

The neglected face of aid

By Theo Ruyter

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In this seminar I would like to invite you on a journey into terra incognita, which is – in short – the psychological impact of what's commonly known as 'development assistance' on the people at the receiving end. My motive for this adventure is twofold:

- 1) the impression if not the discovery that this particular kind of impact has been neglected, ignored and obscured over the years and
- 2) the supposition that awareness of the impact might contribute to a better understanding of current development processes in so called developing countries and, eventually, show the way to an appropriate change of policy.

But before in fact taking off on this journey, I might tell you something on my own background and describe to you, in particular, the context in which I took an interest in what I might call the neglected face of aid.

After finishing my studies in university – specializing in international relations – I worked in Africa south of the Sahara as a foreign correspondent for several years. The Tanzania of the seventies being my base, I was re-educated as a result by people like Fanon, Shivji, Rodney, Machel, Chissano and certainly Nyerere. They taught me how to look at things with different eyes, not only in Africa but also here in Europe.

Since those first years in Africa I have been travelling most of the time back and forth, in my mind as well as physically, between the haves and the have-nots in the world, deepening my understanding of 'development' in many different ways and in many different situations.

Apart from numerous visits to individual countries, organisations and projects all-over the South, I lived twice in Africa again: in the second half of the eighties of the past century I took on assignments for the Dutch quango SNV in Tanzania and Ethiopia and in the first years of the new millennium I have been directing the field office of Eirene in Chad. The latter experience, which ended in December 2003, together with the confrontation with realities in this country again, made me decide to make up my mind regarding the development assistance I had come to know in my life so far.

The result is this booklet, under the title of 'Requiem voor de Hulp' and subtitle of 'De ondergang van een bedrijfstack', which was published last fall. At the heart of it is a judgment of the present, let's say traditional, development assistance as ineffective and ready for a radical review if not straight dismissal. My argumentation is mostly social and political. Take e.g. the mounting evidence supporting the idea that countries having undergone or undergoing massive and lasting development assistance are performing worse economically in comparison with others doing without.

One of the arguments I produce, however, is psychological by nature, as it is based on the presumption of a negative effect on the self-respect or self-esteem among the receivers of aid. The first researcher and author who managed to capture the public at large with this particular

argument was Graham Hancock in his book “Lords of poverty” published in 1989. He suggested and I quote: ”The only measurable impact of all these decades of development has been to turn tenacious survivors into helpless dependants.”

This image has stayed with me ever since and the more I thought about it, the more it dawned on me that Hancock had a point. At the same time I became aware of his position as the proverbial prophet in the desert. Nobody seemed to share his idea, the big shots in the development industry couldn't care less. Business as usual was the device, at least in the Dutch polder, but not only here I think.

So I started checking the idea, whenever I came across people whose judgment I could trust. Like e.g. Wangari Maathai, whom I met during the Social Summit of the United Nations some ten years ago in Copenhagen. She immediately recognized it and named it herself the beggar bowl syndrome.

A few years later the Tanzanian researcher Rugumamu writing about the consequences of a state of dependency on foreign assistance, drew a parallel with drug addiction. He pointed to waning self-confidence and growing indolence among the people, up till the level of the national leadership. No wonder he even asserted national sovereignty was at stake. During my stay in Chad, just a few years ago, the evidence supporting Hancock's observations was overwhelming. You might argue Chad is not representative of Africa or it's not an average aid receiving country. Still I think the symptoms I noticed were far from exceptional in kind.

From the very beginning the general feeling I had was approximate of being a fruit machine. Shake it and it will release at least some coins, at last. Let me give you some examples. One evening, shortly after I had settled in the capital of N'Djaména, I was sitting in a garden-like restaurant, with another 'blanc', at a table rather close to the entry. We had not received any food yet, not even ordered I think. A young man came in, drew near our table and - for some reason - stopped in front of me. He was well-dressed, wore glasses, things like that. In his first phrase already he asked for money, because he wanted to have dinner somewhere himself. The moment I showed and expressed my reluctance, he said things like it was my duty and he was entitled to some money of mine. I nearly prepared to throw him out, because there was nobody else preparing to do so. I forget about the cases of cheat disguised as ridiculously high prices or poor services. That's the kind of thing a foreigner can expect anywhere in the world. Even a physical assault in a major shopping area, in-between two shops. Though in that particular case it struck me the other people on the scene just seemed to turn around and look the other way. No, I especially think of other situations, of people e.g. who - even though they were complete strangers to me - came to my house or my office claiming I should hire them or do them a favour. Or the armed people in uniform, who intimidated my wife in her car just to earn some banknotes on a Sunday afternoon. Or the son of a village chief, whom I had met a number of times and had come to see as a friend, until the day he handed me a project proposal concerning a private piece of land, which I was supposed to finance. He did not suggest a minor contribution, complementing his own efforts. No, thousands of euros, to finish it all. Or take the dispute I had on the budget of a summer university on globalization, which I tried to organise with some local NGOs. I had suggested a low-budget thing we could get together ourselves in a short time, without resorting to some far-away donor. Sneakily I was confronted, however, with a budget line, inserting a per diem for all participants. Though their transport and daily meals had already been provided for...

One situation I remember as extremely embarrassing. A young man in my office, whom I really liked, was going to get married and he invited me for a ceremony, where his people would hand over the required dowry to delegates of the other family. There were hundreds of people and I was the only blanc, surrounded by members of the man's family. After some enveloping movements – you can imagine that kind of gatherings - , it became clear the actually prepared dowry did not quite meet the expectations of the other party. At that point an elder man in the crowd facing me – let's say the bride's family side – stood up. Apparently used to speak up in public he commented on the situation, while using the language of a major ethnic group in the South. Suddenly – for me at least, because I had not been able to follow him – he drew the people's attention to me and made them laugh or chuckle approval. You know why? He had suggested that I – the single white person over there – would have no problem in filling the gap.

Can you understand that, at the end of my stay in Chad, I was tempted to write and actually published a farewell article in a local weekly under the title “La vache ne rit plus”? Maybe you imagine I had felt miserable personally, offended, maltreated, degraded as a human being. Though I had resorted to lessons learned before, like the discovery of an Italian missionary working many years ago among cattle-breeding nomads in Eastern Uganda that he was not considered a real man, as long as he continued to meet the endless demand for favours and assistance. He earned respect by setting a limit and saying no for a change. But I was not a personal hurt that bothered me only. I also had to work off the feeling of being ‘actively ashamed’. If that is the proper translation of ‘plaatsvervangende schaamte’ in Dutch. I could not accept that people were lowering themselves in begging for help and support from outsiders like me. That was something I just could not reconcile with my ideas on development and the basic right of people anywhere in the world, to figure and shape their lives with their own means and according to their own needs and ideas.

Let me return to this booklet of mine, where I advance a number of reasons to put an end to the professionalized and institutionalized system of interference and paternalism called development assistance or, if you insist, development cooperation. In preparing this publication I have been looking for answers to questions forcing themselves on me like – in the context of this seminar – ‘How has this system of aid affected the minds of people on the receiving end and their capacity to solve their own problems and control their own situation and destiny?’ (As far as people in general are capable of doing so, of course.)

It appeared rather difficult, however, to find reports of research or other literature paying attention to this particular subject. I don't know what development studies stand for these days, but I cannot help being under the impression that certain aspects of development are systematically ignored and underestimated. In fact I came across only one relatively recent science-based book, that seemed sufficiently focused to answer my question. It's called *Psychology of Aid*, published in 1998 and written by the Anglo-Saxons Stuart Carr, Eilish McAuliffe and Mac MacLachlan.

And indeed in this particular book, on page 189, the question is raised: “How does it feel to be an aid ‘recipient’?” Moreover the authors explicitly called it a ‘basic’ question and they had added that it was ‘actually rarely considered’. So I thought bingo, that's it. But, when I had a closer look, I discovered the question was raised in the context of an analysis of the so called ‘Pay Me!’ phenomenon. In other words the impact of aid on the receiving end was not treated, problematized if you like, for its own sake, but in the interest of another question, which is (in my words): How can we, at the donor's end, explain why our aid is met with resistance, how can we make it more successful?

The same thing happened, when I got hold of another book called Psychology and the developing world, which was published a few years before Psychology of Aid. The main question here was how psychology as a relatively new Occident-based social science had found its way in other parts of the world. As far as this book is touching on foreign aid, psychology tends to be dealt with primarily from a donor perspective. Stuart Carr e.g., one of the authors of Psychology of Aid, has contributed to this volume a chapter on different ways in which social psychology could be relevant to the management of international aid. The kind of issues he raises here is related e.g. to variables in the relationship between expatriates and their local colleagues or recipients of aid such as the well-known unequal salary level.

I have far from finished my search for relevant literature, but what I have come across so far does not make me feel I can expect a lot more and I certainly do not expect much that runs counter to my idea about the neglected face of aid. To put it bluntly, as I checked the other day with a Nigerian friend of mine living in Ghana: people on this, the rich country's, end don't give a damn about the question raised but not really dealt with by the authors of Psychology of Aid.

Maybe that's only logical: development assistance has turned into an industry in itself and a big one for that matter involving all kinds of vested interests, in the academic world as well, and the general drive of all major actors in this industry is actually to stay in business. In this industry the question of why people give or in which way people can be seduced to give, is much more interesting than questions on the feelings of recipients. If I am not mistaken, philanthropy has turned into science in itself, also here in the Netherlands.

You remember the days donors talked about making themselves superfluous and withdrawing for ever? Anyway, nowadays they tell you, in one way or another, they'll stay with you for ever, till the indefinite day they themselves - not you! - decide it's time to go. Even the president of a (formally) sovereign country is not taken seriously, when he dares hinting at the end of development assistance.

Last September, you may know, president Ben Mkapa visited the Netherlands and he was interviewed by a prominent daily called NRC Handelsblad. This interview was published under the headline - in Dutch - "Development assistance interferes with independence". In view of the prolonged relationship between the two countries it was no surprise a major faction in the Dutch parliament - a member moreover of the current coalition in power - submitted written questions about the interview to the Dutch minister of development cooperation Van Ardenne.

One of the parliamentary questions went as follows: "Have talks been started already with the Tanzanian government about the date of finishing the present development relation (...)? If not, are you willing to initiate such talks, thereby enabling this country to - in president Mkapa's own words - regain its dignity and independence?" The answer of the minister, three weeks later, was: "It is the wish of president Mkapa to stand on his own feet. He is quite aware, however, of the fact that support remains indispensable, until Tanzania has gained sufficient capacity to provide its own people with a fair level of prosperity."

In the present political climate I have no illusions about the aid establishment suddenly becoming aware it has ignored or neglected particular aspects of its benevolent endeavours. I count, however, on another coalition of the willing, that might take on the job and open windows that have been hidden or just closed for a long time. You may be part of that coalition. Didn't I invite you for a trip into unknown land? Let me therefore finish this talk with an agenda for the years to come.

First of all we should have a closer look at the psychological impact of aid and define more precisely what we mean by it. One might make a distinction e.g. between intentional and unintentional effects of the donor, the latter being considered as bad luck or collateral damage. Another distinction to be made is the one between the individual and collective entities such as the society, ethnic groups, inhabitants or citizens and the state. Maybe it's useful as well to distinguish the effects by sector.

Secondly we could list elements, symptoms or aspects of the psychological impact. For the time being I think of two broad categories in this respect, the first one comprising the direct effects on the self-esteem of the recipients and the second one including the effects on the way recipients perceive the donors at home and abroad.

In the first category may be classed in particular the decline of self-confidence, aid addiction, contempt of traditional knowledge and other elements of the inherited culture, the internalization of foreign ideas, habits and ways of working, lack of respect for indigenous leaders depending on foreign aid and the inability or reluctance to identify with national interests.

In the second category I would place e.g. the awe of the Caucasian/white man and all he stands for, identification with the donor abroad or aid worker on the spot, inability to analyse the donor's explicit objectives and hidden agenda and disrespect of the helping and spending drive of particular donors.

After having refined and defined more exactly what questions we have and what answers we are looking for, it's time to dig a bit deeper into the scientific base we may rely upon. As far as I know now, social psychology is the most appropriate source of knowledge and scientific methodology to go to. We shouldn't expect, however, to find ready-made concepts and methods of research to be applied as they are. What probably matters most is the identification of appropriate key-words and start from there. Words or concepts like master-servant or patronage relations, racism and racial discrimination, blackmail and prostitutional behaviour, addiction, interdependence of junkies and dealers as well as between experts in social services and their clients, charity, welfare, social work etc.

The psychology of aid not having taken off (yet) as a full-fledged branche of science, it may be useful as well to look for similarities in other fields and case studies the outcome of which might shed some light on the preoccupation I'm talking about today. Last year, for instance, I was struck by a number of articles in several Dutch quality papers about the work of the British psychiatrist Theodore Dalrymple. As a medical doctor he worked for many years among criminals, junkies and people dependent on welfare.

Dalrymple's experience with the fringe of society made him conclude, among other things, that a major cause of criminal behaviour is the refusal to take on the responsibility of one's own life. And this refusal is connected, according to Dalrymple, with the lack of self-respect of people in a permanent state of dependency on public welfare money, because this state makes them consider themselves as the will-less victim of evil forces from outside. I suppose you can easily make the link with our subject.

Of course there is a lot more to say about this agenda, as a series of steps to mend the neglected face of aid which I have tried to describe to you. But I am going to finish now, because I am really curious to hear, how you think about it.

Just allow me a few more sentences, in which I can rephrase my final objective. If I may define 'development' in this context as a process of self-realization which collective entities

are going through, the main challenge I see is to work for policies bringing about a balanced development, which does not create a privileged mass while locking out the others. Current development assistance is in my view not dealing head-on with the real issues of injustice and inequality. It has always – from the days of president Truman - been a mere blind, but it looks to me nowadays, keeping in mind the Millennium goals as the major indicator, like the donor community is more than ever after its own interests as a matter of priority. That also explains to me it turns a blind eye to the psychological impact of aid.

Filling this gap won't bring, in itself, the badly needed change of policy. In other words: it is certainly no sufficient condition to make the world embark on a new course. But, I feel like insisting on it as a precondition, in the sense that we need a more complete picture of reality in order to develop better tools to change it.
