



# ALTERNAUTAS

(Re)Searching Development: The Abya Yala Chapter  
Vol.2 - Issue 1 [July 2015]

Julia Schöneberg

## **INGOs in Haiti: Development Actors as agents for Alternatives to Development?**

---

Alternautas is a peer reviewed academic journal that publishes content related to Latin American Critical Development Thinking.

It intends to serve as a platform for testing, circulating, and debating new ideas and reflections on these topics, expanding beyond the geographical, cultural and linguistic boundaries of Latin America - Abya Yala. We hope to contribute to connecting ideas, and to provide a space for intellectual exchange and discussion for a nascent academic community of scholars, devoted to counter-balancing mainstream understandings of development.

---

How to cite:

Schöneberg, J. (2015), INGOs in Haiti: Development Actors as agents for Alternatives to Development?, *Alternautas*, 2(1), 10-20. URL : <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2015/3/4/ingos-in-haiti-development-actors-as-agents-for-alternatives-to-development>

Editor : Alternautas  
<http://www.alternautas.net>  
London, UK.  
ISSN - 2057-4924

ISSN - 2057-4924

JULIA SCHÖNEBERG\*

## **INGOs in Haiti: Development Actors as Agents for Alternatives to Development?<sup>1</sup>**

Haiti. The “Pearl of the Caribbean”, the proud country with the only successful slave revolution in history, the first independent black republic. Usually these are not the attributes that immediately come to mind when thinking about Haiti. Quite in contrast, Haiti is known as the “Republic of NGOs”, the country with the second highest number of foreign NGOs in the world.<sup>2</sup> Even before the disastrous earthquake in January 2010 Haiti was already known as the poorest country of the Western hemisphere despite -or as some argue, due to- decades of international intervention and development efforts. Continued international support for past dictatorships has led to famines, human rights violations and kleptocracy. Haiti is generally considered a failed state, with weak governmental structures, little state accountability and high vulnerability to environmental catastrophes.

NGOs, once hailed as magic bullets to solve political, social and economic problems, have been criticized from many different perspectives, but nevertheless continue to be important actors in the development landscape of Haiti. However, five years after the disaster, the situation in Haiti has not essentially changed. At the same time, in general, the apparent failure of development approaches has also generally resulted in a fundamental critique of mainstream development, as proposed by Post-Development theory. Post-Development demands the

---

\* JULIA SCHÖNEBERG is a PhD Candidate at the University of Kassel, Germany as well as Junior Researcher at the Center for Development Research in Bonn, Germany.

<sup>1</sup> Article originally published in <http://www.alternautas.net/blog/2015/3/4/ingos-in-haiti-development-actors-as-agents-for-alternatives-to-development> on March 4th, 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Schuller: *Invasion or Infusion?*

questioning of the dominant discourses, representations and the power/knowledge nexus and argues that this can only be achieved by local, i.e. Southern, movements and organizations themselves. In this regard, strategies of Alternative Development and their participatory approaches are contrasted with the call for radical Alternatives to Development and the complete rejection of international development cooperation as such. Some theorists nevertheless contend that the cooperation of local and international organizations within the demands of Post-Development is possible. They argue that “the postdevelopment agenda is not [...] anti-development. The challenge of postdevelopment is not to give up on development, nor to see all development practice – past, present and future [...] as failed. The challenge is to imagine and practice development differently.”<sup>3</sup>

NGOs, particularly those seeking to imagine and practice alternatives, are confronted with the pitfalls of this aspiration and the reality of being a part of the structured mainstream development apparatus. Very little practical research has been conducted so far, both about the consequences for their work, as well as conflicts within Post-Development theory itself. Indeed, although Post-Development has been discussed extensively on a theoretical level and been criticized for lacking propositions of concrete and constructive alternatives, spaces for a practical Post-Development implementation have yet to be explored. In this discussion, I thus aim to investigate what practical contribution Post-Development has to offer for progressive development work. For this reason, the focus is laid on partnerships and cooperation between Haitian and international NGOs. Field research was carried out in the Haitian capital and in four departments between 2012 and 2014. Data was collected through participant observation, narrative interviews and group discussions with International (INGO) and Haitian NGOs (HNGO) staff, activists, community leaders and grassroots groups.

### **The Post-Development critique**

Different development and poststructuralist critiques in the 1980s and 1990s, according to which power, ideology and representation are the root causes of apparent problems rather than economic nor methodological topics, eventually led to the deconstruction of the development paradigm and the emergence of Post-Development theory. Post-Development argues that (classical or mainstream)

---

<sup>3</sup> Gibson-Graham: *Surplus Possibilities*, p. 6.

development has failed and needs to be dismissed. From this point of view, approaches of Alternative Development should not be pursued any longer, but rather Alternatives to Development be sought. Post-Development differentiates itself particularly from Alternative Development in that “inequalities are perceived through political rather than technical lenses.”<sup>4</sup> Roughly, Post-Development theory can be divided into two waves. Radical authors of the first wave [such as Escobar (1985, 1992), Esteva (1997) Esteva and Prakash (1998) Ferguson (1997), Kothari (1997), Latouche (1993), Rahnema (1997), Rist (1997) and Sachs (1992)] reject international development cooperation altogether. However, they have also been criticized for romanticizing poverty and homogenizing the subaltern. More skeptical second wave theorists, such as Ahorro (2008), Matthews (2004, 2007), McGregor (2009), Nustad (2001, 2007) and Ziai (2004, 2007), have been less exclusive in their arguments. They hold external actors’ involvement in development cooperation acceptable under certain conditions.

I base my discussion on two skeptical Post-Developmental arguments in particular. First, in the “development-as-politics” approach, McKinnon envisages selective interactions and political confrontations of local actors with NGOs.<sup>5</sup> The need for this politicization has also been identified by Ferguson. He contends that in neither guise “does the “development” industry allow its role to be formulated as a political one.”<sup>6</sup> The technical framing de-politicizes the problem of poverty and inequalities and frames it in a managerial and technical way. According to McKinnon, it is not necessary to question the involvement of external actors wholly, but much more important to make clear “who should be inviting whom to participate”<sup>7</sup> in development processes. A similar proposition has been formulated by Matthews. She asks what (meaningful) contribution the “privileged” can make.<sup>8</sup> Like McKinnon she does not rule out a role for Northern (international) actors within the realms of Post-Development. Nevertheless, the question remains whether such a role according to the demands and premises of Post-Development is viable at all, and what a practical realization would look like that does not

---

<sup>4</sup> Andrew McGregor: *New Possibilities?*, p. 1696.

<sup>5</sup> Katherine McKinnon: *Postdevelopment, Professionalism, and the Politics of Participation*, p. 779.

<sup>6</sup> James Ferguson: *The anti-politics machine*, p. 256.

<sup>7</sup> McGregor, *Ibid.*, p. 1697

<sup>8</sup> Sally Matthews: *The Role of the Privileged in Responding to Poverty: perspectives emerging from the post-development debate*.

perpetuate aspects of the formulated critique with regard to paternalism and cooptation.

However, before this exploration commences a word on the use of binaries is necessary. Employing binary terms while attempting to criticize the dichotomous description of different parts of the world is problematic. It can only serve as generalization, yet it may prove to be helpful in confining external and internal roles to those of alleged experts versus beneficiaries. Agreeing with Matthews, the poor or oppressed will be defined as those “who struggle to meet their everyday material needs” and are faced with “exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence.”<sup>9</sup> This means that the privileged are not necessarily those located in the global North, but those that have unrestricted access to a variety of material and non-material resources. For the sake of this analysis INGOs are framed as such.

**“We also understand your idea, but we can’t....” ideal constructions of partnership and cooperation and their clashes with realities**

The concept of partnership is the dominating theme in how INGOs formulate their vision and approach. They consciously “no longer seek to impose their vision of development [...] but instead wish to be partners in strategies determined and owned by recipients themselves.”<sup>10</sup> They formulate a clear ideal type of partnership. However, interviews and observations with INGO respondents carried out on my fieldwork pointed to vast clashes of reality and construction. On the one hand, respondents show reflexivity, on the other they are eager to find justifications for why they cannot abide by the self-proclaimed principles. Largely there seems to be a high awareness about the short-comings of the own work; however, these are legitimized with outward and situational requirements and pressures. The sources of problems are located in the set-up of the development apparatus, its rules and restrictions, and the actors that consciously or unconsciously work to perpetuate this structure rather than reforming it. INGO actors feel they do not have any choice other than to abide by the rules and assume the role of intermediaries. They are torn between their ideal vision of work and the requirements they feel exposed to. Central to this trickle-down intermediarism is the quote: “We understand your

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>10</sup> Abrahamsen: The power of partnership, p. 1453.

idea, but we can't..."<sup>11</sup>, pointing not only to the restrictions of the dispositif but also to the upward accountability structure and the inevitable interconnection of time, money and efficiency. Essentially, the idea of change, framed within categories of activism or protest, is contradictory to the existing bureaucratic structure with its focus on time, efficiency and the documentation of results. The dominant conduct of development interaction does not allow for this idea, even though that may be the official discourse and aim.

### **Repoliticizing development**

The analysis of interactions within the realm of project work shows that (power) imbalances within the relationships persist and cannot, despite awareness of their existence, be overcome. In exploring possible alternative roles for the so-called privileged (i.e. INGOs) it can be asked whether engagement in project work, due to its inherent faults, is valid at all or should be replaced by a different mode of engagement. One possible solution is the involvement in a more profound way by means of funding social change. Research has found that Haiti does not only have a history of community-based grassroots organisations and cooperative forms of work and mobilization, this culture can also still be found at present. To further explore a possible role of the privileged the hypothesis is posed that if people have rights, i.e. they can be citizens, they are able to assume a much more powerful position in order to prompt processes of change. To frame this hypothesis I make the following assumption: In order for development (interaction) to be meaningful and for it to produce long-lasting change it inevitably has to be political. The analysis of interaction within the realm of project work has demonstrated that a lack of further reaching social, political and economic demands leads to the implementation of the status quo. In this context, local organisations work to maintain this status, despite their initial progressive potential and the reliance on self-help and solidarity. The "Republic of NGOs" and its structures, rules and restrictions has been "diverting people's attention away from engagement with the government. [...] They feel like that is a losing game and so they would rather lobby an NGO [and] [...] settle for [...] these little handouts because it seems more tangible versus the bigger picture change."<sup>12</sup> It could be argued that the inherent pitfall in current interactions is the emphasis on projects rather than movements. In thinking about a theory of

---

<sup>11</sup> INGO respondent 2012.

<sup>12</sup> INGO respondent 2014.

development-as-politics the need for a repoliticization of development is assumed. This thought assumes that the current framing of development depoliticizes the problem of poverty and frames it in a managerial and technical way.<sup>13</sup>

### **“What can YOU do to help us that the state listens to us?”**

Haitians interviewed have demanded the state to take more responsibility. They claim that the state needs to listen and act. A participant of the kombit, a community work event based on self-help and solidarity structures, in the community of Fage explained the precariousness of the community’s living conditions and the feeling of being neglected and left behind by the state. He posed the question: “What can you do to help us so that the state listens to us?” This leads to the concept of citizenship and structures of civil society. Starting from a Gramscian understanding, civil society constitutes an “arena in which hegemonic ideas concerning the organisation of economic and social life are both established and contested.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, this sheds light on the demands raised by Haitians for support to make the state listen. INGO support of civil society while neglecting the capacities of the state can cause an aggravation of problems, as the state remains weak.<sup>15</sup> This produces a continued dependence on external intervention. Indeed, local groups do not struggle to build parallel structures to the state, they seek to engage with it and hold it accountable. In this regard, the state cannot be neglected. The support of protest and resistance needs to find a form “which avoids either bypassing civil society or undermining the state.”<sup>16</sup> Engaging social movement theory with notions of citizenship points towards an understanding of “mobilising citizens as knowledgeable actors engaged in a dynamic, networked politics across local and global sites.”<sup>17</sup> Following this line of argument, a starting point for a role of the privileged within a practical form of Post-Development is the support of political resistance movements and social justice advocacy. This approach differs from models of Alternative Development as it tackles sources of poverty, inequality and injustice rather than merely dealing with symptoms.

---

<sup>13</sup> Edward Royce: *Poverty and Power*, pp. 288-289.

<sup>14</sup> Bebbington et al.: *Can NGOs make?*, p.7.

<sup>15</sup> Alan Whaites: *Let’s get civil society straight*, pp. 131-134.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>17</sup> Leach and Scoones: *Mobilizing Citizens*, p. 3.

Haiti has been dubbed the “Republic of NGOs” for decades, not only since the earthquake in 2010. In 2002, the overall government budget of Haiti was roughly equivalent to that of the town of Cambridge, Massachusetts: a population of 10 million compared to 100,000.<sup>18</sup> Yet, the catastrophe has made the disastrous impact of this structure even more blatant. Of the almost US\$ 6 million of official aid disbursed to Haiti an estimated 90 percent bypassed the state and public agencies and was channelled via (international) NGOs.<sup>19</sup> It is no surprise that as a result public services remain chronically weak or worse, nonexistent, and that the thousands of (I)NGOs who are filling this gap reproduce an infrastructure with limited accountability and sustainability. However, one of Haiti’s greatest strengths are the many ways in which ordinary people organise to support one another in cooperatives and solidarity structures such as *gwoupman* or the *kombit*.<sup>20</sup> This wealth of social capital, oftentimes neglected by external actors, can serve to provide the much needed basis for building a responsive Haitian state that listens and reacts to the demands of its citizens. A shift from private (i.e. INGOs or corporations) to public ownership of services, rights and accountabilities is very much needed. Although the social and political landscape is certainly challenging, there are openings where social movement actors are engaging with state institutions and prompting change processes. Successful examples include DINEPA, the National Water and Sanitation Directorate, and its collaboration with local community groups in improving infrastructure and the Ministry of Women’s affairs, which in collaboration with the network of women’s organisations is leading the drafting of a much needed law against violence against women. To support these efforts the privileged can support the capacity of social movements to “build constituency, engage public decision makers and hold [...] [them] accountable.”<sup>21</sup> Project logic is not appropriate in this context. Rather, INGOs need to be flexible. They can support the communication costs of movement or network members and enable new channels such as the internet or social media. Other possibilities are the funding of legal advice and training, media training or advice on internal organisation. Most importantly, they can provide access to small sums of money for

---

<sup>18</sup> Paul Farmer: *Haiti after the Earthquake*, p. 135.

<sup>19</sup> Daniel Moss: *Building back Haitian Government Responsiveness*, p. 4 ; Vijaya Ramachandran et al.: *Haiti: Where has all the money gone?*, p.1. For a detailed overview of foreign assistance to Haiti, funding channels, recipients and private contractors see Rachmandran/Waltz (2012) and <http://www.lessonsfromhaiti.org/lessons-from-haiti/international-assistance/>.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Moss: p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*



“funding impromptu protests and emergency meetings”<sup>22</sup> in situations where the movement needs to react quickly.

However, there are limitations to be considered. Social movements distinguish themselves from INGOs in three aspects in particular: the degree of professionalization, the degree of politicisation and the fabric of their membership. NGOs are much more statist and immobile in their engagement, strategy and structure while movements are fluid. Interactions will inevitably clash at the point where the demand for the formulation of measurable indicators collides with the need for spontaneous and flexible reaction to newly arisen situations and events. Additional pitfalls arise regarding power imbalances and the risk of cooptation from the constellation of global NGOs interacting with local movements. There is the danger that interactions remain focused on the provision of financial funds and are determined by inherently paternalistic positions of speaking and listening and structures of representation. Nevertheless, funding social change and engaging in social advocacy seems to offer more spaces for contributing meaningfully than within established structures of projects.

Building from these findings, seeking global solidarity is a further viable entry point for a form of development-as-politics. This approach incorporates three main elements. First, the most important precondition for sustainable change is the dissolution of binaries. The employment of a global, political lens does not mean sacrificing the local for the sake of the global, but rather the dissolution of framing poverty and inequality as matters located in certain parts of the world and realising its factuality as a global problem. Second, transnational networks may be able to challenge structures that produce and maintain these inequalities. Networks that rely on the mutual exchange of knowledge and experience rather than the injection of expert knowledge usher in agency and open spaces of speaking and listening rather than of cooptation and representation. Third, one of the most restricting factors in attempting to achieve meaningful development was the imbalance in relationships resulting from the unequal distribution of resources and financial means. A shared management of available funds rather than the disbursement from one party to another can provide a solution for this shortfall. A possible solution is a global fund that is administrated by transnational networks.

---

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.gsdr.org/go/display&type=Document&id=3198>

In conclusion, one can say that although INGOs may have some spaces to engage in Alternatives to Development, these spaces remain restricted. To open these, it is inevitable that project logic, with its focus on efficiency and quick and measurable (quantitative) results, is abandoned in favour of more flexible and progressive ways of engagement. To counter the mainstream managerial frame, thinking within terms of global solidarity as a means of development-as-politics could provide the necessary tool for unravelling the “complex relationship between [...] egalitarian justification and [...] hierarchical structure, between the discourse of partnership and bottom up, and the reality of donor power and a global hegemonic discourse on development.”<sup>23</sup>

## References

- Abrahamsen, Rita: The Power of Partnerships in Global Governance, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol 25, No 8, 2004
- Ahorro, Joseph: The Waves of Post-Development Theory and a Consideration of the Philippines, <http://www.cpsa-acsp.ca/papers-2008/Ahorro.pdf> (Access: 20/01/2011)
- Cowen, M.P. and R.W. Shenton: *Doctrines of Development*, London: Routledge 1996
- Escobar, Arturo: Imagining a Post-Development Era? *Critical Thought, Development and Social Movements*, *Social Text*, No. 31/32 1992, S. 20-56
- Escobar, Arturo: *Encountering Development. The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*, Princeton: Princeton University Press 1995
- Esteva, Gustavo und Madhu Suri Prakash: *Grassroots Post-Modernism. Remaking the soil of cultures*, London: Zed Books 1998
- Esteva, Gustavo und Madhu Suri Prakash: *From Global Thinking to Local Thinking*, in: Majid Rahnema (Hrsg.) *The Post-Development Reader*, London: Zed Books 1997
- Ferguson, James: *The Anti-politics Machine. “Development”, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2003
- Gibson-Graham, J.K.: *Surplus Possibilities: Postdevelopment and Community Economies*, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 26 (1), 2005, S. 4-26
- Kothari, Rajni: *the Agony of the Modern State*, in: Majid Rahnema und Victoria Bawntree (Hrsg.)
- Latouche, Serge: *In the Wake of the Affluent Society. An exploration of post-development*, London: Zed Books 1991
- Leech, Melissa and Ian Scoones: *Mobilising Citizens: Social Movements and the Politics of Knowledge*, Working Paper 276, Institute of Development Studies, January 2007
- Matthews, Sally: *Post-development theory and the question of alternatives: a view from Africa*, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 25: 2 (2004), S. 373-384

---

<sup>23</sup> Terje Tvedt: *Development NGOs*, p. 136.

- Matthews, Sally: What, Then, Should We Do? Insights and experiences of a Senegalese NGO, in: Aram Ziai (ed.), *Exploring Post-development. Theory and practice, problems and perspectives*, New York: Routledge 2007
- Matthews, Sally: The Role of the Privileged in Responding to Poverty: perspectives emerging from the post-development debate, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 6, 2008, pp. 1035-1049
- McGregor, Andrew: Development, Foreign Aid and Post-Development in Timor-Leste, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 28 (2007), S. 155-170
- McGregor, Andrew: New Possibilities? Shifts in Post-Development Theory and Practice, *Geography Compass* 3/5 (2009), S. 1688-1702
- McKinnon, Katharine: Taking Post-Development Theory to the Field: Issues in development research, Northern Thailand, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, Vol. 49 (2008), No. 3, S. 281-293
- McKinnon, Katharine: Postdevelopment, Professionalism, and the Politics of Participation, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 97 (4), 2007, S. 772-785
- Moss, Daniel: Building back government responsiveness. The power and limitation of grassroots advocacy, <http://www.tbf.org/tbf/59/-/media/247B94F4C6B0426DA45B845290435CB8.pdf>
- Nustad, Knut G.: Development: the Devil We Know?, in: Aram Ziai (ed.), *Exploring Post-development. Theory and practice, problems and perspectives*, New York: Routledge 2007
- Rahnama, Majid und Victoria Bawntree (Hg.): *The Post-Development Reader*, London: Zed Books 1997
- Ramachandran Vijaya and Julie Walz. 2012. "Haiti: Where Has All the Money Gone?" CGD Policy Paper 004. Washington, D.C.: Center for Global Development. <http://www.cgdev.org/content/publications/detail/1426185>
- Rist, Gilbert: *The History of Development from Western Origins to Global Faith*, London: Zed Books 1997
- Royce, Edward: *Poverty and Power: The Problem of Structural Inequality*, Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers 2009
- Sachs, Wolfgang (ed.): *The Development Dictionary*, London: Zed Books 2007
- Sachs, Wolfgang (Hg.): *Wie im Westen so auf Erden. Ein polemisches Handbuch zur Entwicklungspolitik*, Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH 1992
- Schuller, Mark: Invasion or Infusion? Understanding the Role of NGOs in
- Contemporary Haiti, *The Journal of Haitian Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, pp. 96-119
- Tvedt, Terje: Development NGOs: Actors in a Global Civil Society or in a New International Social System?, in: Rupert Taylor (ed.): *Creating a Better World. Interpreting Global Civil Society*, Kumarian Press: Bloomfield 2004
- Whaites, Alan: Let's get civil society straight, in: Deborah Eade (ed.): *Development, NGOs and Civil Society. Selected Essays from Development in Practice*, Oxford: Oxfam GB 2000
- Ziai, Aram: Development discourse and its critics: an introduction to post-development, in: Aram Ziai (ed.), *Exploring Post-development. Theory and practice, problems and perspectives*, New York: Routledge 2007
- Ziai, Aram: Post-Development: Ideologiekritik in der Entwicklungstheorie, *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 47. Jg. (2006), Heft 2, S. 193-218

- Ziai, Aram: Entwicklung als Ideologie? Das klassische Entwicklungsparadigma und die Post-Development Kritik. Ein Beitrag zur Analyse des Entwicklungsdiskurses, Hamburg: Deutsches Übersee-Institut 2004