is something so seemingly innocuous and a 'good thing' as human rights. Until the Irish NGOs enter into a proper political conversation with other forces in civil society they will be dominated and constrained by the cosy pink glow of being on the side of good while refusing to engage with the contradictions of their mission. And, lest we forget, with the voices of the global South, the once colonised, enslaved and still exploited by the global structures of capitalism for whom the NGOs now form an integral part of soft power and governance modalities. Ireland is not in an exceptional position in this regard due to being a postcolonial country itself.

Discussion

We began by posing some current, very troubling, issues emerging with leading, even

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paradigmatic, development NGO's. We then proposed a fairly basic deconstruction of the terms being deployed- the terms 'development' and 'NGO' in particular- and those guiding much NGO and World Bank understanding of the world, namely 'civil society' and 'human rights'. This led us to a discussion of Irish exceptionalism, as in whether Ireland is in some fundamental way beyond or an exception to the broader international debate around development and NGO's. So, now, in terms of opening up a discussion we are going to pose one simple question in regards to development and NGO's: is Ireland different? Our own response will be both in the affirmative and the negative. Then, instead of seeking answers to all the difficult questions posed in this paper we are proposing a new approach to the study of NGOs – a cultural political economy – which we hope can establish a critically engaged research agenda.

Ireland is, indeed, different in terms of its engagement with development and the history of its NGOs. Much is made in Irish 'development work' that it is not a country with a colonial past, quite the contrary. That, supposedly, places it on a different political and moral pone compared to, say, British, French or Belgian, development agencies. Yet recent historiography in Ireland and the British Empire (see Kenny 2004) shows that Irish participation in empire was not a paradox but a major feature that could be expected. Nationalist historiography would prefer to airbrush out this aspect of Ireland's subordination/colonial role but the evidence is steadily emerging, for example in relation to slavery. The notion that "Ireland is Third World country" (Caherty 1982) became common currency in the 1980's and is also equally off the mark. Irish participation in colonialism was consistent even if unrecorded by and large. Today there is simply no way the European paragon of "market-friendly", tax evading, US subservient state can be seen as anything other than a neo-colonial state in relation to the Third World, complacent nationalist discourses notwithstanding.

Ireland is also "different" in terms of the very large role played by the Catholic Church and human rights discourses. Yet this difference is largely taken for granted, much like the weather is, and never theorised or problematized. This contrasts, for example, with the vast literature in Latin America on the growing influence of the Protestant churches in civil society (see Stoll 1991) which we understand as a political phenomenon deserving critical analysis. . Even in relation to the political role of Argentina's Jesuit leader Jorge Bergoglio of disputed human rights record under the dictatorship, in Ireland, across the spectrum there is a preference for the sanitised version of Pope Francis with not a scintilla of critical thinking evident. It would appear that in a 'mono-cultural, mono-ethnic' society we do not need to concern ourselves with such matters. Also on the question of sexual abuse it is assumed - as when the Oxfam scandal broke - that Ireland is immune to such problems. In a society where clerical sexual abuse has been so prominent that could be seen as over confident to say the least. In brief, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Ireland cannot be immune to any of the political issues we have raised about development NGO's, from their close relationship with governments and the private sector to their neo-colonial relationship with the Third World.

What we propose, in conclusion, is not a polemic, however, but a carefully crafted and openly debated research project involving the participation and engagement of the Irish NGO sector. One thing is being 'at the table' with funders, another is engaging with one's own supporters, including critical ones. What the Oxfam/Goal scandals signal is an urgent need for honest self-reflection on where the Irish NGOs need to go now. We can either listen to international experience, for example in Latin America, or bury our heads in the sand and hope the storm will pass. We are proposing, for our part, an analytical framework that seeks to synthesize the political economy approach and the critical analysis of discourse (see Sum and Jessop 2013). While much of the critical literature on NGO's deploys a political economy approach - their relationship to

global neoliberalism for example – less attention is paid to the 'meaning making' we can discern through a semiotic analysis. A cultural political economy appraisal is well suited to the study of how policy discourse and political imaginaries are constructed. It would help us analyse some of the issues raised above –from sexual abuse to the Catholic Weltanschauung - by looking afresh at the way in which policy makers, NGO managers and academics construct meaning ('soft power') around development and the role of the NGO sector in Ireland.

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