

Should we dump the North-South lens?

In 1970 the United Nations (UN) adopted the (ODA) target of 0.7% of *Gross National Product* (GNP). At that time, the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* (OECD) donors were already spending 0.34%. Doubling it seemed a reasonable goal. But 35 years later, we have barely moved. ODA (now measured as a percentage of *Gross National Income*) rose from 0.34% in 1970 to peak in 1980 and 1982 at only 0.38%. Then for the next 15 years it fell, bottoming out in 1997, 2000, and 2001 at 0.22% [3]. By 2005 it had recovered to 0.33% [4], but was still just below the 1970 level.

One of the major reasons for this depressing net failure is that the development movement uses 50-year-old North-South eyeglasses. We don't see the world as it is, but as it was half a century ago. Using this North-South lens is not just lazy. It's dangerous. It hinders us from seeing, let alone addressing, today's unjust and socially unsustainable imbalances of power and wealth. The North-South concept is a paradigm or conceptual model: one of those useful mental yardsticks which help us make sense of a complex world. It arose in the early 1950s, as the Cold War was taking shape.

Geographically, politically, militarily and economically, the world could then be divided into three broad groups. The First World was the West: the United States (US), Canada, western Europe, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand - free-market, industrialised, democratic, linked through OECD, and most of them US military allies. The Second World was the communist Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and eastern Europe, also largely industrialised and militarily-allied, and highly authoritarian. The Third World was everything else: the "underdeveloped" world of Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean. The *1955 Bandung Conference* created the *Non-Aligned Movement*, largely synonymous with the Third World, which some then began to call the South [5].

No conceptual model is perfect, and from the start "the South" was no exception. Even in the 1960s, it contained uneasy anomalies. Where did China, Israel, Yugoslavia and apartheid South Africa belong? And was it legitimate to shoehorn into the Third World such far-from-non-aligned states as Cuba and North Vietnam, Saudi Arabia, and the US-allied Latin American dictatorships? For several decades the Third World was a concept which, with all its imperfections, still had meaning. We could talk about North and South and know roughly what we meant.

Each group was more or less homogenous. But not any more. Perhaps our thinking should have evolved in 30 or 40 years? Certainly, the world has changed. And those changes have been radical:

- The virtual disappearance of communism as a politico-economic system.
- The rise of fundamentalist religion (Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Jewish) as a political force.
- The Asian Tigers and the oil economies.
- The collapse of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact, and the rapid incorporation of eastern Europe into Western institutions.
- The rise of India and other regional mega-powers.

Politically, militarily, and economically, the global fault-lines no longer follow simple geographical patterns. Globalisation has fundamentally changed governance, undermining state sovereignty. Many scores of transnational corporations have budgets far larger than most nations, and the World Trade Organization

and the New York Stock Exchange have far more real power than most governments. Mass migration has created large "Southern" minorities inside most Northern states. And most Southern states have developed an indigenous super-rich, with some kleptocratic elites plundering national resources like post-colonial robber-barons.

After 50 years of accelerating globalisation, does the North-South paradigm still mean anything useful? Its unstated assumptions are that the North is industrialised and the South is developing, that the North is rich and the South is poor, that the North is skilled and the South is not. All three premises now contain more exceptions than an insurance policy. "The South" is, of course, as a term, nonsense geographically. Most of "the South" is in the northern hemisphere, which contains 85% of the planet's land and at least 90% of its population. The South is also nonsense in terms of wealth, since Singapore and the Emirates now have higher Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita than Spain and Greece. And it's nonsense in terms of development, since it lumps together powerhouses like Malaysia and Brazil with collapsing economies like Zimbabwe and Burma."

North and South are no longer broadly distinct and homogenous groups. Today, they are overlapping and heterogeneous categories, with at best only an historical validity. As useful as it has been for development and social justice movements, the North-South lens is now dangerously misleading, because it is state-based not people-based. There are, of course, still gross disparities of income and wealth between countries. But these are today dwarfed by the disparities between individuals - within states which are perceived as poor as well as within states which are perceived as rich. Over the last two decades, of 73 nations for which the *United Nations Development Programme* (UNDP) has data, 53 (with more than 80% of the world's population) have seen income inequality widen, while only 9 (with 4% of the population) have seen it narrow [6].

Today, even China and India have their billionaires. And the world's richest 500 individuals now have a combined income greater than that of the poorest 416 million [6]. The North-South lens blinds us to such outrages. It encourages an "Us-Them" approach which promotes alienation. In the North, it reinforces the stereotype that the South is a different planet, where people are accustomed to poverty and disease, and incapable of organising themselves. It implies that we should accept lower standards - e.g., ignoring misery and forgiving violations of human rights - in the South.

For the North, the North-South mentality is too often mere patronage, a 20th century version of noblesse oblige, a duty towards the less fortunate. Not wholly unworthy motives, but ones that are uncomfortably rooted in an illusion of superiority. Unfortunately, this archaic mindset is not confined to governments, but also dominates civil society, not least the development movement. It encourages lazy, self-serving thinking among Northern non-governmental organisations (NGOs). We preach partnership, but use our "partners" mainly to raise our own credibility and funding. We still parachute our "experts" into the South, although many Southern NGOs are now more professional than we are.

It's high time we threw away our distorting North-South eyeglasses, and started to see and to analyse the world as it really is. I can propose no useful replacement for the North-South model, though I am sure that any new paradigm should be people-based rather than state-based, just as the concept of human security is now more useful than that of national security. But I have a suggestion for replacing the North-South lens as a tool: as a way of gaining new insights. Panos Canada has begun to explore a "commonalities lens". Instead of looking for differences between countries and cultures, we are homing in on what they have in common.

We started field-testing this approach in 2006, when we teamed up with *Panos Caribbean and AIDS Vancouver* to create "*AIDS in Two Cities*", a photo-analysis by Pieter de Vos of the human impacts of, and community responses to, HIV/AIDS in Port au Prince and Vancouver [7]. Seen through the commonalities lens, AIDS looks remarkably similar in one of the richest and in one of the poorest cities in the world. In both Haiti and Canada, the ARV (anti-retroviral) drugs which can keep HIV-positive people alive are readily available to the wealthy, but not to the very poor. Haiti has, of course, a far greater proportion of people in absolute poverty than does Canada, but while their numbers differ their situations do not.

In each country, many of those who get free ARVs are unable to afford the adequate and balanced diet without which these medications do not work. So NGOs in both Vancouver and Port-au-Prince have to feed hungry people living with HIV/AIDS.

The North-South lens sees Canada as North and Haiti as South. It assumes that Canada must provide "technical assistance", "experts" and "training" to Haiti. The commonalities lens helps avoid these comfortable and self-deceiving attitudes. The Haitian NGO FOSREF (*Foundation for Reproductive Health and Family Education*), for example, whose sophisticated and successful youth clubs ingeniously integrate a multi-layered range of sex education into activities ranging from sports to street theatre, and drumming to language classes, could teach its Canadian counterparts a good deal.

The North-South lens emphasises what divides us, and lays the groundwork for alienation and patronage. The commonalities lens helps us realise what we share, and provides a basis for solidarity, and for learning from one another as equals. "*AIDS in Two Cities*" is, we hope, a modest first step towards seeing human societies more objectively, with all their diversity and defects. Some 2.5 billion people - 40% of the world's population - live on less than US\$2 a day. And many tens of millions - by no means all of them in the North - spend US\$2 or more on a daily cup of designer coffee [6].

Changing these shameful disparities doesn't need rocket science. A mere 1.6% of the income of the richest 600 million people could release US\$300 billion a year, and lift one billion people above the extreme poverty (US\$1/day) threshold [6]. There are few global challenges which are peculiar to one culture, one region, or one ethnic group. Health care, housing, access to clean water, HIV/AIDS, poverty, security from violence, human and civil rights, climate change and a score of other issues all have similar dimensions in both North and South. The North-South lens is obscuring the reality of the world we live in, and distorting our perceptions of social justice challenges which affect virtually every state in the world.

Appropriate and effective responses are usually derived locally. But our analysis should be global. I suggest that civil society should increasingly focus on commonalities, to spotlight the marginalised and deprived in all our societies. Lenses matter. How we see determines how we feel - and how we act. The North-South lens is blurred, cracked, and warped. At 50 years old, it's long past its sell-by date. Isn't it time we threw it away?

Jon Tinker
Executive Director
Panos Canada
jtinker@panoscanada.org

http://www.comminit.com/drum_beat_401.html

NOTES:

[1] For more information on the Panos Network, see: www.panos.org/

[2] For more information on Panos Canada, www.panos.org/

[3] Statistics on International Development 2005, "Figure 6: Net ODA/ GNI Ratios for the UK 1970-2004, United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID), 2005.

[4] "[FINAL ODA DATA FOR 2005](#)" [PDF], Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2006.

[5] For more information on the Bandung Conference, see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bandung_Conference.

[6] Human Development Report 2005. United Nations Development Programme, 2005.

[7] For more information on the "AIDS in Two Cities" project, see: [http:// www.comminit.com/](http://www.comminit.com/)