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Responding to Poverty in the Light of the Post-Development Debate: Some insights from the NGO Enda Graf Sahel¹

Sally Matthews*

Abstract

How can we take on board the many valuable insights of post-development theory without seeming to advocate indifference and inaction in the face of the misery that many people in the world experience daily? In this paper, I provide a partial response to this question. I begin by looking at some of the alternative strategies offered in post-development literature and set out to show that while there are several problems with these alternatives, to read post-development theory as advocating indifference or inaction is to read it uncharitably. Secondly, I draw on the experiences of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Enda Graf Sahel in Dakar, Senegal to suggest some ways in which the insights of post-development theory, or some versions of post-development theory, can be taken into consideration without leading to inaction or indifference in the face of the suffering of those who occupy a less advantaged position in contemporary relations of power and privilege.

Résumé

Comment intégrer les nombreuses idées valables de la théorie du post-développement, sans paraître prôner l'indifférence et l'inaction envers la misère qui affecte chaque jour un grand nombre de personnes dans le monde ? Dans cet article, j'apporte une réponse partielle à ce questionnement. Je commence par examiner certaines des stratégies alternatives qu'offre la littérature sur le post-développement et démontre que si même si ces alternatives posent un certain nombre de problèmes, il serait tout de même ingrat de considérer la théorie du post-développement comme une théorie favorable à l'indifférence ou à l'inaction. Deuxièmement, je m'inspire de l'expérience de l'ong Enda Graf Sahel à Dakar, au Sénégal, afin de proposer diverses façons de prendre en compte les

* Department of Political and International Studies, Rhodes University, South Africa.

idées de la théorie du post-développement ou certaines versions de cette théorie, sans pour autant que cela aboutisse à l'inaction ou à l'indifférence envers les souffrances des plus défavorisés par les relations contemporaines de pouvoir et de privilège.

Introduction

One of the most prominent debates in development theory over the last decade or so is that between the so-called post-development theorists and their critics. Post-development theorists provide a scathing critique of past development initiatives revealing several of the problematic assumptions underlying such initiatives and calling for their complete rejection.² Critics argue that this position is too extreme and that it is potentially politically irresponsible – by undermining current development initiatives without providing an alternative response to the problems such initiatives purport to address, post-development theory ‘leaves only fragmented remains ... an agenda-less programme, a full stop, a silence, after the act of deconstruction’ (Blaikie 2000: 1038–39). For those who are deeply concerned with the question of how to respond to problems such as poverty, inequality and oppression, this position may thus seem unappealing.

One of the concerns of the critics of post-development theory, is the question of how ‘we’ – the privileged – should respond to the plight of those less fortunate than ourselves.³ Many development theorists and practitioners have a strong moral commitment to helping ‘the poor’ and are offended by post-development theory’s suggestion that such ‘help’ often does more harm than good. However apt post-development theory’s critique of the messianic presumptions of the ‘developers’ and of the arrogance of the whole notion of ‘helping the poor’ may be, it does seem that we need to respond in some way to the plight of those who are less privileged than ourselves.⁴ How can we take on board the many valuable insights of post-development theory without seeming to advocate indifference and inaction in the face of the misery that many people in the world experience daily?

In this paper I provide a partial response to this question. I begin by looking at some of the alternative strategies offered in post-development literature and set out to show that while there are several problems with these alternatives, to read post-development theory as advocating indifference or inaction is to read it uncharitably. Secondly, I draw on the experiences of the NGO Enda Graf Sahel in Dakar, Senegal to suggest some ways in which the insights of post-development theory, or some versions of post-development theory,⁵ can be taken into consideration without leading to inaction or indifference in the face of the suffering of those who occupy a less advantaged position in contemporary relations of power and privilege.

‘Alternatives to development’: supporting the ‘local’ and transforming power relations

While I agree that post-development theory has been stronger on critique than on construction, it does at the very least provide pointers to some ways to respond to the problems that it argues ‘development’ has failed to solve. Some of these responses can be seen as addressing the question ‘What should be done?’, while others address the more specific question of ‘What should we – the privileged – do?’ In this paper I would like to sketch some possible responses to the latter question in particular.

Post-development theory suggests at least two broad ways in which we may be able to respond to the suffering of the poor. Firstly, it suggests that we support the ‘local’ and ‘new social movements’ as it is argued that local ‘grassroots’ initiatives are best able to improve the lives of the communities of which they are an element. Secondly, it suggests that we ought to work to undermine oppressive and unjust power relations and that such work includes working within privileged societies. Each of these strategies holds more promise than some critics have allowed, but neither is without its flaws.

Much post-development theory suggests that what is wrong with ‘development’ is that it seems to involve outsiders deciding on behalf of others what these others need and how these needs can be met. Post-development theorists do not think that such ‘outsiders’ – such as NGOs, foreign or even national governments, and international financial institutions – can legitimately decide what is best for communities they little understand. Rather, we should look to ‘the local’, to ‘new social movements’ (NSMs) or ‘popular organisations’, as agents of desirable social change. These movements are not ‘outsiders’ and are thus more legitimate and effective actors within their communities. Members of advantaged societies should support such movements, both in their own and in other societies, but should guard against becoming involved with them in ways that entail paternalism or an imposition of foreign values.

Post-development theorists’ optimism about the local and the popular has met with much criticism. Some of this criticism relates to the absence of any criteria for deciding which popular organisations to support.⁶ Post-development theory does not say that only organisations which endorse x and y should be supported, but rather seems to imply that as long as the group is rooted in the community in which it works, its efforts are legitimate and likely to be beneficial. Critics rightfully point out that there is insufficient reason to believe that all new social movements will truly act in the interests of the poor and oppressed (see Nanda 1999, 2002; Storey 2000). Because some post-development theorists seem to place their faith in such move-

ments without providing sufficient criteria for judging which local groups really will advance the interests of the poor, post-development theorists have been accused of washing their hands of the fate of the poor and thus taking up a politically irresponsible position (see Kiely 1999).

A further issue that needs clarification is the question of *how* to support such local and popular organisations. How are we to provide them with our encouragement and support, while avoiding the paternalism and condescension of earlier 'development' initiatives? What kind of relationship should 'we', working for NGOs, academic institutions, governments and the like, have with these organisations and movements?

In addition to providing support for the 'local', post-development theorists suggest that one contribution that 'we' can legitimately make, is to recognise the complexity of the causal relations that lead to impoverishment and oppression and to seek to transform these relations, particularly by working to correct the ways in which 'our' societies contribute to the impoverishment and oppression of distant others. Ferguson (1990: 286) speaks of how teaching and advocacy in the West can help advance the cause of those negatively affected by Western governments' imperialist policies. Yapa (1996, 2002) points out that it is wrong to understand poverty as located 'over there' with the poor and thus to assume that in order to address poverty one needs to intervene in the poor community or region. Rather, we should see that poverty arises within a complex nexus of relations and that this nexus extends into non-poor communities and regions. It follows, then, that one can help to transform the relations that cause poverty and oppression without necessarily intervening in the poor community itself. Thus, argues Yapa (1996: 723) "My solution" [to the problem of poverty] is aimed at fellow academics who, like myself, are deeply implicated in the problem and whose power lies primarily in our capacity to engage the discourse critically'. While writers such as Yapa and Ferguson speak particularly of the role that 'first world' citizens can play within the 'first world', similar comments can be made with regard to 'third world' elites – and by 'elites' here, I mean to refer to all those 'third world' citizens who have access to similar privileges as those of the citizens of the 'first world'. One way that such elites may be able to respond to poverty is through working within the privileged sub-sections of 'third world' societies so as to try to change the way that these sub-sections relate to the rest of their societies. More broadly, such elites can work at disseminating information and providing support to assist in the erosion of the complex network of causal relations from which impoverishment and oppression result. I should also stress here that to argue in favour of such a role is not to argue that this is the *only* role that such 'first world' citizens and 'third world' elites can play, but simply to stress that this too is

a legitimate way for the privileged to respond to poverty and oppression. Such a role could complement the work of 'local' movements and of those who provide support to such movements.

For those whose interpretation of misery and oppression emphasises material deprivation, the idea that an intellectual can 'fight poverty' from the comfort of an air-conditioned office, may not at first seem persuasive, but it is unfair to dismiss this strategy out of hand. Post-development theorists convincingly demonstrate how the non-material – discourse, knowledge, culture and the like – needs to be taken on board both in defining desirable social change and in thinking about how to bring about such change.⁷ The role that Ferguson, Yapa and others propose 'we' can play is an important one if we are to change the relations that cause poverty and misery rather than just 'treating the symptoms' such relations produce.⁸

However, there is a problem associated with this strategy, especially in the version which stresses that 'we', the privileged, should work only or primarily within 'our' societies. Some post-development theorists seem to suggest something along the lines of 'culture A may only be legitimately criticised by members of culture A or according to the values of culture A' and thus that 'we' ought to confine our work to 'our' societies. This kind of position opens post-development theory up to accusations that it embraces a politically problematic relativism, as this sort of assertion implies that there are no values that hold at all times in all places, but rather that different groups have different but equally valid value systems. Such a relativist position leaves little space for any kind of 'forward politics' – if all value systems are equally valid, why fight in favour of some values – indeed why seek to be ethical at all? Furthermore, this approach sits uncomfortably alongside other elements of post-development theory such as its strident critique of the 'Western world' – it is incoherent to condemn the consumption levels and individualism of 'Westerners' and then to say that each culture ought only to be judged by its own values.

Clearly then, while post-development theory is not 'critique but no construction' (Nederveen Pieterse 2000: 188) as some critics aver, the construction on offer remains a little flimsy. In order to better theorise such alternatives it is useful to look at the experiences of those who have engaged in the difficult task of trying to respond to problems such as poverty, inequity and oppression, in the light of some of the insights of post-development theory. It is here that the experiences of Enda Graf Sahel are instructive.

The experiences of Enda Graf Sahel⁹

Enda Graf Sahel (EGS), as it is called today, has been around, in various forms and under different names, since 1975 and forms part of the larger Enda Tiers Monde (Enda TM) network.¹⁰ It began as one of the first fields of experimentation for Enda TM and initially focussed its attention on Dakar, particularly Grand Yoff, a suburb on what was then Dakar's periphery. While its core remains in Grand Yoff, the EGS network now stretches across most of Senegal and reaches into several other African countries.

For thirty years, EGS has been involved in diverse efforts to improve the lives of disadvantaged people. Their ways of going about this have evolved over the years in response to much internal reflection and debate. Initially, their approach was a fairly typical community development approach, which drew on international discourses of aid and development prevalent at the time. They saw themselves as there to help the poor and they thought that fighting poverty entailed the transfer of money, knowledge, resources and other things external to the poor community (De Leener et al., 1999: 8). Today, the EGS team look back very critically on the approach they adopted when they began 'development work' in 1975. They sarcastically describe the way in which they whole-heartedly took to the game of 'victim, persecutor and saviour', presenting the poor as victims, the neglectful state as the persecutor and themselves as the 'good cowboys' heroically rescuing the poor (Enda Graf Sahel 2001: 230–32). After a few years, they were forced to recognise that the population did not view them in this way and in fact was at least as likely to turn to other 'saviours', such as religious leaders and even politicians, in times of distress. Looking back they say that during their first decade of existence they were little more than 'a transfer point in the development aid system' (De Leener et al., 1999: 7). While the community did not regard them as harmful, they were not particularly impressed by these would-be messiahs' attempts to 'rescue' them from unemployment and poverty, and certainly did not feel that their position in the community was an essential one. Eventually they were forced to admit that their projects had all failed and that they were marginalised within the community they had set out to 'save'.¹¹

In many ways this period of crisis within EGS represents on a smaller scale the larger 'impasse in development' which seemed to be occurring at much the same time. They relate their change of direction to a broader crisis in development, saying that EGS's contemporary approach 'originates firstly in an assessment of [their] own experiences, but also in the failure of thirty years of development in most African countries' (EGS 1996). They were forced to admit that their 'development' initiatives had borne little fruit and that what was needed was more than small adjustments. Rather than aban-

doing their work, or continuing to blind themselves to the failure of their initiatives, they set out to transform their approach so that they could more effectively help to improve the lives of those living in the communities in which they worked. Many of the reasons they give for the failure of their previous initiatives touch upon themes in post-development theory, such as the inappropriateness of imported models and 'expert' knowledge, the insensitivity of most 'development projects' to people's own knowledge and creativity, and the arrogance of imposing the values and ideals of 'development workers' on the communities they claim to be helping.¹² This period of reflection led to a number of attempts to change the functioning of their organisation in such a way as to better respond to the expressed needs of the communities in which they were active. They evolved from an organisation which set out through various 'expert' interventions and projects to 'rescue the poor', to a network of groups, horizontally and fairly haphazardly related, which provide support for a variety of community initiatives.

I will not here at length describe the evolution of Enda Graf Sahel, but will rather try to draw on its experiences to make a few comments relating to the issues raised in the previous section of the paper.¹³ As mentioned earlier, post-development theory suggests at least two alternative strategies for fighting poverty: supporting the 'local' and the popular, and working to erode oppressive and unjust relations. EGS's recent work provides some insights on how NGOs can play this role, and more broadly on how 'we' can take on board some of the insights of post-development theory while continuing to respond to the problems of those less privileged than ourselves.

Providing support for popular organisations

Enda Graf Sahel provides support for many groups and initiatives originating in the communities in which they work. Indeed, it is not possible to clearly distinguish between EGS, the NGO, and the larger network of community based organisations (CBOs) which are loosely affiliated with it. EGS describes itself as a 'network of actors' and many of these actors are drawn from CBOs. Rather than recruiting staff members through advertising for people with particular skills or qualifications, EGS tends to draw people who are already working in the community into their organisation. According to their vice-coordinator, Babacar Touré (2005), what is important in the choice of new staff members is their capacity to fit into existing social dynamics of change in the community. It seems that frequently EGS begins by working with those involved in community associations, and then sometimes draws these people into the organisation itself or into particular projects for which they have funding.

The evolution of one of the branches of Enda Graf Sahel, Enda Graim, demonstrates this nicely.¹⁴ Enda Graim¹⁵ is situated in Thiès, Senegal's second largest city, and works both in Thiès and particularly in the peri-urban and rural areas around Thiès. While Enda Graim is a relatively new organisation (it began in the late 1990s), it grew out of an already existing associative movement in the rural area of Fandène, just outside Thiès. Several of the current personnel of Enda Graim had been actively involved in various associative activities, particularly in associations providing a form of basic health insurance to people in the villages of Fandène.¹⁶ These associations began to cooperate and were given support by Enda Graf Sahel, which was also active in Thiès at the time. In this way, Enda Graim gradually emerged, such that it is difficult to say whether Enda Graim is best described as an NGO or as a community-based organisation. One of its staff members describes it as a hybrid between the two.¹⁷

One of the most important ways in which EGS supports local initiatives is by putting different community groups in contact with each other and then facilitating ongoing contact between them. EGS is able to use their geographically broad involvement and their ability to communicate with people far away through access to telephones, the internet and the like, to facilitate greater contact between various community groups who can then go on to support each other in different ways.

An example of a network initiated and supported by EGS is that of the VAF network, with VAF standing for the *valorisation des activités des femmes* (valorisation of women's activities). This is a large network bringing together a number of smaller regional and professional networks and consisting of a total number of around fifty women's groups.¹⁸ Most of these women's groups were associated with EGS before the creation of VAF, but in 2003 it was decided to establish a broader network for women's groups affiliated with EGS. The VAF network allows the women to better coordinate their activities and to learn from each others' experiences. They are also able to trade goods and skills – for example rural women farmers provide urban women who make fruit juices and jams with their surplus products. EGS also provides some training for the women, such as training on methods to improve their processing of local products. In addition, the VAF network helps the women's groups find new partners as they can refer each other to partners who can potentially provide technical or financial support.

The provision of funding is one of the most important roles played by EGS and is an important way in which outsiders can support popular initiatives. Small, locally-based initiatives are often unable to access funding because they are unaware of what funding exists, unable to write proposals to attract such funding, and do not meet the requirements of the donors. EGS,

with its many contacts and high number of educated employees, can be helpful here. For example, during my time at EGS, some EGS staff members became aware of French funding available for the promotion of informal professional training. The EGS network includes many people involved in such training, particularly within VAF and within an artisan network affiliated with EGS. On discovering this funding, EGS's vice-coordinator and one of the members of the artisan network arranged a meeting for various role-players in informal professional training, such as those supervising apprenticeships in artisan studios and those involved in sharing dyeing and fruit-juice making skills, and informed these people of this funding and discussed what could be done with such funding. EGS's staff members have many connections within the donor community and a staff member who knew the chairperson of the funding committee allocating this funding was called upon to present a proposal, which would be drawn up by some of the people attending the meeting, to the funding committee. If the funding was granted, several people within the artisan and women's networks would have access to money that, alone and outside of the EGS network, they would not have been likely to attain.¹⁹ NGOs are generally better able to attract donor attention and so the provision of funding is an important way in which they can support popular initiatives.

The above suggested ways of supporting popular initiatives are fairly passive in that they mainly involve responding to the people's requests for training, funding or 'contacts' in similar organisations; however, there is a less passive way in which outsiders can support local organisations. They can expose them to ideas and information of which they would not otherwise be aware and provide a different 'take' on situations. In my discussions with EGS staff it became clear that one of the things that they thought they could do was to challenge local approaches by presenting local organisations with information of which they were not aware or by drawing their attention to extra-local causes and effects of their situations and their attempts to address these situations.²⁰ EGS's ability to get in touch with a variety of role players, including agriculturalists, town planners, neighbouring communities and so on, enables them to point out possibilities that particular local groups may not have considered on their own. An example of this is the *Écocité* research project in which EGS is involved which examines the impact that growing cities have on the areas surrounding them and encourages dialogue between urban dwellers and peri-urban and rural dwellers in the areas around cities.²¹ The Senegalese branch of this research project has thus far focussed particularly on the cities of Thiès and Mboro, putting inhabitants of these cities in touch with inhabitants of nearby villagers. Through this project urban and rural-dwellers become more aware of interdependencies

between each other and how the evolution of cities affects the surrounding rural areas.

A related role played by EGS involves making the communities with which they work look upon their own strategies and belief systems differently. As a result of years of colonialism, neo-colonialism and other forms of domination, many of the communities with which EGS works have had their beliefs and way of life disparaged. Development projects too are not innocent in this respect as they often unintentionally encourage people to see themselves as incapable of solving their own problems and present models from outside as solutions to these problems. EGS believes that it has a role to play in revalorising people's own strategies, knowledge and beliefs. Because many disadvantaged communities have had their world views denigrated, it may be difficult for them to reject values and ideals which have effectively been imposed upon them and to reassert their own way of seeing the world. EGS sees its role as the facilitation of the reassertion of denigrated world views and value systems and also, importantly, the questioning of those that dominate (Ndione et al., 1994: 55-56). They can help members of such populations to look upon themselves and their communities differently and to 'emancipate themselves from the burden of received models' by questioning these models and the assumptions and power relations which undergird them (EGS 2001: 297).

This last role is perhaps one of the hardest to delineate in practice. How does one really go about revalorising denigrated value systems? Without having an initiative specifically aimed at doing just this, there are several ways in which EGS plays this role. An example is an initiative of Enda Graim to promote the Noon language which is spoken by some of the communities in the region of Thiès.²² Until recently this language was not recognised as one of Senegal's national languages and was only a spoken language. Several of the Enda Graim staff members come from the Noon community and, working with the broader community, began advocacy in favour of greater recognition for Noon. Through their pressure and pressure from other language advocacy groups, Noon has now been recognised as a national language. In addition to this advocacy work, Enda Graim has begun literacy classes in *noon*. They provide basic literacy training for Noon-speaking adults who cannot read and write, as well as special Noon literacy training for literate people who want to learn how to read and write in the language. Radio broadcasts in Noon have also been arranged. Providing Noon literacy training obviously brings similar benefits to general literacy training, but Charles Wade of Enda Graim, stresses that these initiatives to promote the Noon language are particularly valuable in terms of the revalorisation of the cultural heritage of the Noon people. The speakers of Noon, who number around

35,000, used to be embarrassed about their language and those who could not speak other languages felt stupid and ashamed. By seeing their language being promoted, their assessment of the value of their cultural heritage has changed, and they are no longer ashamed of their language, and by extension of their culture and themselves.

There is no simple way to work out how those who are not poor and oppressed may be able to play a sincere and valuable role in the battles of those who are, just as it is not simple either to work out who is poor or oppressed and who is not. Enda Graf Sahel's recent attempts to support local initiatives and groups suggest some ways in which more privileged people may play some role in supporting the initiatives of those less privileged. In the section above I have shown how 'we' may be able to facilitate contact between different groups, to provide funding and training, to expose people to different ways of seeing things and to information of which they were not previously aware, and also to help people view their own communities and their own beliefs and strategies in a more positive light. Each of these approaches carries with it all sorts of risks, but I believe that they do indicate some promising ways in which those who do not belong to or are peripheral to poor or oppressed communities may be able to play some kind of positive role in the struggles of such communities.

Transforming power relations

As mentioned earlier, post-development literature suggests that another role that the relatively privileged can play is to try to transform the relations which cause others to experience poverty or injustice. When our focus is solely on 'helping the poor', we risk implying that poverty has its causes with the poor – that poverty is caused by the lack of knowledge, expertise, entrepreneurship, fertile land or perhaps even good fortune on the part of the poor. Post-development theorists suggest, rather, that we need to look at the relations between the rich and the poor to understand the origins of poverty.²³ Thus the problems of poverty and injustice are seen as closely tied up, as poverty is often the result of unjust relations. EGS's definition of poverty suggests something along these lines:

Poverty is the result of a long process. For this reason we prefer to speak of impoverishment and of the mechanisms which create poverty in each of us.

As far as we are concerned, we do not fight against poverty, but against everything that creates poverty in our lives (De Leener et al., 1999: 15).

By defining their struggle in this way, they suggest that their 'battlefield' is not just to be found among the poor and disadvantaged, but rather that they need to struggle against these mechanisms of impoverishment wherever they

may be found. Today, EGS has a branch in Belgium, Enda Intermondes, which contributes to some extent to this struggle. This organisation gives its objectives as the de-mystification of the North-South divide, the valorisation of popular expertise in both the South and the North, and the promotion of cooperation between popular organisations in the North and those in the South (EGS 2000: 63). By establishing a branch in Europe, EGS can be seen as acknowledging that their struggle is not one that is located only in Africa, as many of the causal chains causing impoverishment in Africa have their origins in Europe.

Relatedly, EGS is currently setting up a programme dealing with ethical trade issues.²⁴ They hope to contribute to attempts to change the kind of international trade relations which are skewed towards those in the 'first world'. This programme will work within West Africa to promote awareness of trade issues and disseminate information with regard to trade treaties, and is also likely to involve attempts to lobby those who are involved in determining trade relations, both in West Africa and further afield. It will thus contribute to attempts to fight against the structures which cause poverty, rather than simply alleviating poverty itself.

EGS has already had some involvement in ethical trade issues through Enda Diapol's participation in the Cancun meeting of the World Trade Organisation in 2003.²⁵ Aware that much information and reporting on such meetings does not reflect the interests and concerns of those in the 'third world', Diapol sent three West African journalists to Cancun with the aim of assisting in the improvement of reporting about this meeting. Diapol also assisted in the dissemination of information on this meeting with the aim of increasing awareness among West Africans of the ways in which global trade relations, particularly with regard to cotton, are skewed against them. Such activities help exploited farmers to better recognise their position and the causes of this position, and thus facilitate growing solidarity among such farmers in order to resist such exploitation. NGOs, by having access to information and by having the skills needed to interpret such information, can play an important role in terms of disseminating information which can make those disadvantaged by exploitative trade relations more aware of the complexities of their situation and thus better able to respond to them.

Sensitivity to difference and the problem of cultural relativism

Post-development theory, like a lot of other contemporary social theory, is concerned with the need for sensitivity to difference, and very critical of the way in which many 'development' initiatives have imposed particular values and derided the values of those in the 'underdeveloped' world. It is this concern for sensitivity to difference that is behind their preference for local

movements and their caution about 'outsider' attempts to address poverty. Advocates of post-development theory hope that such strategies may make it possible to respond to poverty and related problems while avoiding the cultural imperialism that has gone hand-in-hand with many development initiatives. However, as mentioned earlier, this approach opens them up to accusations of cultural relativism and to the extent to which they do succumb to cultural relativism, their ability to construct a positive political programme is compromised.²⁶ How does one manage to maintain sufficient sensitivity to difference and resist cultural imperialism without sacrificing an adequately detailed positive programme? A related problem is that of deciding which local initiatives and movements ought to be supported. Earlier on I detailed ways in which 'we' can support local groups, but I said nothing about *which* of these initiatives and movements we ought to support. Critics of post-development theory are, as touched upon earlier, concerned that the approach of supporting the local and 'new social movements' may be politically problematic if no criteria are provided to determine which initiatives are worthy of support. This issue is related to the tension between the desire to be sensitive to difference and the desire to avoid cultural relativism – generally, is there any way that privileged outsiders can humbly and sensitively support the local and the popular without succumbing to cultural relativism?

Some of EGS's recent experiences vis-à-vis how to decentralise their institution without losing a sense of coherence and unity, provide some insights with regard to this question. During the 1990s, EGS began to promote their own organisational decentralisation. The motivation behind this decentralisation was a concern that centralisation tends to involve the imposition of a particular approach or way of doing things, and that if the various groups within the expanding EGS organisation were to be able to respond appropriately to their different contexts, such an imposition needed to be resisted. Hence, a strategy of decentralisation gradually arose as the various sub-units within EGS were given more and more autonomy and encouraged to develop their own approaches and strategies.

However, recently the organisation has felt the need to try to redefine what it is that unites them (see EGS 2005). They realised that while the various EGS staff did have a sense of belonging to the 'Enda Graf family', their sense of contributing to a common project was rather vague and impalpable. As a result, they initiated a research project on their own organisation in an attempt to define what it is that held them together and guided their diverse programmes. The tension experienced by EGS between the need for coherence within their organisation and the need for autonomy for the various components of their organisation, is in many ways the institutional equivalent of the tension discussed earlier between the need to

avoid cultural relativism and the need for sensitivity to difference. While EGS did not want to impose a particular approach – and thus a particular set of values – on its various components; without a sense of what held these components together, the organisation could not maintain its coherence.

EGS thus set about identifying some common values that united them as an organisation and that they sought to promote in the community in which they worked. A discussion session bringing together the broader EGS network led them to conclude that their intervention in the community, or indeed *any* intervention, could not be considered to be ‘value neutral’ and that they were promoting a particular set of values, even if only implicitly. In attempting to make explicit these values, they speak of values such as solidarity, equity, autonomy, respect for others and for shared goods, conviviality, reflexivity, and protection of the environment (EGS 2004b, 2005).

They also created some organisational structures and practices aimed at facilitating the further elaboration of a common set of values and orientations. A Coordinating Council was established in which the various sub-units within EGS should all be represented and which should meet fairly regularly – more or less monthly – to help coordinate the activities of EGS as a whole. Furthermore, they decided to organise a number of orientation sessions, called *boussoles* (compasses), which would bring together people working on a particular theme with the aim of finding a ‘common north’ which would serve as a lodestar to orientate their activities, but would still allow the various programmes a large amount of flexibility. The compass metaphor is meant to capture the idea of the existence of a general common direction, but many different paths as a result of the diversity of contexts in which the various people within the EGS network find themselves.²⁷ Over the last year and a half several such *boussoles* have been held on themes such as agriculture, the economy and communication. Each *boussole* is supposed to bring together all those involved in the programmes related to the theme of the *boussole*.

These recent developments at EGS are a recognition that on an organisational level decentralisation, and the sensitivity to difference and context it enables, must be balanced with some kind of unifying guiding orientation, or else the organisation will lose coherence. Likewise, in relation to post-development theory, it could be said that while post-development theorists are correct in wanting to present an alternative which is not overly prescriptive and which is sensitive to difference, in order for an alternative programme to be workable, there needs to be a broad guiding framework. There *are* several values which are implicit in much of post-development theory,²⁸ as in any other approach no matter how non-prescriptive, and making

them explicit will help to clarify the political project proposed by post-development theorists.

Of course, the balance between avoiding prescription on the one hand and incoherence and vagueness on the other is a difficult one. It is not yet certain whether EGS's attempts to achieve this balance within their organisation have been successful. The values defined as being in common to the organisation certainly avoid being prescriptive but it is not clear that they are sufficiently defined to really draw the organisation together. It is still too early to tell if the meetings of the Coordinating Council and the *boussoles* will be able to provide the organisation with sufficient coherence. Nevertheless, the recognition of the need to establish a sense of unity while avoiding prescription and insensitivity to difference, and the commitment to find a way to do so, is an interesting starting point.

Something should be said here about the related problem of deciding which local initiatives ought to be supported. If, as pointed out by critics of post-development theory, not all such initiatives will necessarily promote the broader interests of the communities in which they work, how is an NGO like EGS to decide which community organisations to support? Having a clearly defined set of values and objectives could function as criteria for making such decisions, but using such criteria could have the disadvantage of being experienced by the community as an imposition from outside. EGS's experience has taught them that when they insist that particular values be respected by the organisations with which they work, these organisations tend to present a 'front' of cooperation, while operating according to their own values behind the scenes. During their early years of existence, EGS strongly promoted democratic and egalitarian leadership structures, but while the people pretended to go along with these requirements, in fact leaders were chosen according to local social hierarchies. EGS also insisted upon strict accounting practices and that the money loaned be used in very particular ways, but in response the people presented 'too perfect' accounts which disguised the real ways in which they spent the loans given by EGS.²⁹ It seemed that insisting upon certain values did not lead the population to adopt these values, but did function as a barrier to openness and honesty between EGS and the community.

Nevertheless, providing support for any community organisation whatsoever could be seen as politically irresponsible. EGS professes to advance their values in their cooperation with community groups and acknowledges that not all community organisations work for the interests of the broader community,³⁰ but they avoid insisting on a rigidly defined set of values or practices. This is not a completely satisfactory response to the concern expressed by critics of post-development theory regarding how to decide

which 'local' movements should be supported, but EGS's experiences demonstrate the difficulty of finding a conclusive way to fit into and be relevant to the community without completely diluting one's own orientation and set of beliefs, and without being 'captured' by possibly unscrupulous community organisations. Currently, EGS does not support every community organisation that asks for their aid and does try to encourage certain values within the community, but at the same time is very cautious not to impose such values, nor to unintentionally encourage the population to 'pretend' to embrace the same values as EGS by making their support conditional on the acceptance of a particular set of values or the practices entailed by such values.

Conclusion

Looking back on the period of crisis that led them to change radically their approach to 'helping the poor', the authors of one of EGS's publications note:

... we asked ourselves if we ourselves had not in some way contributed to the impoverishment of some people through our practices, through the promotion of values and ways of seeing things which encouraged impoverishment, domination and exclusion and which strengthened this culture of 'development'. This interrogation was a key moment in our journey (Ndione et al., 1994: 17).

As with the post-development theorists, EGS began to feel very uncomfortable with the idea of 'development' and with many of the strategies and assumptions that came along with it. As an NGO working in a 'developing' country among a poor community, they could not simply criticise 'development', but had to decide whether their discomfort ought to push them to withdraw entirely from 'development' work or to radically reorient their approach. Opting for the latter option, they began to carve out a path that would allow them to continue to play a role among the 'poor', while distancing themselves from practices which while apparently 'helping the poor', actually strengthen relations of domination between the rich and poor. Their experiences, a small sample of which have been summarised above, can assist those who sympathise both with some variants of post-development theory and with some of the criticisms levelled against it, to think of ways in which we can reconcile key aspects of the post-development critique of 'development' with a continued commitment to respond to some of the problems which 'development' purported to address. If EGS is correct, it is possible for 'us' – the relatively privileged – to play some role in improving the lives of those less fortunate. There are ways in which we can provide support to community movements and there is a role for us to play in under-

mining the relations of power and privilege that are the distant causes of the suffering of many in impoverished communities. However, whatever role it is that we may play, it is one that requires continual self-interrogation and adjustment.

Notes

1. This paper is based on current research towards a PhD thesis in the Centre for West African Studies at the University of Birmingham, UK, under the supervision of Reginald Cline-Cole. Fieldwork was conducted with the NGO Enda Graf Sahel in Dakar, Senegal. I would like to thank Enda Graf Sahel for hosting me during this period of fieldwork and the Commonwealth Scholarship for providing the funding for the research.
2. The most often-quoted post-development texts are Sachs (1992), Escobar (1995) and Rahnema with Bawtree (1997), but several other authors, notably Latouche (1986, 1993), Rist (1997) and Esteva and Prakash (1996) are also often listed.
3. This division between 'us' and 'them' is a little crude, but I hope it will serve as shorthand for a more complex division between those who have typically been seen as the providers of some form of 'development assistance' and those who have been seen as the beneficiaries.
4. This is true even if, following post-development theory, we problematise notions like 'poverty' and question the desirability of the lives of those in 'developed' countries. Some people do live miserable lives and those of us who do not may well have some kind of moral responsibility to try to reduce this misery.
5. 'Post-development theory' is an umbrella term for a whole host of fairly diverse critical responses to development. Many critics have pointed out that some versions of post-development theory are more conducive to 'forward action' than others and, following such critics, I would like to endorse certain strands within post-development theory rather than all that has been associated with this term. Ziai (2004), for example, differentiates between neo-populist and radical democratic variants of post-development theory. It is principally the radical democratic variant that I draw upon here.
6. Another relevant form of criticism, which I will not be dealing with here, comes from those who see the state as a more likely agent of desirable social change. See for example Schuurman's (2001) discussion of 'emancipatory spaces'.
7. Post-development literature such as *The Development Dictionary* (Sachs 1992) draw on post-modern insights to show how discourse and knowledge are not 'neutral' but themselves play a role in the oppression and exclusion of some people by others.
8. I should also note that neither Ferguson nor Yapa argue that this is the only role 'we' can play. Both allow that 'we' may also play a more directly interventionist role, but they would like to stress that it is incorrect to view the academic working to change discourse on poverty as less involved in

responding to poverty than the practitioner ‘in the field’ trying to implement some or other solution strategy aimed at reducing poverty.

9. The information in this section is based on various Enda Graf publications (see bibliography) and on fieldwork done in Dakar, Senegal with the organisation itself. My understanding of the history and general evolution of the organisation is based on many helpful discussions with various members of the Enda Graf Sahel network.
10. Enda Tiers Monde’s full English name is Environment and Development Action in the Third World. It is an international non-governmental organisation that was founded in Dakar, Senegal in 1972. Enda Graf Sahel was previously known as Enda Chodak and is sometimes also referred to as *Enda Sahel et l’Afrique d’Ouest* (Enda Sahel and West Africa).
11. Their own account of this period and the reasons for the failure of their various interventions makes interesting reading - see for example chapter 4 of *Pauvreté, décentralisation et changement social* (De Leener et al., 1999).
12. I should note here that while much of the literature and internal discourse of EGS makes similar points to those made in post-development theory, I would hesitate to call what EGS does ‘post-development practice’ as I am not quite sure what exactly this means and as this is not the way in which they would describe themselves. While some members of EGS, particularly the coordinator, Emmanuel Ndione (see Ndione et al., 1997 and Ndione 2002), have participated in the post-development debate, most of those affiliated with this network are not familiar with this debate, nor do they have a clear position with regard to it. Nevertheless, their current way of acting in the community takes on board many of the insights of post-development theory, although they have for the most part come to these insights independently of post-development literature and the broader post-development debate.
13. Enda Graf Sahel’s own literature (see Ndione 1992, 1993; Ndione et al., 1994, De Leener et al., 1999, and Enda Graf Sahel 2001) provides several discussions of this evolution.
14. This feature of EGS was drawn to my attention by Mamadou Ndiaye and André Wade, who co-ordinate Enda Graf Guediawaye and Enda Graim respectively, but I will focus here on the experiences of Enda Graim.
15. ‘Graim’ stands for Groupe de Recherches d’Appui aux Initiatives Mutualistes – Research group for the support of associative initiatives.
16. Interviews with André Wade, Victor Tiné, Ferdinand Mbaye and Charles Wade, Enda Graim, 29-30 June 2005.
17. Interview with Charles Wade, member of Enda Graim, 30 June 2005.
18. The discussion of the functioning of this network is based on participation in VAF events and interviews with Hélène Diouf (2005), Yacine Diagne and Constance Tine (2005). Hélène Diouf is coordinator of ASFED (*Association Sénégalaise de femmes pour l’entraide et développement*) and vice-president of APROVAL (*Association des Professionnelles pour la Valorisation des produits locaux*), both of which are part of VAF. Yacine Diagne coordinates

the broader VAF network. Constance Tine coordinates RAP (Réseau des Apprentissages Populaires) which is a member of VAF.

19. All of the above comments are based on my own attendance of this meeting which took place in July 2005. I am not sure if the funding proposal, which had yet to be drawn up, was successful.
20. Discussions with Babacar Touré (2005) and André Wade (2005) were especially helpful here.
21. These comments are based on a discussion with Victor Tiné (2005), a researcher on this project, and Enda Graf Sahel's 2004 annual report.
22. Comments on the Noon language programme draw on a discussion with Charles Wade (2005) of Enda Graim and also to some extent on Enda Graf's 2004 report of activities (EGS 2005).
23. It should be noted here that post-development theorists also question the way in which poverty is understood in much development literature and some post-development theorists seem very sceptical about the value of the notion poverty at all. However, most would surely allow that certain people do live in a state of deprivation which they deem to be unpleasant and from which they yearn to escape. It is to this state that I refer when I speak of 'poverty' here.
24. Interview with Mariama Samb, coordinator of ComEthic, Enda Graf Sahel.
25. Enda Diapol (*Enda Prospectives Dialogues Politiques* – Prospectives for Political Dialogue) is a separate entity from EGS but it has its origins in EGS and works closely with EGS. The information that follows is based on the Enda TM 2003 report and Enda Diapol's 2004 report.
26. This is so because if all cultural values are equally good, there is little motivation for fighting for a particular set of values, and any positive political programme will have to be built upon certain values, even if these are only very broadly defined.
27. The idea of the *boussoles* became clear to me during discussions as part of one of the *boussoles* (on agricultural networks) which took place from the 13 to 15th June 2005 at Enda Graf Sahel's head office. This idea is also briefly explained in one of their publications (see Ndione et al., 1994:12).
28. Solidarity, conviviality, tolerance, frugality, humility, and respect for the environment seem to be values informing much post-development theory.
29. Early EGS publications discuss this problem - see Ndione (1992, 1993).
30. EGS lists the criteria of a 'good' community organisation - see De Leener (1999:47), which suggests that they believe it to be possible to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' community organisations.

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