

# Catchwords, Empty Phrases and Tautological Reasoning Democracy & Civil Society in Danish Aid

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

UNDP's Human Development Report for 2002 is entitled *Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World* (UN 2002). The main message of the report is that despite a growing number of at least nominal democracies in the world today, suppression of political freedoms, human rights and civil liberties have not diminished significantly, nor has it affected the number of civil wars, still accounting for the loss of about 3.6 million lives during the 1990s. In general the global divide is as unequal as ever, with the bottom of the Human Development Index still occupied primarily by countries in sub-Saharan Africa, while the Western nations, particularly the Nordic countries, are in the lead – now as ever.

Once again an international aid organisation has been forced to revise earlier standpoints and easy recipes for dramatic change in the developing world, now

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admitting that the hopes of seeing positive, immediate societal changes following the introduction of formal democracies – often as a result of aid conditionality enforced by the World Bank Group – have faltered. In the present context UNDP is also distancing itself from the significant role it had in advocating support for democratisation and good governance as easy, but very valid, universal solutions to complex problems. Instead, Mark Malloch Brown, UNDP's Administrator, blames it on the rest: "The international cheerleaders for democracy have underestimated what it takes to build a functioning, properly rooted democracy". Now, in retrospect, UNDP in seeking to present an image of itself as a reflective and adaptable organisation of great purity – and wisdom gained from experience.

Once again we have witnessed how the aid community offers catchwords and empty phrases to the general public – including taxpayers – as convincing and easily comprehensible arguments. Such words and phrases, placed within the context of a causal chain of explanation – providing there is 'increasing empowerment', 'democratisation' and 'local participation', economic development will happen more or less automatically – are well suited to the task of continuously boosting public support, only to be retracted, or modified, when reality meets conviction or ideology. However, the aid community continues to search for new catchwords and phrases, which it believes will make a dramatic and imminent change for the better in the developing world. These formulations often combine notions of 'social' with 'technological' engineering, both believed to bring the virtues of the Western world to those countries in the South that are in dire need of the same.

In the following, we will try to address how catchwords and empty phrases continuously play an important role in the mythology of aid. First, we will discuss how 'planned intervention' – the foundation of Western rationalist aid thinking – is characterised, what it means and how it should be perceived. This is followed by an analysis of the rhetoric of partnership, as formulated within Danida policies and strategies.

Basic to this discussion is the concept of civil society. This concept has recently entered the developmental scene but has been dramatically transformed by aid organisations (again illustrated by Danida). Here we will discuss how the concept of civil society is seen within a Western ideal model of society consisting of State, market and civil society, each with different traits. Finally, we will attempt a more general description of the tautological reasoning behind the empty phrases and catchwords, before moving on to a general characterisation of the mythology itself.

### The logic of 'planned intervention'

The term 'planned intervention', used in particular by sociologists and anthropologists associated Africanist development anthropology, (for instance within the APAD network<sup>2</sup>) is part of a broad concept of modernity and modernisation (see, for example, Arce and Long 2000). It seeks to analyse the premises on which the notion of external, planned intervention is based, when such interventions, often projects, are confronted with local contexts, in all with all their ambiguity and fluidity. This meeting at the 'development interface' gives rise to particular outcomes, some of which are expected and anticipated, but often resulting in more unexpected and unintended consequences, as pointed out by Ferguson (1990).

Perhaps no other concept has been so closely associated with the 'modernist' project than planning. To plan for, control, manage, direct and to 'assist' - in the terminology of aid - the underdeveloped world, in its perceived ambition towards modernity, are integral elements of this much-needed transformation process. It builds on a combination of normative theory and positivism, and has inherited the technocratic thinking according to which technical solutions

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<sup>2</sup> The APAD network (Association Euro-Africaine pour l'Anthropologie du Changement Social et du Développement) was formed in 1991, after a number of closely related studies dealing with various aspects of the 'development interface'. Such studies included the analysis of 'planned intervention', its effects, and the ambiguous and diverse contexts within which planned intervention was expected to function (see, for example, Elwert and Bierschenk, 1988; Long and van der Ploeg, 1989; Bierschenk, 1988; de Sardan, 1988; Crehan and von Oppen, 1988).

to problems identified are available, or will have to be invented if missing, and the application of these techniques or ideas can basically remedy situations of 'underdevelopment', poverty, social misery, environmental degradation, etc. The superior nature of planning, even its proclaimed infallibility, is then associated with objective 'scientific' laws, which can assist with social and historical development.

To help with this, a whole managerial, logical and rationality-bound approach – exemplified by the Logical Framework Approach (LFA)<sup>3</sup> - has been developed and is now widely applied in all corners of the aid community. It is a concept of planning that in the words of Escobar is possibly one of the most persistent, perhaps 'sustainable', ways of analysing and structuring a complex world:

The concept of planning and management embody the belief that social change can be engineered and directed, produced at will. The idea that poor countries could move more or less smoothly along the path of progress through planning has always been held to be an indubitable truth by development experts (Escobar, 1996:50).

On the one hand, development planning and 'planned intervention' express the 'modernist' rationalist conviction – mostly unquestioned – that development can essentially be predicted, managed and controlled. On the other hand, this belief has an in-built and essential logical contention that it is possible to distance oneself from the past and that historical trajectories have no value, except as causes of present-day miseries. This discontinuity, or '*tabula rasa*' contention, is both an outcome of intensive processes of problem identification and – not least – a precondition, even a justification, for the project of 'planned intervention', which demonstrates the overwhelming need to solve problems through external assistance. The discontinuity notion establishes the break with the past, in which the causes of poverty and misery were rooted, while promising the unquestioned better future. As mentioned by Crush:

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<sup>3</sup> For a critique of the extended and routinely used LFA, see Gasper, 2000.

Most plans contain a formulaic blow to the previous plan period, a technocratic assessment of its failings designed as a prelude to the conclusion that this time “it’ll go much better.” Because development is prospective, forward-looking, gazing towards the achievement of as yet unrealized states, there seems little point in looking back. The technocratic language of contemporary plan writing – the models, the forecasts, the projections – all laud the idea of an unmade future which can be manipulated, with the right mix of inputs and indicators, into preordained ends’ (Crush 1995:9).

Proponents of the current mode of planning theory refute the idea that planning – and planned intervention – is an uncomplicated, straightforward and simplistic venture. To Mintzberg (1994: 18-19), for example, the notion of planning expresses rationality and is an effort to impose a structured rationality, which, however, is based on an illusion because:

[it] is not possible to plan for the future, to prepare for the inevitable, to pre-empt the undesirable nor to control the uncontrollable. Planning is not really defended for what it does but for what it symbolizes. Planning, identified with reason, is conceived to be the way in which intelligence is applied to social problems. The efforts of planners are presumably better than other people’s because they result in policy proposals that are systematic, efficient, coordinated, consistent, and rational. It is words like these that convey the superiority of planning.

Much in line with this reasoning, Porter includes planning and planned intervention in his listing of ‘master metaphors’ in development, meaning the way in which metaphors about development establish ‘authority and provide a device for making sense, creating order and certainty’ (Porter 1995: 65).

Among the reasons why planning and the logic behind ‘planned intervention’ do not entirely work as anticipated is that this kind of linear thinking, coupled with a harmonious view of the local context, is not at all reconcilable with a complex, fluid and ambiguous world (see, for example, Bierschenk and de Sardan 1998, de Sardan 1995). Most projects tend to neglect the complexity of the local context and disregard conflicts, power struggles and positioning in arenas intermediated by informal or formal institutions.

According to such a view, the 'field' of development is thus a space in which multiple realities are confronted and contested. And they are indeed a highly politicised 'battlefield' – as stressed by Long and Long (1992) – in which knowledge, meaning and power produce outcome far from the expected.

In contrast with these sociological insights, the aid-community relies on simplistic models of society as consisting of separate social spheres – state, market and civil society – which can be targeted by planned interventions. By stimulating these spheres, a better world - one increasingly understood in terms of democracy and human rights - can be produced. For many donors, the path to this better world is now thought to be through civil society - 'the power of the people'. Hence, the Danish governmental aid organisation Danida has in recent years given growing emphasis to establishing 'partnerships' with civil society. In this mythology, concepts refer tautologically to one another making the projects appear feasibly and plausibly to the public. The following will be a critical discussion of the aid-mythology.

## The rhetoric of partnerships in development

The idea of planned intervention is proposed and presented in many different forms of aid. In the case of Denmark, its development assistance programme is based on a 'partnership approach', as also indicated by the title of its main policy document, *Partnership 2001* (based on two sets of documentation: Danida 2000, 2001a).

The strategy approach is an ambitious one, laying the political foundation of Denmark's development policy, full of declamatory and well-meaning phrases and lofty ideals – and presented within a context of self-praise and self-assurance:

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Denmark will in the future continue to demonstrate its solidarity with the millions of people in the world whose daily lives are marked by poverty and living conditions that do not permit them to make use of their rights and their potential. We shall live up to our shared responsibility for creating a global development that makes it possible to improve the living conditions of the world's poor. Partnership 2000 lays a solid foundation for our work in the years to come (Danida 2000).

Thus, partnership is 'an indispensable basis for development co-operation'. This approach is summarised in the strategy document:

A realistic partnership must be based on a recognition of and respect for differences in the partners' points of departure with respect to values, resources and capacity. Trust, openness and the will gradually to expand the partnership are the key words. An ideal partnership cannot be created from one day to the next. Time, patience and a shared vision of strengthening the partner that is weak in resources are required.

Partnership involves obligation. All partners must live up to the commitments that they have agreed after thorough analysis and discussion. Denmark is interested in long-term co-operation. We will pursue an active and consistent policy and live up to our commitments. We expect the same of our partners. If the partnership lives up to expectations, the co-operation can be expanded. (Danida 2000).

The strategy recognises that establishing partnerships is not an easy task, and that previous efforts may have been disappointing. Establishing partnerships may have been difficult in the past, but with mutual trust, commitment, shared visions and honouring of obligations (and Danish funding), the Danida strategy may nevertheless thrive.

However, in November 2001, when a new centre-right government in Denmark replaced one led by the Social Democrats, 'partnership' suddenly took on a different, and less idealistic, meaning. Partnership was now shown to be a rather one-sided affair as Denmark, in one stroke, broke off relations with developing nations that did not live up to the ideals of the new government regarding democracy, human rights and civil liberties. Suddenly 'time and patience' was not needed. While the countries now excluded from

Denmark's priority list of programme countries may have performed below an acceptable level *vis-à-vis* requirements relating to human rights, freedom of expression and other civil liberties, the major problem was that similar criticism could also have been made in relation to several other countries still included in the priority list.

The strategy had emphasised the importance of Denmark conducting an active and sustained policy and living up to its obligations. It had also stated: 'We expect the same from our partners.' The new government's drastic change of policy showed up the hypocrisy involved in the earlier statement, and the dangers, from the Southern partners' point of view, of relying too much on fine words and promises. In one stroke, the 'language of development' was shown to be an instrument of power and control; a discourse intended more to sustain existing balances of inequality and power, rather than serving the stated lofty and unrealistic ideals of 'partnership.'

## The illusion of Civil Society

In the case of Denmark, 'partnership' is linked to 'sustainable development', both concepts supporting a strategy that emphasises the virtues of civil society. Danida's (2001b: 18) strategy document states that one priority goal is 'the development of an active civil society' through:

Support to and collaboration with local organisations in civil society, traditional structures of representation and local community groups, who work for the poor and serve their needs and rights. This will take place also enabling the Danish NGOs, who have the will and ability, to forge partnerships with organisations in civil society in the developing countries.

The concept of civil society developed is one that entails all the good things in life:

A development co-operation that is based on partnership and that seeks to promote democratisation requires the establishment of an active civil society. A strong civil society can be a proponent of reforms to benefit poor and vulnerable groups.



... Denmark's development assistance must help to strengthen the capacity of civil societies to engage in active and critical dialogue with central and local government in recipient countries with the object of promoting poverty reduction, democratisation and respect for human rights' (Danida 2000).

After lying dormant for decades, the concept of civil society has, with its rediscovery by the aid community, risen to the stars. The aid community has clearly seen its prospective value when coupled with other populist concepts (ownership, participation and empowerment) as well as related to an image of society in which the State has been forced to give way to market forces as well as to civil society. Civil society is a force that can both challenge the remains of the State politically as well as substitute for its shortcomings, even taking its place when acting as a basic service provider, a function formerly the exclusive responsibility the now-failed State.

According to the Danida's view, there is a direct causal chain between a strengthened civil society and poverty eradication, democratisation and respect for human rights ('By strengthening organisations and alliances in civil society Denmark has the opportunity to promote democratic development ...' – Danida 2001a). Not only is it assumed that civil society and its institutions, contrary to the State, are obvious and suitable partners for development aid collaboration in general, and less bureaucratic and less at risk of falling into the mismanagement traps of the State, its clientilism, nepotism and patrimonialism. It is also assumed that the institutions of civil society are particularly able to address the tasks of poverty alleviation, democratisation and securing human rights. In other words, civil society represents everything good, the State and its administration the opposite.

Actually, apart from promoting democratic development, reducing poverty and ensuring popular participation, support for civil society institutions is seen as one of the best means of establishing a 'check and balance' factor viz. the role of the State:

Strengthening of civil society organisations in the developing countries is regarded as an important step in the development of democratic societies. This serves to create the support for, and opposition to, governments that will ensure the active participation of civil society in both the formulation and implementation of reforms.' (Danida 2001b).

The identification of the institutions of civil society, including NGOs, as prospective, efficient and non-bureaucratic partners of great purity, harmony and idealism is, of course, more an image of the local community projected by an external aid donor that sees things in an ethnocentric light. For obvious opportunistic reasons it is an image, which cannot be substantiated by, for example, empirical studies that have shown local institutional structures to be subjected to exactly the same processes and pitfalls as the State (Chabal and Daloz 1999; Nugent 1993, Uphoff 1993).

In the Western conceptualisation of civil society – as also illustrated by the Danida case – the image, or the illusion, of civil society is carried by an image of society that is modelled on the background of an idyllic representation of the West's own historical modernisation project. But it is essentially a misinterpretation and misunderstanding of how, historically, the institutions of civil society grew organically out of processes of industrialisation and the development of capitalism. In this process, the institutions of civil society were fighting the State. But they were also in close alliance with the State, and it was never the intention, or the goal of the struggle, to substitute for the State. Rather, the intention was to carve out some space within the State where the State and civil society, together, could respond to the needs of society, including the formation of trade unions.

To Hegel, civil society was a constellation of individuals who had left the rather secure, reproductive space of the family and had now whirled into economic activities and transactions characterised by competition and intensive trade and exchange. In this process, individual needs and requirements were situated outside political society, that of the State. The State was the only mechanism that could ensure common interests, the universal needs of society; and the existence of civil society was an

articulation of a specific stage in bourgeois society where the State was seen as the overall, superior and regulatory mechanism that could ensure that universal rights prevailed over particular interests.

For Marx, civil society was an indication of the shift from feudal to bourgeois society. An epoch had arrived in which individualism in its extreme form was expressed as a fight – one against all – for material gains. Selfish and atomised individuals were separated from their former entities – guilds, community structures, professional organisations – and were now fighting out conflicts over territory (land), influence, material wealth and power. The modern bourgeois State was here seen as the necessary instrument that could regulate and settle such conflicts, and out of the form and activities of the State grew a new political identity: the Bürger, or citizen, within society.

With Marx, a double understanding of civil society developed. On the one hand, it was the place where individual conflicts were fought and which by necessity had to be resolved within the domain of the State. In consequence of this, on the other hand, it established a *de facto* separation of State and society.

But crucial in this was the fact that civil society was not formed in contrast to, or in opposition to, the State, and did not find its legitimacy and justification in contrast to State power. Instead, civil society institutions and organisations sought to confront the State with the aim of being part of the State.

For Gramsci, who is probably the most influential contemporary source of inspiration, civil society was the organisational constellation, or association, of like-minded individuals who had a common political goal, which transcended individually-based ambitions. From Gramsci's perspective, it was the working class that possessed this historically progressive role. At the same time the goal was revolutionary, as it was the aim to conquer and subsequently dismantle the bourgeois State, replacing it with a form of political regime based on a communistic ideology.

Gramsci made a separation between State and civil society, but saw this mainly as a conceptual and methodological distinction, rather than one prevailing in praxis. In this view it was important to stress that the concept of State contained elements from civil society, and that borders between the two were therefore unclear and often fluid.

Neither the one or the other historically grounded concept of civil society has much to do with current (mis)use of the concept. The way in which the aid community has twisted the meaning has resulted in a concept that is unproblematic and consensual, where the strengthening of civil society is, in itself, by its own logic, positive.

In its current usage, civil society has nothing to do with seeking, for instance, revolutionary changes in the developing world, as Gramsci would like to see it. Rather, it is the epitome of everything good. It is non-conflictual and harmonious, and with it comes a wide range of other 'goodies': empowerment, ownership, participation, democratisation, human rights, etc. It is a conceptualisation that sees civil society and the State as dichotomous – separated in time and space – and which has decided that as a kind of *deus ex machina* civil society will somehow help in regaining the paradise that was lost.

Thus, the concept of civil society is typical of the way in which the aid community is hijacking concepts, which they empty of their original meaning and separate from the historical context in which they were formed. Instead, they transform them to suit the purpose and the implicit or explicit intentions of the external intervention. Simultaneously, through this metamorphosis the concept is served up and 'sold' along with the other purported virtues of democratisation, local empowerment and participation, which no one can object to, and which hold all the promises for a bright future.

## The ideal model of society: State, market and civil society

In the view of Western aid donors, the ideal societal model to export has three components: the State, the market and civil society. Simultaneously with the cutting back of the State, the growth of civil society has taken place, primarily through support to NGOs, while the private sector and market forces are expected to fill part of the void left, allocating resources in society in the best possible way. Characteristic of this perspective on society is not only that it is modelled on, or mirrors, the Western ideal-type, but that policies affecting the respective roles of the three components are all instigated by external forces, not least Western donor conditionality, rather than growing organically in the peripheral societies themselves. The aid donors are together in this but possibly do not realise that they are part of an experiment on a grand scale, in which the Western ideal-type is expected to slide smoothly into a societal context that is actually characterised by much more fluidity, ambiguity and diversity than anticipated. The outcome of this grandiose experiment can only be termed uncertain.

While the first decades of the 'development era' following the Second World War had a State-centrist approach and foundation, the pendulum of development aid and policy has shifted to the civil society camp. Increasingly, aid is channelled through NGOs and into 'civil society', bypassing the State and markets, with democratisation as the main target, while offering a counter-force to the State.

Democracy has become both the means and the end in the new era of aid. It has become the solution to poverty, political suppression, marginalisation, ethnic conflicts, etc. Accordingly, all that is needed is for 'the people' to take their destiny into own hands. This is imagined to be linked with participation, empowerment, ownership of projects, in short, the liberating power of the people. Escobar (1995a: 226) calls this situation 'the democratic imaginary' that includes the fulfilment of 'needs', justice, human rights, class, gender and ethnic equality. While being a liberating credo in this version, it is also a

curse, as aid donors will fall down hard on countries not living up to expectations (how variable these may be), sanctioning through aid cuts any wrongdoers.

The democratic imaginary is thus part of international aid institutions and their conceptions of planning and development, where the first is expected more or less automatically to lead to the second. In the World Bank's 1997 World Development Report, the power of the people is termed *social capital*, which is defined as 'the informal rules, norms, and long-term relationships that facilitate co-ordinated ventures for mutual advantage' (World Bank 1997: 114). This definition rests entirely on a notion of the social field as constituted by State (hierarchy and control), private sector (profit and competition) and civil society (voice and collective action) (*ibid*: 116). Moreover, since these spheres are conceptualised as separate it becomes necessary to *empower* the people to release their potential *social capital*. To the World Bank, empowerment means 'enhancing the capacity of poor people to influence the State institutions that affect their lives, by strengthening their participation in political processes' (World Bank 2000/2001: 39).

In this version, political and State processes obviously run on a separate track from civil society, unless the latter is grasping its own destiny, deciding for itself or called upon to participate – a vocabulary that does not indicate the overturning of political regimes. The situation is pre-given. There is a firm belief within the aid community that democracy is what the people want if only they get the chance to employ their *social capital*. According to this view, democracy is the end product of liberation, but it is also a view separated from any real insight into the workings of the relationship between the institutional order and the social order in any given place.

Parallel to this focus on the liberating democratic imaginary of social capital and empowerment, *democratisation* has also become a curse in aid policy in many Western countries. In the case of Denmark the government has made democratisation the defining issue in its partnership approach, and a yardstick for its economic involvement in Third World countries. In line with this new

aid policy, it is stated, for example, that Bangladesh needs to take greater responsibility for its own development. Nepal has a disturbing political orientation. Vietnam has done little to further the process of democratisation. In addition, the Danish government will no longer tolerate limits and obstructions to democratic rules, processes and goals. Obviously, socialism is no longer an issue. And accordingly, the government has completely cut off aid to Zimbabwe, Malawi and Eritrea, which have not lived up to expectations, or directly violated norms and rules governing 'good behaviour'. Moreover, a good number of other countries have been placed on the observation list – ready to be sanctioned.

Democratisation has thus become a key issue in the aid community. As an example of this and in line with the policy of the new Danish government, Mellempfolkelig Samvirke (MS), one of the major Danish NGOs, is now totally committed to democratisation and human rights in the Third World. This is seen as one of the key ways of combating poverty; for example, MS Kenya recommends that 'poverty reduction be linked much more to human rights and democratisation when determining relevant approaches' (MS 2000a: 17). To MS Kenya the major task 'will therefore be to devise strategies, which aim to reduce poverty' and this is to be done 'in a way that is empowering' (*ibid*). In one sweeping statement MS Kenya establishes a causal link between poverty reduction, democratisation and empowerment, any one of these leading naturally to the others.

In this aid strategy, 'policy advocacy' plays an essential role. This is seen as informing the key approach to social change. 'It is about engaging in political action for change' (MS 2001: 1). The implementation of this capacity is to take place at the community level, through 'working directly with the grassroots' (MS 2000a: 15). When compared to the report of MS Central America it becomes clear that MS finds democratisation intimately linked to 'the quality of citizen participation' (MS 2000b: 2).

It is the people – in the form of civil society or grassroots organisations – who are seen as the only viable motor of development. Thus MS Central America

has designed different kinds of locally situated programmes with the aim of 'furthering the space of debate' (*ibid*: 6) and is concerned with the 'promotion of citizen participation to achieve local development by means of a strategy intended to strengthen local participation and consensus-seeking processes' (*ibid*). With NGOs such as MS, it is then the goal to help strengthen social actors 'to increase [their] influence on the State' (*ibid*: 7). But alas, this is a difficult task, because as long 'as civil society is incapable of exerting pressure and negotiating with the State, (...), development in Central America will once again be postponed' (*ibid*: 8).

So in the opinion of MS the 'evolution of civil society is a central theme in the region [of Central America]' (*ibid*: 7). Luckily, there is still a lot for institutions such as MS to do, as 'Central American civil society still lacks a clear vision of its identity and interests' (*ibid*). With a little help from its MS friends, civil society can and will be strengthened, so that it can 'develop new leadership which is capable of true representation of the poor majority' (*ibid*: 10).

Hereby, development is reduced to a question of the attitude, willpower and/or mentality of the populations involved – and awareness-raising is the solution to any deficit in this area. When the task is accomplished, everyone can develop its own society, generate growth and achieve equality. These are obviously thought to be qualities residing in every population that, given the right circumstances and maybe a little help, can realise its own potential – and become affluent.

While the focus on the ability of civil society may seem like progress, both in theoretical and practical terms, this change is still framed within the same model of society, as constituted by State, market and civil society. For MS, the focus has now shifted to what it believes to be an inherent dynamism in civil society. Accordingly, in the overall MS polity, 'human resource development is a key component of the aim to alleviate poverty and overcome inequality. Therefore, the policy principally aims to reinforce the empowerment of target groups' (MS 2000b: 13).



Originally, modernisation apparently worked within the first two elements of the trinity of State, market and civil society, injecting modern traits into 'traditional' societies, while new Western aid organisations such as MS will work with and through the third element, spurring the people to 'participate' in their own lives. Surely, this is a contradiction in terms.

Therefore, what looks like a radical break with former aid mistakes, and former paradigms, is in reality a continuation of the very same theoretical notions. The same basic assumptions about the constitution of society still form the basis of 'interventions', and presumably, the 'new' strategies will eventually run up against the same obstacles that marred development planning in former decades. Moulding aid strategies within this theoretical paradigm of society represents a case in which analytical sub-divisions of the social order are taken as empirical reality, where social spheres can be managed, planned for and controlled as if the categories of theory were perceptible to intervention in real-life situations.

## Truth and discipline: The case of CARE Denmark

Nevertheless, hijacked by the aid community, the concept of civil society has taken on a life of its own. From being an analytical description of the social order, the concept has become an empirical reality that Denmark wants to target by planned intervention. According to Denmark's ideology, civil society has the potential to bring about positive change. It is like virgin land that has to be – indeed needs to be – cultivated. This reality is subsequently used by the Danish State to discipline its client NGOs, where political ideology is turned into instruments of power, defining the reality of aid intervention. In the case of a major Danish NGO, CARE Denmark, we can perceive an aid administration's view of the concept of civil society, and how this is deciding whether or not the NGO is fulfilling basic criteria in Denmark's civil society strategy and subsequently how much funding it will get.

Under the new Danish government that came into power in 2001, drastic cuts in Danish aid contributions have been experienced. In 2001, the NGOs survived quite well the new government's efforts to reduce Denmark's aid contribution, even experiencing limited growth, slightly less than the inflation rate. However, one Danish NGO in particular, CARE Denmark,<sup>4</sup> has suffered heavy cuts (around 20 per cent since 2001) in Danida contributions, as they have had difficulties in meeting the requirements under the Danish civil society strategy.

According to the minutes (drafted by Danida) of the 'annual consultations' between Danida and CARE Denmark in late 2001, 'the application [from CARE] does not fully meet with the requirements in the Civil Society Strategy'. According to Danida, this is particularly the case when CARE is selecting its partnership organisations, which seem to be both civil society organisations and decentralised public institutions such as municipalities and districts.

On the one hand, CARE is advised by Danida to increase project implementation through civil society organisations. On the other hand, it is asked to justify itself, explicitly and convincingly, when implementation takes place through public institutions (even if this is in close collaboration with civil society organisations). CARE was also advised that if a satisfactory strategy for this had not been developed by the time the 'dialogue' with Danida took place in 2002, it would suffer an even greater cut than the one decided on in the consultation of 2001, when the organisation's budget for the coming year was reduced by DKK 4 million (or around 10 per cent).

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<sup>4</sup> CARE Denmark was established in Denmark around 1989 as a national arm of CARE International. Since then, CARE Denmark has developed as a Danish NGO, more than an affiliated arm of the international CARE system, and has focused activities on natural resource management projects. In general, CARE Denmark is regarded, as also indicated in Danida-funded reviews and evaluations of the organisation, as a thoroughly professional development institution, in line with the other four main Danish NGOs included in the overall Danida framework.

From these minutes it is obvious that Danida's Civil Society Strategy has been turned into civil society orthodoxy. Regardless of the quality and impact of CARE Denmark's project and programme interventions, in which they seek to address poverty and environmental degradation through improved, balanced and participatory measures, the organisation is punished for not having followed to the letter the requirements of the Civil Society Strategy. This seems all the more paradoxical as Danida, at least in the minutes, does not seem to care too much about whether CARE Denmark is acting as a trustworthy, professional development institution, impacting on poverty and improved natural resource management. Instead, the Civil Society Strategy and its requirements have become the end goal – irrespective of whether the explicit developmental goals are reached or not.

The orthodoxy of the Civil Society Strategy adopted by Danida is also expressed in the minutes, where 'State' and 'civil society' are referred to as two separate and distinct phenomena. Not only is 'civil society' seen as being in opposition to the State (CARE Denmark is not allowed to work through decentralised or central State institutions) but the reality of what happens in much of the developing world, at least in Africa (see, for example, Chabal and Daloz 1999), is simply not recognised. This reality is that straddling and overlap between the two takes place more often than not, as, for instance, Chazan (in Hyden and Bratton 1992) makes clear when she states that '[the] state and civil society stand and fall together', or when Fatton says that '...in Africa, state and civil society depend on each other for their very existence and cannot stand alone' (Fatton 1992:1).

That State and civil society are interrelated is thus totally ignored by Danida. Chazan (1994) again, emphasises that such separate notions of State and civil society are 'mechanistic', and that perspectives that only recognise organisations that contribute to the growth of civil society as being part of civil society constitute a rather tautological notion. In this context, Chazan (1994: 256) emphasises:

State organs and social groups continually engage each other in multiple settings that are arenas of struggles for domination and accommodation. The constantly changing interactions that occur in these spaces mould and redefine the nature of state structures and social forces, generating an ongoing, mutually transforming, dynamic.

The minutes drafted by Danida, following discussions with CARE Denmark, become rather ironic and devoid of contextual meaning towards the end. Here it is stated – as ‘good advice’ – that CARE Denmark ought to reconsider its activities in western Nepal in areas controlled by ‘Maoist rebel groups’. This is in fact what Danida itself has already done, ending its bilateral project activities in such regions. Here the concept of civil society finally loses all meaning, the naked truth being that only those organisations that Danida likes are worthy of inclusion in the concept.

### Individualism, need and greed

In these strategies of planned intervention and disciplining the aid community, societies are seen as closed units with inherent qualities. Civil society is seen as a complete and independent social sphere distinct from the market and the State. In addition, a *basic needs* model is suggested to explain the constituent parts and to furnish the dynamics of society which have long historical roots (see, for example, Smith [1776] 1961).

This is the legacy of Hobbes, who assumed that individuals had innate needs, desires and wants and that the fulfilment of these resulted in social contracts. Man, he saw, not as driven by spiritual forces but by internal ones particular to each and everyone, as voluntary motions, ‘commonly called the PASSION’ (Hobbes [1651] 1968:118). Hobbes invoked an original state of being that consisted of constant war, in which ‘the life of man [is], solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short’ (Hobbes 1968:186), only capable of being remedied through a social contract among this multitude of men. ‘For it is the Unity of the Representer, not the *Unity* of the Represented, that maketh the Person One’

(Hobbes, 1968:220). This 'mutuall transferring of Right, is that which men call Contract' (Hobbes, 1968:192). That is, needs and State theory in one.

Galbraith (1992) has elaborated on such assumptions about the constitution of society. Inherent in his view is the idea that without the help of industrial production humans are condemned to live a simple and brutish life. He operates with a hierarchy of needs in which the physical are lower-order and animalistic, and the psychological are higher-order and humanistic. When the physical needs have been satisfied, the higher order needs take over. These consist first of self-respect and prestige, and further up the ladder we find self-realisation and comfort. Needless to say, people without the capabilities, or lust for, industrial production lack all the essential human qualities.

One of the major problems with the way the aid community defines society as consisting of State, market and civil society is that these spheres are only separate entities in theory. In reality, they have no life of their own and aid interventions according to one or more of these subdivisions will falter, simply because these concepts misrepresent social reality. There are no reasons to enhance production, if the new products are not needed for social reasons – for example to mark social distinctions – as they are not in very egalitarian societies. There are no reasons to enhance governmental capabilities, if social life is governed by other kinds of institutions of authority. Moreover, civil society cannot be stimulated into a life of its own. In the latter case, that of civil society, we encounter another 'founding' myth of Western society: the myth of the liberating power of the people. According to this myth, Western democracy is the end-result of a long struggle against oppression, from nature, religion and despotism.

Historically, these social spheres were linked to the situation in Europe where industrial production superseded the peasant economy based on 'gifts', which in the new social milieu became 'commodities', produced in a separate social sphere and meant for consumption. With the separation of production and consumption, society appeared as 'a marketplace' (Smith [1776] 1961), divided into producers and consumers. Thus, objects appeared as detached

from subjects: it was a world of humans on the one hand and of objects on the other, a world divided into subjective and objective.

The aggregated form of this subject-object model – civil society-market - contains the same problem. Here the analytical separation of market and civil society is just as arbitrary as the one between subject and object, and just as tautological since these social spheres are also defined in relation to each other. In this case, the analytical manoeuvre consists in separating the people from the objects that define them socially, according to class, gender and other forms of social distinction, and then theorising about the relationship introduced into this otherwise coherent social reality. To make these two ends meet, something has to mediate the two social spheres – or societies fall apart – and this, of course, is the concept of the State, which has ‘a foot in each camp’.

Paradoxically, the Danish government – and many more with it - thus tries to take the outcome of a long historical process and employ it as a tool in aid interventions, with the aim of solving social problems by making history ‘stand on its head’. It seems to wish to transport an institutional order from a historical past so as to liberate the subjected people of the developing world, to give them the ‘freedom’ they are supposed to fight for – as if democracy were a separate social sphere.

We also find the myths of linear development opposed by Escobar (1995a, 1995b), Long (1992) and Melucci (2000). Long claims that paradigms have been lost; Escobar finds that there is an urgent need for alternatives to be developed; while Melucci argues that we can no longer rely the teleology fostered by the paradigm of modernity and development, with their ‘myths of progress and revolution’ (Melucci 2000: 62). According to Long (1992: 18-19):

Modernisation theory visualises development as a movement towards technological and institutionally complex societies, where development is set in motion by external interventions such as aid.

Instead of a Western-founded myth of progress and revolution, Melucci argues that present societies are organised around the processing of meaning - it is a world of possibilities and choices (Melucci 2000: 66) – and thus he sees social movements as the new organising force in social life. Instead of progress, he sees complexities, which he finds contemporary social movements are well suited to handle, since they ‘work more on process than on contents to face the challenges and dilemmas of a complex world’ (*ibid*: 68). In this, he finds ‘people...are more willing to contribute to democratic society, more just and compassionate’ (*ibid*).

Long also advocates that aid and planned intervention should be deconstructed and seen as entering life-worlds in which any plan or strategy is part of an ongoing socially constructed and negotiated process. From this perspective, interventions can never be the ‘execution of an already-specified plan of action with an expected outcome’ (Long 1992: 35). Rather, Long argues, development should unfold from below, by locating individuals in their specific life-worlds in which they manage their everyday affairs.

Instead, we find an overlap between governmental policy and aid implementation. Both rely on the same basic assumptions about ‘development’, as being the result of free human subjects pursuing their freedom in an otherwise cruel world, replete with market forces and despotism. This view can only be sustained if development is reduced to a question of mentality, the will to be free.

It is a view that is deeply embedded in European thought-systems. According to Blaut (1993: 7), this model of the world maintains that:

[all] the really crucial historical events, those that ‘changed history’, happened in Europe, or happened because of some causal impetus from Europe... All of them accepted as true by the majority...of European historical scholars.

Accordingly, Europeans ‘invented’ democracy, science, feudalism, capitalism and the modern nation-state, all considered historical facts. In this conception of history, societies carry with them the potential to develop or to stagnate. In

Europe, freedom-loving people have propelled European societies forward towards the pinnacle of progress. The end-products of this struggle are democracy and human rights. These institutions are the result of the European Volksgeist. This is what the rest of the world lacks. Development and planned intervention through partnership can, according to the aid community, change this situation.

## Concluding remarks

The main concepts used in the aid community, and its notions of the constitution of society, are seen by some as Eurocentric constructions. As Tilly argues, they are the result of a 19th-century model in social science via which social scientists strove to make sense of their contemporary social surroundings. Since production had replaced exchange they saw society as 'coherent but delicate structures' (Tilly 1984: 2). Evolution and change happened in society, which was seen as a 'thing apart ... each having its more or less autonomous culture, government, economy, and solidarity' (*ibid*: 11).

The Danish governmental aid organisation Danida is, together with a plethora of sister organisations all over the world, caught up in this model, still rehearsing 19th-century 'truths' about the constitution of society, making such view the foundation stone of their Partnership 2000 programme for aid. For example, according to this programme '[c]ulture can be defined as the complex of spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features which characterises a society or a social group' (Danida 2000).

Societies and social groups are thus identified according to some pre-defined criteria as though they were self-contained social organisms. Then these cultural units, considered as 'mental structures and common practice' (Danida 2000), are ranked according to the intervention they require, an intervention made in the name of development in which the previously defined aspects of culture serve as 'pre-condition and context to the work of development' (Danida 2000).



In this way non-progress is a result of barriers within societies that have to be targeted by intervention: 'Also important is removing the social and institutional barriers that result from distinction of gender, ethnicity, and social status. Sound and responsive institutions are not only important to benefit the poor but are also fundamental to the overall growth process' (World Bank 2000/2001: 7).

Following these observations this essay argues, on the basis of a close reading of Danida and MS documents, that current Danish aid practices are guided by 'mythological' notions of history, grounded in an idealised conception of 'Western'/Danish society. As a consequence 'civil society' assumes a privileged status in the development model subscribed to by the Danish aid industry. This results in the belittling of the central importance of the State in economic management and the inflation of the role of non-State actors. Furthermore, the aid industry's democracy fetish is highly conducive to perversion as an instrument, not of 'partnership', but of arbitrary control and subordination. Thus, we argue that democracy requires not only active citizens but also a functional State, and that this is contingent on even exchange between the First and Third World.

Otherwise, the mythology of aid will keep on conveniently explaining away Western affluence and Third World poverty as self-made qualities and as independent occurrences. And since the West has monopolised most of the earth's resources, this mythology of self-contained societies gives the West a moral right to enjoy the fruit of its supposed inventiveness, and at the same time, an imagined moral duty to devise schemes of intervention for the Rest.

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