

NGOs and Imperialism

Yves Engler, ZNET

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Foreign Affairs 501, Take Home Exam

Any individual working for an aid organization is required to pass this exam and a B+ or higher must be achieved to attain "left wing" status.

Please write 500 words answering each of three of the following questions.

- 1) Do people really feel better when their elected government is destroyed by democracy promotion rather than subversion?
- 2) Should it be called "aid" or "aiding and abetting" when you give a country weapons of mass destruction?
- 3) Why is it called a non-governmental organization (NGO) when it gets most of its funding from governments?
- 4) Why do progressive people, who think privatized medical and social welfare services are a right wing plot in their own wealthy countries, donate money to organizations that replace government-run services in poor countries?
- 5) Are some major Western non-governmental organizations really just an arm of imperialism?

Bonus marks will be awarded if you answer all five.

Facing the reality that most development NGOs are heavily reliant on Western government "aid," which is usually directed towards countries of geopolitical importance to the captains of capitalism, may be unpleasant for some "progressives," but it is true nonetheless.

A major principle of Canadian foreign aid, for example, has been that where the USA wields the big stick, Canada carries a police baton and offers a carrot. The major recipient of Canadian aid in 1999/2000 was the former Yugoslavia; Iraq and Afghanistan were top two recipients in 2003/2004; today Afghanistan and Haiti are Nos. 1 and 2. The intervention-equals-aid principle also exists for other western countries.

Post-coup Haiti has been a bonanza for Canadian (mostly Quebec-based) NGOs.

They have received tens of millions of dollars from the Canadian government.

Montreal-based Alternatives, usually on the left of the NGO world, is but one example. With no operations in Haiti before 2004, the post-coup influx of Canadian "aid" dollars was too good an opportunity to pass up. The Haiti file was given to an Alternatives employee who was having difficulty raising money for his Africa dossier. Canadian imperialism showed a definite preference for media work in Haiti over Ghana and Alternatives was rewarded when it obliged. (Alternatives also made its way to Afghanistan.)

According to the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) website, Alternatives has received \$2.1 million for Haiti work over the past couple of years. Coincidentally, Alternatives has parroted the neoconservative narrative about Haiti. Their guest speaker on Haiti at the recent Quebec Social Forum

was Chavanne Jean-Baptiste, an advisor for right-wing business candidate, Charles Henry-Baker's failed presidential campaign. (It has been alleged that Baptiste's organization provided support to the ex-military who led the armed assault against the elected government in February 2004.) Alternatives other than the main Haitian invitee was Rene Colbert, editor of *AlterPresse*, who told this author in a private conversation there was no coup in February 2004 since Jean Bertrand Aristide was never elected.

Many of the other Canadian NGOs that benefited from the coup called for Aristide's overthrow. The Concertation Pour Haiti (CPH), an informal group of half a dozen NGOs, branded Aristide a "tyrant," his government a "dictatorship," and a "regime of terror" and in mid-February 2004 called for Aristide's removal. This demand was made at the same time CIA-trained thugs swept across the country to oust Aristide.

Quebec (and Haitian) NGO's hysterical opposition to Aristide was certainly influenced by the politics of their government donors. An understanding that intervention would lead to increased aid also likely influenced it. The 1994 US invasion, which restored Aristide to office, created a boom for development NGOs in Haiti (making it the world leader in NGOs per square kilometer, according to some). Yet, securing financing became more difficult as international funding was curtailed along with foreign troops (and US police trainers) in the late 1990s and with the "intransigent" Aristide's 2000 election. Not until Aristide was gone, and a post-coup government installed by the USA, France and Canada, did the aid spigot once again turn back on for Canadian and Haitian NGOs.

Haiti was not unique. In another part of the world, many NGOs supported "humanitarian intervention." In her book, *Fools' Crusade*, Diana Johnstone decries NGO support for Western imperialism in the former Yugoslavia. She points out: "When, as in Bosnia-Herzegovina or Kosovo, military intervention leads to an international protectorate, Western NGOs are granted a prominent role in local administration and receive a large share of public and private donations." (*Fools Crusade*, Page 13)

Of course imperialism is not only about military intervention. In *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention and Hegemony*, William I. Robinson argues that "democracy promotion" is an important aspect of modern imperialism. It's a change in US foreign policy from "earlier strategies to contain social and political mobilization through a focus on control of the state and governmental apparatus" to a process in which "the United States and local elites thoroughly penetrate civil society, and from therein, assure control over popular mobilization and mass movements..."

The colored revolutions in Eastern Europe are high-profile recent examples of "democracy promotion" at the service of western aims. In Haiti, as well, a variety of NGOs were funded to promote the US and Canadian version of democracy. Politics Without Sovereignty explains: "From 1998, USAID and DFID [the UK's Department For International Development], among others, began to systematically subcontract to international NGOs including CARE, ActionAid, Save the Children, Oxfam, and Concern International to 'build civil society capacity.'"

According to a recent *Vancouver Sun* article, nearly a fifth of the Canadian International Development Agency's budget, some \$600 million, is now spent on initiatives directed towards "promoting democracy." Last October CIDA established an Office of Democratic Governance. Of course, the US is the largest democracy promotion donor with the National Endowment for Democracy at the forefront. Its Democracy Projects Database coordinates 6,000 projects worldwide.

The economic and social sides of imperialism also benefit NGOs. The neo-liberalism pushed by the IMF, World Bank, USAID, CIDA etc. breeds NGOs.

As structurally adjusted states withdraw social services, NGOs flood in.

Take Ghana, for instance. Since the late 1980s, a series of structural adjustment programs have diminished the state's role in the economy. The donors that push neoliberalism argue that while reforms may bring with them social ills, their aid and NGOs will help to resolve these side effects.

Back in the late 1980s the former president of CIDA, Margaret Catley-Carlson, explained to the Ghanaians: “We know that if you take on this [IMF] program of reform it will cost you. Your food prices are going to shoot up, and in the urban areas that is going to be very destabilizing. So we will put in some food aid [likely administered by NGOs] and help you out over this very difficult period.”

The process of withdrawing the state has resulted in ever-growing dependence. With a hint of pride, Jeanine Cudmore, an employee of the CIDA-funded Social Enterprise Development Foundation, recently told the Montreal Gazette that in northern Ghana “the government relies on NGOs.”

When the U.S. returned Aristide to office in 1994, it was on condition that he implement an economic agenda focused on further downsizing the state.

International creditors argued that the flipside of this government downsizing would be increased aid, particularly to private sector NGOs. This “aid” money was to be channeled towards projects such as schools and hospitals run by private (usually non-profit) NGOs.

A CIDA report released in 2005 stated that by 2004, “non-governmental actors [for-profit and not-for-profit] provided almost 80 percent of [Haiti’s] basic services.” While an NGO-run school may be better than no school at all, a cluster of privately run schools is not an ideal development model.

Canada’s development agency has admitted as much. According to CIDA, “Supporting non-governmental actors contributed to the creation of parallel systems of service delivery. ... In Haiti’s case, these actors [NGOs] were used as a way to circumvent the frustration of working with the government ... this contributed to the establishment of parallel systems of service delivery, eroding legitimacy, capacity and will of the state to deliver key services.”

NGOs are significant beneficiaries of modern imperialism: They soften the edges of neoliberalism, while democracy promotion and military interventions alike bring a windfall of contracts.

Perhaps the question to be asked is: Are development NGOs compatible with real democracy?

In Canada and many other countries, most people, including all of those who are on the left, oppose private health clinics, seeing them as a threat to our universal, government-run systems of medical care. People everywhere see public schools as an important part of democracy. Citizens in all First World countries demand social services provided by their governments.

Yet the “development” model favored in the Third World for the past two decades involves destroying government services and handing them over to NGOs that willingly participate in this undermining of democracy

If you see anything progressive about that, you’ll get a failing grade in the test above.

Yves Engler is the author of two books: *Canada in Haiti: Waging War on the Poor Majority* (with Anthony Fenton) and *Playing Left Wing: From Rink Rat to Student Radical*. Both books are published by RED/Fernwood and available at www.turning.ca.

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