

# Birds of a feather? UNDP and ActionAid implementation of Sustainable Human Development

*Lilly Nicholls*

---

## A realistic solution, or wishful thinking?

The 1990s have been a challenging time for world development. The evidence is mounting that, although there has been tremendous overall growth since the Second World War,<sup>1</sup> much of the real progress has been highly concentrated. Growth has been characterised by precarious standards of living for much of the world's poorest, and escalating inequality between the 'haves' and 'have nots'.<sup>2</sup> Parallel to persistent poverty and growing marginalisation, the international development community has been weakened by impatience with the territoriality, bureaucratisation, and self-deceiving nature of the current system of co-operation and foreign aid (Ferguson 1990; Hancock 1991; Sachs 1992). Finally, international development has reached what some view as a theoretical impasse. This is due to the growing awareness of our incomplete knowledge of development processes. It is also due to the disillusionment both with Keynesian ideals of state central planning and with neo-liberal models of market-led growth. (See Moore and Schmitz 1995, though Schuurman 1993 holds that the impasse has been overcome.)

It is in this context that Sustainable Human Development (SHD) and People-Centred Development (PCD) approaches emerged. They featured strongly in the 1995 World Summit for Social Development (WSSD), where 134 nation-states pledged to 'place people at the centre of development' (*Copenhagen Declaration* 1995). They appeared, too, in statements by the OECD that defined its mission as 'making progress towards the achievement of *Human Development*.' (OECD 1996).

Although UNDP did not invent SHD/PCD ideas, its annual *Human Development Reports (HDRs)* have promoted them as an alternative development paradigm with the potential to challenge the status quo.

UNDP defines SHD/PCD as ‘the process of enlarging peoples’ capabilities and choices so as to enable them to better satisfy their own needs’ (UNDP 1990–1997):

Sustainable Human Development is a new development paradigm which not only generates economic growth, but distributes it equitably; that regenerates the environment rather than destroying it; and that gives priority to empowering people rather than marginalising them. It gives priority to the poor ... and provides for their participation in those decisions affecting them. (Speth 1994: 5)

The innovation of SHD/PCD lies in its ability to go beyond state-versus-market dichotomies by arguing that people should be at the centre of all development. They should be viewed not only as its ‘means’ but also as its ‘ends’. The SHD/PCD paradigm is unique in that, by placing the emphasis on peoples’ well-being rather than on their income, consumption or productivity, it aims to transcend both economic and instrumentalist models of development. In addition to being a new paradigm,<sup>3</sup> SHD/PCD is a promising framework for carrying out comprehensive policy and institutional reforms. It provides a way to build a newly-invigorated system of international development co-operation based on the ideals of improved coordination, a candid policy dialogue on ‘sound governance’, equity, genuine North–South partnerships, and the active participation and empowerment of the poorest.

SHD/PCD ideas may be appealing, but the key question is whether the paradigm can be implemented in the world’s poorest countries (Uganda, in this case) where it is most needed. Can multilateral agencies such as UNDP, and indeed much smaller and less bureaucratic international NGOs such as ActionAid, translate SHD/PCD’s more ambitious components into practice?

Despite the prolific literature on human development, most scholarly writing has either concentrated on measurement issues (and specifically on the statistical merits of the Human Development Index — HDI), or on the conceptual complexities and the contribution of Sen’s theories to SHD/PCD approaches. At the same time, the more policy-related publications of international organisations like UNDP have focused mainly on the originality of SHD/PCD ideas compared with state-centred or market-oriented development models. They have tried to convince the

international community to move closer towards human development approaches. Unfortunately, neither the scholarly nor policy-related literature has questioned the conceptual soundness or ‘implementability’ of SHD/PCD approaches. There has been no critical and in-depth analysis of how development agencies are putting such approaches into practice, and the real-life socio-economic, political, institutional and organisational constraints they have encountered in doing so.

A more comprehensive examination of the issue is given in my doctoral thesis (Nicholls 1998), which draws on field research and extensive interviews in the USA, Europe, and Uganda. This article highlights the core finding that, despite the genuine efforts of UNDP and ActionAid to implement SHD/PCD at all levels, both agencies were prompted to make a series of contentious assumptions about development processes and about their own capacities. Ultimately, both had to displace core SHD/PCD goals. This was due to both the conceptual deficiencies of the paradigm and the tensions between organisational interests and the SHD/PCD agenda.

## SHD and PCD unveiled

### *Theoretical quicksand*

The first significant finding is that, despite its conceptual novelty, and bold policy and institutional agenda, the paradigm’s abstract and unfinished nature, coupled with its ideological ambiguity and internal tensions, make it extremely difficult to translate into a comprehensive yet concrete development strategy.

The first set of problems is attributable to two major factors. First, the Capabilities Approach, from which the paradigm derives much of its theoretical substance, is essentially a philosophical framework comprising complex and abstract principles. Capabilities, overall functionings, primitive and refined functionings, well-being, being well-off, well-being freedom, agency freedom, agency information, overall entitlements, exchange entitlements, endowment entitlements, effective power, procedural control, and counterfactual choice, are but a few examples. Indeed, its pioneer, Amartya Sen, claims it was never intended to become a concrete development strategy or action plan. Second, the Approach has never been fully fleshed out, so the exact links, weights, prioritisation, or multiple effects of various *capabilities* (i.e. the ability to do this or that), and

the various components of the SHD/PCD paradigm itself, have never been established. The consequence of these shortcomings is what even its proponents refer to as a major gap between SHD/PCD as a theory and as a realistic development strategy and action plan:

There seems to be a gap between Sen's conceptualisation of Human Development and its operationalisation. Thus far, we have Sen's highly theoretical approach on the one hand, and the nitty gritty practical material which lacks theoretical scope on the other. The two have never been brought together and there is tremendous debate as to whether this is possible.<sup>4</sup>

Another conceptual limitation that has undermined attempts to put SHD/PCD into practice is its sheer vagueness. For instance, development practitioners in Uganda were concerned that 'the meaning of SHD/PCD was so broad and nebulous [that] almost any intervention could fall under the SHD/PCD umbrella'. Nor were such criticisms restricted to field workers. One adviser to UNDP's Human Development Report Office (HDRO) complained that it was 'almost like motherhood, in that there was nothing in it that one could oppose'.

A final conceptual deficiency is that the ideological ambiguity and internal contradictions within SHD/PCD have complicated its translation into a comprehensive yet focused development strategy. Its ideological ambiguity is largely rooted in its eclectic borrowing from numerous, and often opposed, ideologies and development doctrines. It ranges from Sen's Capabilities Approach and the Basic Needs Approach at the centre of the spectrum, to Liberation Theology and Freirean notions of empowerment on the left, and neo-liberal ideals of market liberalisation on the right. Even Sen's own writings can be ideologically ambiguous. For example, in earlier publications he praises the state's involvement in economic activities and regulatory measures such as controlling trading activities, food subsidies, and direct rationing. By the mid-1990s he is writing about 'market incentives' instead of 'incentives to public action', and warning against the inefficiency of governmental regulations and controls.<sup>5</sup> While the ideological nebulosity of the SHD/PCD paradigm (and the confusion caused by the changing positions of its key adherents) are rarely acknowledged in public, some UNDP staff admit the problem. They have expressed concern about the practical implications of 'taking socialist values, merging them with market-oriented ideas and getting away with it.'<sup>6</sup>

Hypothetically, there is no reason why one ideology or development doctrine cannot be intertwined with another. But when it comes to translating such ideas into policies and strategies, serious tensions can emerge. A typical illustration of these can be found in the *HDRs*'

simultaneous calls for the protection of all property, and for the redistribution of wealth and assets, including land reform. The two may not be mutually exclusive in theory, but in contexts where land-ownership is highly concentrated there are bound to be trade-offs and tensions in practice. Alas, the proponents of the SHD/PCD paradigm have remained largely silent about its conceptual vagueness, its unfinished nature, the persistent gap between theory and practice, and its inherent ideological tensions.

Findings on the ground showed that the actions of UNDP and ActionAid in Uganda added to the conceptual confusion and practical difficulties with the SHD/PCD paradigm. In UNDP, considerable damage seems to have been done by the decision to push definitions and guidelines on human development (predetermined in New York) in a top-down and prescriptive manner.<sup>7</sup> UNDP staff in country offices were left feeling excluded and ‘pressed against the wall’ by headquarters. The lack of ownership over the approach, and confusion among many UNDP staff, were aggravated by other factors. First, UNDP tended to tamper with the paradigm (for example, it added ‘sustainable’ to the phrase ‘human development’ late in the game, largely to please the newly-arrived and environmentally-conscious Administrator, James Gustave Speth). Second, UNDP introduced new terms (e.g. Human Security, Social Capital, Preventive Development) and measurements, whose exact links to human development have never been fully explained, but which help to keep the annual *HDRs* newsworthy. (Alongside the original HDI have been added the Political Freedom Index — PFI, the Human Poverty Index — HPI, the Gender-Related Development Index — GDI, and the Gender Empowerment Measure — GEM.) Lamentably, UNDP’s top-down imposition of SHD/PCD, along with alterations in the definition of the paradigm, and the constant addition of new measures and terminology, have further blurred SHD/PCD’s already ambiguous meaning and ideological position.

ActionAid never quite managed to reach an internal agreement on the meaning or desirability of adopting a SHD/PCD approach. Many among its Trustees, sponsorship and marketing departments, and managers in certain Development Areas, wanted to retain the NGO’s traditional alleviatory approach to social service delivery. This approach was predictable and had brought success and generous funding pledges in the past. The more intellectually-oriented analysts, technical specialists, and a small cluster of field directors favoured a shift towards greater policy advocacy and the more decentralised and participatory approach associated with SHD/PCD ideas.<sup>8</sup> Unable to reconcile this conceptual

deadlock, ActionAid began carrying out major organisational and programme reforms without internal consensus about a shared development vision or clearly defined development guidelines. Viewed positively, ActionAid never resorted to imposing pre-set definitions and guidelines on its field staff in a top-down fashion. Unlike UNDP, it did not need to grapple with the conceptual deficiencies or ideological ambiguities of the SHD/PCD paradigm. Still, my research revealed that within ActionAid, too, SHD/PCD ideas were viewed as an 'import from the North'. Field staff felt they had virtually no ownership of SHD/PCD, and only scant knowledge about its meaning. Thus, ActionAid's main problem was not so much having to put an overly abstract and ambiguous development paradigm into practice, but rather a lack of theory altogether. That is, it was implementing development interventions which lacked a theoretical context and were not sufficiently anchored in a shared conceptual framework. Staff were unable to engage in higher levels of abstraction, and to draw out cross-sectoral or cross-regional connections and wide policy lessons from their work.<sup>9</sup>

### *The displacement of SHD/PCD in Uganda*

The conceptual complexities and deficiencies of the SHD/PCD paradigm, and the two agencies' own handling of these issues, complicated the translation and integration of SHD/PCD approaches. But the difficulties do not end there. There was a strong tendency for UNDP and ActionAid to pursue their own organisational interests, whatever those might be: for example, to do what is easiest and most feasible, to increase their own mandate and control over development processes, to appease powerful stakeholders, or to gloss over errors and the complexities of development processes. When these interests were in tension with core SHD/PCD goals, the SHD/PCD agenda ended up displaced.

### *Setbacks at the policy and coordination levels*

Globally, UNDP has been adept at using the international spotlight generated by its *HDR* and by the WSSD to advocate moderate but innovative policy proposals. Examples include the Tobin Tax against international currency speculation and the 20/20 Compact which calls for increased donor and recipient government social development expenditures. More audacious and anti-hegemonic policy proposals included the introduction of a Global Social Safety Net whose funds

would be paid through income taxes levied on the richest nations. UNDP also called for the creation of an Economic Security Council which would grant voting rights to poor countries, and for the introduction of global mechanisms to monitor monopolistic, protectionist or polluting behaviour, high military spending, human rights violations, and corruption by nation-states.<sup>10</sup> This ambitious global policy agenda faced considerable political resistance from powerful G-77 countries (China, India, Nigeria, and Algeria being prominent among these) who objected to the 'sound governance' and demilitarisation goals that were also included. Their objections were based on the belief that such goals threatened national sovereignty and vested interests; that they smacked of Northern conditionality, and represented an attempt by donors to replace technological and financial transfers with 'soft' aid. A member of India's Permanent Mission to the UN expressed the South's opposition thus:

Developing countries do not want a poverty-governance programme. They have governments equipped to do this on their own. What can a Nordic country with 4 million people teach a country like India with 950 million people about governance? What developing countries want is technological transfers, not donors going into 'soft' areas.<sup>11</sup>

Instead of coming to UNDP's rescue, sister UN agencies joined forces with resisting G-77 nation-states in insisting that it had overstepped its traditional mandate. UNDP, as a purveyor of technical co-operation, had no business proposing such an ambitious agenda of global institutional and policy reforms for consideration at the WSSD. The UN Secretariat's Department of Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development was especially upset by the publicity generated by UNDP's audacious proposals. It convinced the UN Secretary-General that UNDP had trespassed upon its turf, and that it should refrain from influencing policy debates in the lead-up to the WSSD.<sup>12</sup>

Within Uganda, UNDP's efforts to stimulate a national policy dialogue on SHD/PCD issues was met with equal, if not more fervent, opposition. Interestingly, the harshest critics of its efforts to play a policy leadership role at the national level came from within the UN family, many of whom did not want UNDP 'encroaching upon' their own mandates. They argued that UNDP was 'too lightweight' and lacked the resources, substantive in-house expertise, and the clout to play such a role. As the World Bank's Chief Economist in Uganda candidly put it:

It is one thing to be a leader and another to claim to be a leader. Where is UNDP's thinking and technical capacity? Human Development Reports formulated with the help of academics in New York do not necessarily establish UNDP's policy influence or expertise at the country level.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, UNDP was unwittingly caught in the middle of North–South political tensions over the right of the international donor community to push a 'sound governance' global agenda. And it was caught in the midst of the UN's own turf battles, and fellow agencies' recriminations about UNDP's limited policy clout and analytical capacities. Consequently, UNDP had little choice but to downgrade its initially proactive policy role in the WSSD and to drop the most ambitious proposals of its wide-reaching agenda. Gone were its plans to disseminate its Political Freedom Index (PFI), along with its appeals to democratise the UN and to expose those nation-states and corporations not doing their share to further the SHD/PCD goals of social responsibility, equity, democracy, and peace.

Influencing wider policy debates and becoming a much more global, analytical, and influential NGO had become one of the cornerstones of ActionAid's vision, as asserted in its 1992 mission statement (Griffiths 1992). By the mid-1990s, ActionAid had established policy advocacy departments in its London headquarters as well as in many of its country offices. Despite this, by late 1997, after several false starts and efforts to jump-start its policy and advocacy work, ActionAid had still to ratify its most recent Advocacy Strategy. It had still to agree on two or three key issues, the target audience, and the specific policy goals it would pursue. By early 1998, after eight years and four restructuring attempts to create an effective policy advocacy department and to mainstream its advocacy work, ActionAid's Advocacy Department had once again been disbanded. Many former staff, including the head of the department, had left, and the NGO was still trying to refine and implement an Advocacy Strategy (ActionAid 1997).

The reasons behind ActionAid's difficulties in activating its policy analysis and influencing work are multiple and complex, but two constraints stand out. First, because it is much smaller than UNDP and has no official access to inter-governmental forums, it has never achieved — and probably never will — the international profile that UNDP has gained through global conferences and publications. In addition, because ActionAid's comparative advantage has always been grassroots social service delivery, it has concentrated its work in geographically restricted



and mostly rural Development Areas (DAs) where, until recently, at least in Uganda, there was little government to speak of. Hence, ActionAid has never established a significant presence in capital cities, nor had the access to government officials that UNDP has traditionally enjoyed in very poor countries like Uganda. Added to its lack of global or national profile and access is the reality that many of the staff in the Country Programmes are sectoral experts (e.g. teachers, nurses and agronomists). These people are better at delivering community health or education services than at lobbying or drawing wider policy implications from their time-consuming micro-level interventions.<sup>14</sup> The problem is not only that many of ActionAid's staff in a country like Uganda lack the conceptual framework or skills needed to analyse development issues and influence wider policy and governance debates. They also lack the time, data, access to decision-makers, and the political desire to do so in a country where development workers either constitute part of the elite, or where the wounds left from past religious and tribal tensions are still raw and where challenging the status quo can still be a risky endeavour.<sup>15</sup>

The other constraint which has undermined ActionAid's advocacy aspirations both globally and nationally is the political resistance from among its own Trustees. Some of these view its growing involvement in policy influencing work as potentially offensive to the NGO's philanthropic and middle-of-the-road child sponsors. A restrictive, ten per cent ceiling has been placed by ActionAid's Trustees on how much it can invest in advocacy.<sup>16</sup>

### *Setbacks at the programme and grassroots levels*

If political pressures, North–South tensions, turf battles, and their own limited organisational capacities and clout kept UNDP and ActionAid from playing a greater coordinating and leadership role in influencing wider development and governance policies, what about their effectiveness in implementing SHD/PCD approaches at the programme and grassroots level in Uganda?

Generally speaking, both agencies have made significant progress in integrating SHD/PCD approaches into their organisational structures and country programmes in Uganda and beyond. Within UNDP, 40 country programmes have produced national Human Development Reports, many of them involving a wide range of national government and civil society actors. All country offices have moved towards a more holistic, decentralised and 'programmatic' approach to development. All UNDP

programmes have increased their proportion of nationally-executed projects, and begun to orient their development interventions towards what UNDP considers the key elements of SHD/PCD. These are the so-called four 'E's: Employment, Equity, Empowerment and Environmental Regeneration (UNDP 1995). At ActionAid, the shift towards Human Development-type goals has been achieved by increasingly complementing grassroots DA-level work with global and national policy influencing activities; by formulating integrated country programmes rather than sectoral and fragmented ones; and by hiring more Ugandan as opposed to expatriate staff, strengthening indigenous NGOs, and reducing ActionAid's own operational activities in order to allow beneficiaries to become more involved in programme formulation, implementation, and assessment (Twose 1994). These achievements notwithstanding, a closer look at both agencies' implementation of SHD/PCD at the programme and grassroots levels in Uganda exposes some worrying trends. I focus on two aspects: their promotion of equity and claims to reach the 'poorest of the poor', and their efforts to foster greater ownership, participation, and empowerment among Ugandan beneficiaries.

### *Promoting equity and reaching the 'poorest of the poor'*

Through the establishment of new partnerships with Ugandan NGOs and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs), and the creation of numerous income-generating activities (IGAs) at the grassroots, the UNDP country programme in Uganda has clearly made important strides in working more directly with poor communities. This is no small feat for an inter-governmental organisation which, until recently, channelled virtually all its funds via central government ministries. Still, the bulk of evidence from the UNDP supported programmes that I visited<sup>17</sup> shows that, because these require beneficiaries to organise into groups, it is often the better-off (i.e. those with assets, higher education, and access to information and to influential decision-makers) who either directly monopolise the benefits of UNDP supported projects or manage to place themselves as intermediaries on behalf of the poor. To add insult to injury, cases of incompetence by implementing NGOs or CBOs, community conflicts, and 'capture' by better-off intermediaries, or malfeasance and corruption within beneficiary groups, often went undetected. This was because UNDP has a limited rural presence, and often employs Kampala-based development experts who spend little time living and interacting with project beneficiaries or monitoring project activities.

Because ActionAid's field workers spend considerable time in rural areas, and the NGO itself is much more grassroots oriented, it managed to avoid much of the predatory behaviour of beneficiary groups experienced by UNDP. Once again though, the ActionAid projects I visited (mainly agricultural extension, water, health, credit and savings projects, or women's groups, and school management committees)<sup>18</sup> attracted mostly better-off community members. (By their very nature, some of these projects meant that members had to have some access to land which could be improved, or some initial capital or cash which they could put into common savings. Alternatively, they needed sufficiently high levels of education and free time to benefit from training in maternal health and sanitation, teacher education, or project planning.) This inevitably meant the poorest members of the community were excluded from group activities. These people are without assets, uneducated, marginalised, or too busy or ill to partake in such activities, or too embarrassed to even approach 'people as busy and important as ActionAid workers'. As a senior ActionAid Uganda manager himself put it, the NGO cannot focus its attention on the poorest and most deprived individuals in the community since it is much too difficult to show quick and concrete results if one works with those who live in remote areas, have few resources, respond slowly, and sometimes only to charity.

### *Fostering national ownership, participation and empowerment among Ugandans*

With respect to fostering a sense of ownership, as well as greater participation and empowerment among beneficiaries, UNDP Uganda has successfully replaced many of its expensive expatriate Chief Technical Advisers with national consultants, through increased use of National Execution (NEX). Today, UNDP is much more likely to designate the Ugandan government or Uganda-based NGOs as implementors of UNDP supported projects. Despite these advances, UNDP has a long way to go before it can claim to treat Ugandan counterparts as genuine partners. According to Ugandan government planners and advisers, for instance, UNDP still has difficulties incorporating Ugandan government officials in the formulation of UNDP supported projects from the outset. It also has a tendency to propose its own (usually very visible) project ideas and to 'send ready-made project documents to the Ugandan government' rather than working within the parameters of the latter's existing development efforts.<sup>19</sup> Because of a lack of resources and skilled personnel, and low

morale within the Ugandan public service, UNDP has become better known by the Ugandan government as a source of 'top-up' salaries, office equipment and four-wheel drives than for its technical expertise or ability to help bring about much needed policy or institutional reforms. Several UNDP supported projects, for example, were immobilised due to the refusal of local government officials to sit on Project Selection Committees unless they were paid 'sitting' or 'transport' allowances to do so.

What about UNDP's efforts to increase the participation of the poor in development processes? Many of the beneficiaries at the grassroots complained that UNDP invariably arrived in their communities with pre-defined project ideas that were unrealistic (e.g. they required peasants to draft their own project proposals or carry out their own evaluations). Other ideas were undesirable (e.g. banning individual financial benefits in areas where access to 'start-up' capital was the biggest impediment facing the poor; or demanding that beneficiaries organise themselves into groups in a society where extreme social differentiation and past tribal, religious and political divisions make collaboration beyond one's own family or tribe much too risky). Many of those involved in UNDP supported projects began opting out or shirking their responsibilities. They realised that they had limited control over the initiatives, and that the benefits which they would derive from them were minimal. Far from being empowered, the small cluster of participants who remained felt abandoned, and saddled with the burden of having to complete the project on their own.<sup>20</sup>

In the case of ActionAid Uganda, the participation of beneficiaries in project activities was much more systematic and carefully planned. For instance, in the Buwekula DA where I conducted most of my rural field visits, ActionAid had established and trained community-selected Parish Development Committees (PDCs) to identify the community's development needs. The committees also formulated project ideas and designed project assessment indicators and methods. The idea of creating PDCs was no doubt motivated by a genuine desire to increase beneficiary ownership and participation. In practice, things turned out to be quite different. ActionAid's DAs continued to work under strict planning and budgetary deadlines emanating from London and Kampala, instead of giving PDCs sufficient time to absorb the project planning training. Rather than carefully selecting their community projects, the PDCs' participatory project identification and formulation process was abruptly cut short by ActionAid's determination to meet its deadlines.<sup>21</sup> In addition to deadline pressures, because ActionAid Uganda felt that a standardised development

structure would be easier to set up and control, it proceeded to set up PDCs (or equivalents) in various DAs without first having carried out an in-depth analysis of their feasibility.<sup>22</sup> Nor, according to beneficiaries themselves, did they give communities the option of using existing institutional mechanisms, such as the government's Resistance Councils (RCs — later called Local Councils, or LCs). The negative consequences of these unilateral decisions became apparent only much later. Newly-created PDCs began to complain that their work was being seen as a partial duplication of the Ugandan government's work, and that the government's local RC/LCs were refusing to put their monies into PDC projects. Moreover, many PDC members were community activists already heavily involved in RC/LC activities and with only limited management skills, access to transport, or time to attend to more meetings or monitor additional community projects. It is difficult to see how ActionAid's controversial PDCs will be able to sustain their activities and to both finance and justify their existence to the local Ugandan government once the NGO phases out.

In retrospect, it would seem that, when organisational interests have conflicted with core SHD/PCD goals (like reaching the poorest, or fostering ownership, participation, and the empowerment of the poor), the latter have tended to be displaced in favour of the former. Hence, the implementation of SHD/PCD by these two agencies has been displaced by conceptual deficiencies, political resistance, and by their own limited capacities and organisational interests.

## Conclusion: the need for self-criticism and learning

This article's analysis of the efforts of UNDP and of ActionAid to implement SHD/PCD approaches offers several important insights.

- 1 In human affairs, there is always bound to be a gap between our ideals (i.e. theory) and reality (i.e. practice). This was the case with SHD/PCD. Despite the paradigm's theoretical innovation and its potential political audacity, its conceptual deficiencies and the two agencies' own limited capacities and conflicting priorities resulted in a form of goal displacement which made it even harder to bridge the theory-practice divide.

It is important to appreciate, of course, that the tendencies described here should not be interpreted as being rigid or perfectly predictable behaviour. Thus, I am in no way implying that there can ever be only one single organisational interest or that agencies like UNDP and ActionAid always know or always pursue their own

organisational interests. My findings suggest that there are normally numerous competing interests within organisations (e.g. analysts and technical staff versus the Board of Trustees at ActionAid; Northern donors promoting the ‘sound governance’ agenda versus resisting G-77 countries within the UN). Organisations are capable of following alternative pathways, and do not always pursue what is in their immediate interests (e.g. the decisions of UNDP and ActionAid to decentralise operations and cede control of programming decisions to the field). Their interests need not always be at odds with core SHD/PCD goals (e.g. the two agencies’ interest in promoting ‘sound governance’ coincides with a core SHD/PCD goal).

- 2 The second finding is that UNDP and ActionAid have made important advances towards implementing SHD/PCD approaches, including the introduction of more integrated, decentralised, and nationally-executed development programmes. They have made undeniable contributions to alleviating poverty through their agricultural extension work, and training courses for women, health carers and teachers. They have contributed to capacity development through group formation and support for income-generating activities. They have helped provide vital social services to poor communities in rural Uganda. Despite these achievements, the bulk of the evidence shows that UNDP and ActionAid are vulnerable to political pressures from traditional stakeholders, to territorial turf battles, and to constantly having to carve out a niche for themselves. These pressures, common to many international development agencies, suggest such organisations are not ideal change agents, nor challengers of exploitative power relations or of the existing system of international development co-operation.

In fairness, I should stress that my research observations are based on the two agencies’ performance in only one country and during a restricted period (mainly 1993–1998). Moreover, by having set out to implement SHD/PCD, UNDP and ActionAid have set themselves a Herculean task which no other international development agency — or government for that matter — has ever realised. Doubtless, my research is putting UNDP and ActionAid to the toughest test possible. I would argue, nevertheless, that it is a fair test, since both agencies appeal to funders and to the public through claims that they are achieving SHD/PCD goals like improving equity and donor coordination, and that they are influencing policy debates, as well as fostering greater ownership, participation, and empowerment among the poorest.

3 Third, it is clear that the constraints faced by a large inter-governmental organisation and an international NGO in their implementation of SHD/PCD approaches are more similar than one might expect. Most notably, both agencies often place organisational interests above core SHD/PCD goals. But there were other similarities. For instance, the staff of both agencies grappled with the conceptual elusiveness of the SHD/PCD paradigm, even though ActionAid did not attempt to impose pre-defined definitions or criteria, as UNDP did. Both agencies faced difficulties influencing wider policy and 'sound governance' debates, even though UNDP had more access to global forums and national decision-makers than ActionAid. Both agencies encountered political resistance from traditional stakeholders. ActionAid, however, did not face the same pressures as UNDP, with the territoriality of the UN system, political pressures from Southern governments, or the opportunism of local government officials. In contrast, ActionAid's direct, operational approach permitted it to monitor projects on the ground. In short, UNDP's and ActionAid's work is potentially complementary since the former performs well globally and in the realm of policy, while the latter is more effective at grassroots operational work.

The remaining question is: what is to be done? The story is not all gloom. First, becoming aware of the conceptual deficiencies inherent in those ideas which we plan to put into practice is a useful start. After all, in order to surmount a theory's ambiguities and tensions, they must first be perceived. We can further limit the damage by avoiding putting into practice theories on a large scale until they have been sufficiently tested. We should not design programmes which are overly optimistic and complex, or dependent on high levels of competence, coordination, or consensus-building. These often do not exist or are difficult to attain within many international development organisations. It would also be helpful for theorists and practitioners to work more closely, and for both to collaborate with staff in the field and with Southern partners to ensure that the latter have ownership of ideas and programmes from the outset. This should also ensure that new ideas and models can be put into practice by existing development agencies, and that their implementation is feasible in poor countries.

Changing the behaviour of development theorists and practitioners, however, is not enough. Changes are also needed within development

agencies, the existing system of international development cooperation, and developing country societies themselves. While the latter must continue to work towards more democratic, tolerant, and equitable political and social structures, development agencies must stop imposing ideas in a top-down manner upon Southern partners. As advocates of democratic development like Robert Chambers, David Korten, and Michael Edwards have noted, international development actors must be willing to become truly accountable to Southern partners. This means allowing such partners to make direct choices about the direction and parameters of projects and to become Board members in Northern NGOs. It means Northern NGOs opening themselves up to 'reverse evaluation' by beneficiaries, to external social audits, and to following good practice guidelines drawn up by fellow development actors. At the same time, as advocates of the New Institutional Economics (e.g. Samuel Paul and Teddy Brett) have pointed out, in the international development community we must stop romanticising development processes. We must not conceal the difficulties of coordinating efforts among donors who are in heated competition with one another, or of building partnerships with Southern governments that may be undemocratic, inefficient, or corrupt. We must not underestimate the difficulties of fostering participation in communities where civil society is weak, where social structures are highly unequal or divisive, and where the poorest members of the community have limited access to information or technical skills. Often, these individuals have little free time for more meetings, or diminishing tolerance for altruistic, 'process-based' development efforts that do not bring them the material benefits and economic opportunities they so desperately need and desire. In short, we need more honest self-criticism and debate about the real difficulties which development organisations are facing in their efforts to implement human development before we can begin to truly learn from our experience.

## Clarification

Both UNDP and ActionAid staff have been sent detailed reports and have had the opportunity to comment on the research findings synthesised in this article.



## Notes

1 All groups of countries experienced a rise in their *per capita* income from 1965 to 1985, and developing countries grew even faster than industrial market economies (at 3 per cent p.a. compared to 2.4 per cent p.a.) (Griffin and Knight 1990: 11).

2 While in 1960, the richest one-fifth of the world's population had incomes 30 times larger than the poorest fifth, by 1990, the share of income of the richest quintile had doubled. Once unequal distribution within countries is taken into account, the richest 20 per cent of the world's population have more than 150 times the wealth of the poorest 20 per cent (UNDP: 1992 *HDR*).

3 SHD/PCD approaches fit Kuhn's definition of a paradigm as a 'world view' in which a constellation of beliefs, values and techniques are shared by a common community. As Kuhn himself pointed out though, no paradigm solves all the problems it defines and it is quite natural for adherents of a paradigm to have a variation of focuses and explanations of their shared world view (Kuhn 1970: 44, 77–79 110).

4 Interview with John Knight, 20 April 1995.

5 Compare, for instance, the pro-state statements in Drèze and Sen (1989: 89, 246, and 259) with the far more pro-market tone in Sen (1994: 8–9).

6 Interview with Per Arne Stroberg, Senior Human Development Advisor, Bureau for Policy and Programme Support (BPPS), UNDP Headquarters, 12 January 1996.

7 Confidential memo from senior BPPS official, January 1995.

8 Senior ActionAid manager interviewed at London headquarters, 18 December 1996.

9 Interview with Nigel Twose, Head of Programme Development Department at ActionAid, 12 February 1997.

10 UNDP, 1994 *HDR*.

11 Interview with Mrs. Vitra Vaishid, Minister and Third Secretary, Permanent Indian Mission to the UN, 18 January 1996.

12 Interviews with UN informants, New York, January 1996.

13 Interview with Iradj Alikhani, World Bank Resident Economist in Uganda, Kampala, 7 July 1995.

14 Interview with a senior manager in ActionAid Uganda's Programme Development Department, June 1995.

15 Interview with a senior manager in ActionAid's headquarters, January 1997; and with a manager in the ActionAid-Mubende Office, Uganda, 26 May 1995.

16 Interview with Martin Griffiths (Director of ActionAid from 1991–1994), 28 August 1996; and with former ActionAid Trustee, interviewed in 1995.

17 My rural field work focused on three of UNDP Uganda's most promising grassroots initiatives, all of which were deemed by UNDP to have strong participation and empowerment components. They included: The Africa 2000 Network, which teaches farmers environmentally sound practices; the Micro Projects Programme to Combat AIDS, which helps HIV/AIDS victims start income-generating activities; and, the Community Management Programme (CMP), supported by UNDP and executed by HABITAT, which teaches communities to manage development initiatives. Thanks to the access and logistical support given by UNDP, and the help of a research assistant, Elizabeth Waisswa, I visited almost 20 projects in Mubende, Mbale and Fort Portal.

18 With ActionAid Uganda, my rural field work was carried out in the Buwekula DA in Mubende District, where the NGO was trying to shift towards a more integrated, participatory, and self-reliant development approach at the time of my visit. Thanks to ActionAid's access and logistical support, I visited over 20 projects with my researcher, Edward Ssekayombya.

19 During my field work, Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning (MFEP) officials noted that UNDP's proposal to create a special SHD Unit and database within the MFEP failed precisely because MFEP officials were not sufficiently consulted. UNDP did not fully take into account officials' reluctance to create separate technical units within the Ministry instead of strengthening its existing poverty analysis capacity. (Interviews with MFEP Economic Advisor and Commissioner for Economic Planning. Government of Uganda, Kampala, 7 December 1995.)

20 Such was the case in the S. S. Light Secondary School Construction Project in Mubende, where shirking and low participation became serious problems after UNDP and HABITAT rejected the group's request for individual credit and savings opportunities and convinced them to settle for a collective construction project instead.

21 Confidential internal memo from ActionAid headquarter's Evaluation and Impact Assessment Programme, December 1995.

22 Interview with technical expert from the ActionAid Uganda Country Office in Mubende, 1 December 1995.

## References

**ActionAid** (1997), 'The Final CLAG Report on the Strategy for Mainstreaming and Integrating Advocacy', unpublished report, Collaborative Leadership and Advocacy Group, London: ActionAid.

**Copenhagen Declaration Adopted by the World Summit for Social Development**, Copenhagen, March 1995 (advance unedited text, 20 March 1995).

**Drèze, J. and A. Sen** (1989), *Hunger and Public Action*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

**Ferguson, J.** (1990), *The Anti-Politics Machine: development, depoliticization and bureaucratic power in Lesotho*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

**Griffin, K. and J. Knight** (eds) (1990), *Human Development and the International Development Strategy for the 1990s*, London: Macmillan.

**Griffiths, M.** (1992), 'Moving Forward in the Nineties', London: ActionAid.

**Hancock, G.** (1991), *Lords of Poverty*, London: Mandarin Press.

**Hijab, N.** (1995), 'Promoting Sustainable Human Development: national entry points', Bureau for Policy and Programme Support, UNDP: New York.

**Kuhn, T.** (1970), *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press (second enlarged edition).

**Moore, D. and G. Schmitz** (eds) (1995), *Debating Development Discourse: institutional and popular perspectives*, London: Macmillan.

**Nicholls, L.** (1998), *From Paradigm to Practice: the politics and implementation of sustainable human development in Uganda*, doctoral dissertation at London School of Economics, University of London.

**OECD** (1996), *Highlights of the 1996 Development Co-operation Report*, Paris: OECD.

**Sachs, W.** (1992), 'Development: a guide to the ruins', *The New Internationalist* 232.

**Schuurman, F. J.** (ed) (1993), *Beyond the Impasse: new directions in development theory*, London: Zed Books.

**Sen, A.** (1994), *Beyond Liberalization: social opportunity and human capability*, The Development Economics Research Programme Series, London: London School of Economics.

**Speth, J. G.** 'Initiatives for Change: Future of the UNDP. Report of the Administrator', UNDP and UNFPA Executive Board Annual Session 6–17 June 1994. UN Document: DP/1994/39 23, Geneva, May 1994.

**UNDP** (1990–97), *Human Development Report*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

**UNDP** (1995), 'Managing Change: UNDP Corporate Plan', Office of Evaluation and Strategic Planning, New York: UNDP.

---

*This paper was first published in Development in Practice Volume 9, Number 4, 1999.*