

Faith-Based Non-Governmental Organizations: Harmful or Helpful?

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ABSTRACT

Non-governmental organizations or NGOs are often seen as the best way in which to pursue development, and are commonly thought to be objective third parties in international relations. However, NGOs are far from objective parties, and have their private agendas that they seek to pursue. This paper explores the growing role of faith-based NGOs in developing nations through a literature review of relevant sources. The definition of what is a faith-based organization is examined in terms of the aid given and the way in which it is distributed. Examples of the various roles of faith-based NGOs, whether this be in working closely with local peoples to deliver more efficient aid, or in situations where the distribution of aid was impacted based on religious views of those in need. Special consideration is given to the ways in which faith-based NGOs impact the HIV/AIDS crisis in Uganda and Kenya, as religious beliefs may come into play in determining which forms of prevention may be used. The need for new and better methods of development is discussed, through consideration of post-development theories in determining what is development and how to pursue it, and how these theories impact faith-based NGOs.

DEVELOPMENT

Development itself is often a word of contention, with many different definitions of what exactly constitutes development and what characteristics determines whether or not a nation is developed. Development is commonly viewed through a Western lens, with development seen as modernization, in terms of technology and urbanization, but also in terms of culture. This means that Western principles of government and culture are often forced upon nations, similar to the process that was seen in times of colonization. This is the type of development that post-development seeks to reject, one that contributes to “cultural westernization and homogenization” as is often seen in traditional forms of development (Pieterse 175). To become more inclusive, development must be changed to encompass the cultures and knowledge of all nations.

POST-DEVELOPMENT

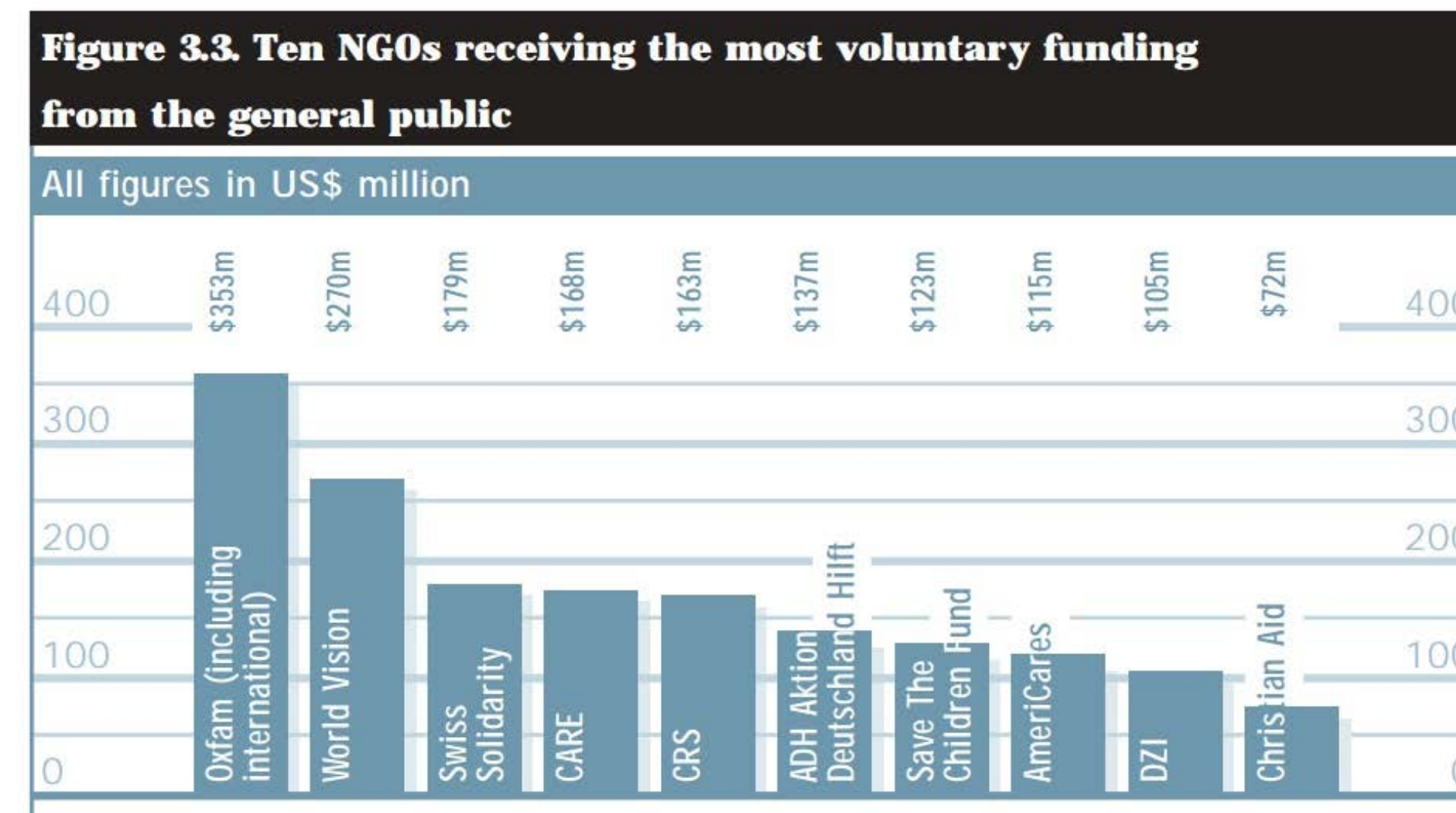
Post-development looks to create a world in which “development would no longer be the central organizing principle of social life” and would not take place only through Western ideals (Escobar 448). This type of development theory is often seen in Faith-Based NGOs, as they look to bring to other peoples the enlightenment of their faith. Post-development theory views current development practices as no longer viable, and so, new, more objective systems must be created, which take locals’ knowledge and experience into account, and use them to create a better world. NGOs looking to proceed using a post-development framework need to focus on both giving aid, and on the need to empower local peoples.

METHODS

Through a literature review, this essay looked to examine the definition of NGO and Faith-based NGO, and their impact on development in the nations of the Global South. A number of databases, such as Scholars Portal and JSTOR, were used to access articles published on this topic. The texts found were further examined to ensure that they came from peer-reviewed journals, and best represented the topic. These articles were then compared to gain a fuller understanding of what an NGO is, how a faith-based NGO may differ, and how these organizations interact with theories of development and post-development.

NGO/FBNGO

Non-Governmental Organizations or NGOs are coming to play an increasing role in the deployment of international aid and the provision of services in developing nations. Non-governmental organizations are seen by many as an objective third party with the local relations necessary to get aid to those who need it most. However, it is commonly overlooked that NGOs are in fact private organizations that are commonly run similarly to a business and may have their own objectives in providing aid to developing nations. Faith-Based NGOs are still more complicated to define, and are commonly considered to be any organization “that derives inspiration and guidance for its activities from the teaching and principles of the faith or from a particular interpretation or school of thought within a faith” (Clarke and Jennings p. 6). Different scales have been created to define just how important faith is within an NGO, from only a founding principle, to something that defines every interaction with development. The figure below shows the top receivers of voluntary aid from a disaster relief event, and clearly shows that faith-based NGOs are coming to play an important role in the distributing aid.



This figure shows the amount of voluntary funding given in a disaster event. Many of these top receiver of the publics donations are faith-based NGOs (World Vision, Christian Aid, etc.) which shows the important role they continue to play relief and development efforts.

Image courtesy of: http://www.sida.se/contentassets/58e749060aed47f1b4737537739f592c/funding-the-tsunami-response_3144.pdf

POSITIVE CHANGES

- Through the withdrawal of the World Bank and IMF loans in Kenya and Uganda, more and more services became privatized and people came to rely on NGOs, including faith-based NGOs, to provide these services (Hofer). One of the services that was most impacted by the faith-based organizations was the formal schooling for children (Hofer).
- Faith-based organizations account for a large number of NGOs currently in existence, and because of their deep spiritual links with certain groups (such as a congregation they are associated with) they often have large volunteer bases and large sources of income. This means they have many opportunities to spread their influence worldwide.
- One such example of the positive impact that religious groups can have is seen in the work of faith-based organizations in Indonesia to improve child survival rates. This project, called the Child Survival Project was able to vaccinate more than two million children, and provide much needed information to help parents deal with common issues such as diarrhea (Munir)

HARMFUL IMPACTS

- Some of the greatest controversy surrounding evangelism in faith-based NGOs arose surrounding the actions of faith-based organizations acting in Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami. In 2005 it was brought to the public’s attention that some Christian evangelical groups were attempting to bring the Christian religion as well as aid to Muslims who had been affected by the tsunami (Ferris)
- One of the common ways in which aid is delivered by faith-based NGOs is through contributions to health care projects, especially in service to the treatment of HIV/AIDS. This can be a problematic area for faith-based organizations, as there can often be conflict between religious belief and prevention methods, leading to less than successful programs. This is often seen in projects that encourage abstinence, but neglect to provide other measures of birth control as seen in the World Vision AIDS programs (Clarke).
- Schools developed by Faith-based NGOs are commonly evangelical in nature, and churches and faith-based NGOs came to be some of the largest funders of school programs in both Kenya and Uganda (Hofer).

CONCLUSIONS

While some forms of development, including the elimination of extreme poverty and major diseases such as AIDS and malaria are worthy goals, development must be changed to become more inclusive of all cultures and their knowledge and beliefs. This would require a move from development theory into the world of post-development, which rejects the Western ideal of development, and seeks instead to incorporate other forms of knowledge and more grassroots operations (Escobar). One can only hope that in the future, more sustainable and integrative forms of development can gain hold, that allow all nations to prosper without a focus on Western ideals of development as modernization.