An undercurrent, by definition, is the unseen movement of water beneath the surface; its tug and motion are only perceptible upon submersion. It is an apt metaphor both for international development studies and its undergraduates. The intriguing tensions and debates within the field of IDS flow beneath a popularized veneer of humanitarian charity. And we, its undergraduates, study at the margins of the arena of the academy – much of our vitality and dynamism hidden from view. Undercurrent is a publication that immerses its readers in the ebbs and flows of development studies through the perspective of Canadian undergraduates.

Indelibly marked by the legacy of colonialism and the onward march of global integration, international development studies is a field illuminated by our confrontation with human difference and inequality. The just pursuit of unity in diversity promises to be a reiterating challenge for the next century, and water is a fitting icon for such a pursuit: an elemental reminder of our fundamental oneness that, through its definition of our planetary geography, also preserves our distance.

With aspirations of distinction, we are proud to offer Undercurrent.

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Un undercurrent (courant de fond), par définition, est le mouvement invisible de l’eau sous la surface. Son va-et-vient est seulement apparent par submersion. Ceci est une métaphore à propos des études de développement international et des étudiants au baccalauréat. Les tensions et les débats fascinants au sein du domaine du développement international circulent sous l’aspect superficiel de la charité. De manière comparable, nous qui étudions aux marges du champ académique voyons que notre vitalité et notre dynamisme sont souvent masqués aux regards d’autrui. Undercurrent est une publication qui immerge ses lecteurs dans le flux et le reflux des études de développement international à travers la perspective d’étudiants canadiens.

Indélébilement marquées par l’héritage du colonialisme et de l’intégration mondiale actuelle, les études de développement international sont un champ éclairé par notre confrontation avec la différence humaine et l’inégalité. La poursuite judicieuse d’une unité au sein de la diversité promet d’être un défi récurrent pour le siècle à venir. L’eau est une image appropriée pour une telle quête : elle est un rappel élémentaire de notre unité fondamentale, qui, parce qu’elle définit notre géographie planétaire, préserve aussi notre distance.

Avec des ambitions de distinction, nous sommes fiers de présenter Undercurrent.
Welcome to the Fall/Winter 2008 issue of Undercurrent: The Canadian Undergraduate Journal of Development Studies. After joining the Undercurrent team in August as the new Editor-in-Chief, I was put to work right away on the issue that you have in front of you. When I wasn’t terrified of letting down the hard-working editors that have come before me, I got steadily more excited about the opportunity a journal like Undercurrent presents to young academics. The learning relationship between authors and editors is quite different than that between students and professors. The process of polishing and repolishing, revisiting an argument over and over again as several reviewers identify gaps, is one that is largely absent from the undergraduate experience. It is this type of process, rather than the quest for good grades, that helps young undergraduates to make the jump from studenthood to academia.

The individuals that contributed to Undercurrent’s issue this year were often as fresh as I am to the team, including a number of guest faculty advisors: Albert Berry (University of Toronto), John Cameron (Dalhousie University), Alex Latta (Wilfrid Laurier University), and Viviana Patroni (York University). Thank you for joining the team and we hope to see you as part of the next issue! Thanks also to our returning faculty advisors, Haroon Akram-Lodhi (Trent University), Rachel Bezner-Kerr (University of Western Ontario) and Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert (McGill). Welcome and thank you to our new Editorial Board members who took on an especially large number of reviews this semester: Rory Morrison (University of Guelph), Arunan Sivalingam (University of Calgary), Hilary Clauson (Simon Fraser University), and Scott Verhoeve (Wilfrid Laurier University). I also want to thank our returning Editorial Board members who have lent their experience to this issue: Deborah Lightman (McGill University), Jenny Mason (Dalhousie University), and Hilton Yip (York University).

Of course, without the authors there would be no issue and I want to thank them for their hard work and patience as I learned the ropes. In this issue, Sam Grey (Trent University) unpacks the practice of polygyny in Sub-Saharan Africa. Jayne Grigorovich (University of Toronto) examines agency among slum dwellers throughout the world, and Aidan MacDonald (Carleton University) looks at how water resources relate to Palestinian statehood. Jonathan Patch (Wilfrid Laurier University) investigates the role of women’s non-violent activism in the Niger Delta resource conflict. Our very own Scott Verhoeve (Wilfrid Laurier University) looks at how peace is taught in the Cambodian education system. Last but not least, Jenna Meguid (University of Toronto) provides a critical review of Jeffrey Sachs’ book, The End of Poverty.

On behalf of the team, I hope you enjoy this issue of Undercurrent and see in it the potential for undergraduate students in development studies as thinkers as well as learners.

See you in the Spring!

Kate Jongbloed
Editor-in-Chief
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ABSTRACT – Despite the pervasive belief that monogamous marriage and the nuclear family are natural or inevitable features of modernity, many other nuptial and household forms exist. Polygyny – simultaneous marriage to multiple wives – is one such form. Today, widespread polygyny is virtually a sub-Saharan African phenomenon, and it perseveres here in the face of rapid, ostensibly antipathetic, socio-economic change. Predictions that development and modernization would obliterate traditional kinship systems in sub-Saharan Africa remain unrealized because they fail to appreciate that polygyny is not merely a historical relic or cultural idiosyncrasy, but a rational, internally consistent strategy that enables both individuals and groups, under particular conditions, to set, pursue, and achieve a broad range of goals. Accordingly, polygyny has not disappeared in those areas wherein the management of kin networks and household composition confers clear political, social, moral, or economic benefits.

RÉSUMÉ – En dépit de la conviction généralisée que le mariage monogamique et la famille bâtie autour d’un noyau sont de naturelles ou d’inévitables caractéristiques de la modernité, de nombreux autres arrangements nuptiaux et familiaux existent. La polygynie - mariage simultané à plusieurs femmes - est l’une de ces formes. Aujourd’hui, la polygynie est un phénomène à toutes fins pratiques d’Afrique sub-saharienne, et il persévère malgré la rapide, soi-disant anti-pathétique évolution socio-économique. Les prédictions voulant que le développement et la modernisation ait pu oblitérer les systèmes sociaux en Afrique sub-saharienne reste infirmée parce qu’elles ne parviennent pas à comprendre que la polygynie n’est pas seulement un vestige historique ou une idiosyncrasie culturelle, mais une stratégie rationnelle et cohérente permettant à la fois aux individus et groupes, dans des conditions particulières, de fixer, de poursuivre, et de parvenir à un large éventail d’objectifs. En conséquence, la polygynie n’a pas disparue dans ces domaines où la gestion des réseaux de parenté et la composition du ménage confère de clairs bénéfices politiques, sociaux, moraux, ou des avantages économiques.

Marriage is more than a vehicle of reproduction. It is a socio-cultural institution with wide-ranging political, economic, and legal implications that responds to a variety of structural and personal forces (Burnham 1987). Within this institution, cultural norms and economic motives reinforce one another, with the result that evolving marriage patterns are both a cause and a consequence of societal change (Gould, Moav, & Simhon 2004; Solway 1990). Despite the pervasive belief in Western societies that monogamous marriage and the nuclear family are natural or inevitable features of modernity,1 many other nuptial and household forms exist without being merely historical relics or cultural idiosyncrasies. Polygyny – simultaneous marriage to multiple wives – is one such form.

Today, widespread polygyny is virtually an African phenomenon, found in almost all traditional2 societies...
south of the Sahara. Of the twenty-nine nations in the world classified as having high rates of polygyny, twenty-seven are located in sub-Saharan Africa, where the incidence of co-wives is ten times that found in other polygynous societies, and the institution has unique societal functions (Caldwell & Caldwell 1990; Goody 1973). As Jacoby (1995) asserts, here “[p]olygyny is not a mere cultural curiosity, but has important ramifications” (p. 939). Though the practice is now everywhere in decline (whether rapid or slow), and though this shift is often correlated with “development” or a transition to modernity, the interaction between climbing socio-economic indicators and falling levels of polygyny is both subtle and complex. While it is true that the various structural changes associated with modernity and development have had a profound impact on plural marriage, polygyny has proved surprisingly resilient. Predictions that urbanization, educational advancement, economic development, as well as Western capitalist modes of production and social organization would obliterate traditional kinship systems, ushering in the nuclear family as the African norm, remain unrealized (Goody 1973; Kaufmann & Meekers 1998). The logical conclusion must be that the incentives for polygyny retain considerable vigour even in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa, so that the institution perseveres in the face of rapid, ostensibly antipathetic, socio-economic change.

THE DECLINE OF AFRICAN POLYGYNY: THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL ACCOUNTS

In a review of the literature on polygyny’s decline, three main hypotheses provide the bulk of explanation and prediction. One posits that the institution is incompatible with the rise of capitalism, and must therefore fall away as pre-capitalist societies ‘evolve.’ Another asserts that polygyny becomes less desirable to societies as economies develop, and less attractive to individuals as consumption patterns Westernize. A third claims that polygyny is principally a practice of the rural and uneducated, making it a custom that wilts with the advance of urbanization and increasing levels of educational attainment. In an account of the persistence of polygyny, each ‘decline hypothesis’ merits individual attention.

Social Evolution, Capitalism, and the Globalization of Markets

Engels (1942) posits polygyny as a feature of mid-level societal complexity, and as yielding to monogamy with the rise of social classes and ‘civilization.’ This theory has been borne out, to some extent, by historical analyses and cross-cultural research (White & Burton 1988). It is true that polygyny is strongly associated with less socially stratified cultures, and it is virtually non-existent in modern, fully industrialized societies (Tietzeus & Reynar 1998). Socially imposed monogamy, coupled with privatization, typically leads to primogeniture, allowing much more flexible transfers of capital between generations, and thus facilitates at least part of the wealth accumulation necessary for the emergence and intensification of capitalism (Mueller 1995; Engels 1942). The webs of affinity created by polygyny, by way of contrast, redistribute wealth; indeed, to do so is part of their logic (Engels 1942). Because it is far more common in subsistence than exploitative economies, polygyny is found principally in extensive agricultural and some pastoral and semi-industrialized settings – descriptions which still apply to many sub-Saharan African societies today. Here, the occurrence of polygyny is most often tied to female value, measured in terms of contributions (potential or actual) to traditional modes of production, reproduction, and exchange (Goody 1973; Jacoby 1995). In polygynous societies, resource rights are typically vested in lineage groups, the household is the unit of labour, and accumulation and investment are concentrated values that have been [more] recently imported, mainly form the West” (1982, p.122).
in social goods (Goody 1973; Solway 1990).

In pre- and peri-capitalist societies, gradual enclosure of land and resources, the rise of the cash economy, and the introduction of wage labour in general (and a market for female labour in particular) all mitigate against polygyny’s large households and extended kinship networks (Kazianga & Sinha 2005; Timaeus & Reynar 1998; Ware 1979). Globalization, in its turn, widens the scope and deepens the effects of these processes. Over the past century and a half, incipient global trade and rising Western demand for goods such as coffee and cocoa has steadily diverted land from traditional crops, which were associated with a higher number of female hours per hectare (Jacoby 1995). The result has been a reduction in women’s economic value, and thus the value of wives; a consequence that has been exacerbated by a growing national dependence on the cultivation and export of new, primary commodities and the subsequent uptake of modern farming technologies (Jacoby 1995; Lee 1979). Smallholder farming in sub-Saharan Africa has been (and is still being) either supplanted by intensive commercial agriculture or combined with wage labour and other non-agricultural activities (Kitching 1983), neither of which confers an advantage on families with two or more wives (Goody 1973; Lee & Whitbeck 1990). Coincident with this change, there has been a steady move to accumulation and investment in material goods rather than social resources, and the expression of class-based relations rather than kinship ties (Solway 1990). The rental of land to tenant farmers is now found in place of the household, lineage-based cultivation rights formerly seen in polygynous societies, while population growth has reduced the availability of land (and other resources) overall (Comaroff & Roberts 1977; Dorjahn 1988; Jacoby 1995; White & Burton 1988). Because these outcomes have been seen to different degrees in different regions, some theorists have looked to traditional socio-economic relations to explain variations in polygyny’s ebb.10

The timeline of that ebb has itself lent credence to the capitalism-based decline hypothesis. Polygyny’s wane has been most noticeable in the Southern sub-Saharan region, where the impacts of capitalism and class formation were felt earlier and harder (Kaufmann & Meekers 1998). In fact, paralleling the historical path of socioeconomic development, drops in polygyny occurred about ten years earlier in Southern Africa, as evidenced by the proportion of polygynously married women in older age groups.11 In addition to declining earlier, plural marriage has been ebbing fastest in the South. To a certain extent this is to be expected since capitalism’s narrowing of kinship ties weakens polygyny as an institution, which in turn weakens the depth and breadth of kinship ties.12 Overall incidence of polygyny is lowest in Southern sub-Saharan Africa (where less than a third of nations are highly polygynous), and climbs as one moves through the Eastern to the Western regions (with half of nations in the former and 80% of nations in the latter showing high rates of polygyny). Jacoby (1995) refers to this West-East swath as the ‘Polygyny Belt,’ extending from Senegal to Tanzania (p. 939).

Economic Development and the Westernization of Consumption

If one thing is indisputably true of sub-Saharan Africa, it is that everywhere its societies are undergoing rapid socio-economic and demographic change (Timaeus & Reynar 1998). There appears to be a strong correlation between polygyny and development concerns in this context, since both underdevelopment and polygyny are found to a far greater extent here than anywhere else on Earth. Over 93% of highly polygynous nations are located in sub-Saharan Africa, and three-quarters of these are classified as ‘Least Developed Countries.’13,14 Not surprisingly, a causal relationship has been actively sought, so that the macroeconomic picture of polygyny is consistently damning, with most political economists describing the institution as an outright ‘engine of decline.’ These analysts focus on the exchange of bride-wealth, an element of polygynous unions in which a positive ‘price’ for a bride is paid to her male kin to signify or seal the marriage contract. Because the accumulation of wives and female children thus constitutes an alternative investment strategy,

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9 The term ‘globalization,’ for the purposes of this article, refers to a reconfiguration of geography, remapping social, economic and political space in a way that minimizes the importance of place, distance and border. In the past quarter century, globalization specifically describes trans-border exchanges, both within and beyond the market, in which distance and time are almost inconsequential. See, among others, Jan Aart Scholte, Globalization: a critical introduction (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2000).

10 For example, according to Kaufmann and Meekers (1998), women in Lesotho enjoyed higher status in traditional society than did their peers in Botswana; consequently, earlier access to productive resources was replicated in later access to wage labour, and their marriage and kinship systems have more successfully adapted to capitalism.

11 In Southern Africa the sharpest drop is observed in the 30-39 and 40-49 age groups, while the 20-29 and 30-39 age groups are the ones in which the greatest drop is observed in West Africa (Hasaye & Liaw, 1997).

12 In other words, the movement toward capitalism’s class-based relations and away from those mediated by kinship appears to be a self-perpetuating phenomenon. Once initiated, the transition drives steadily toward the ‘death’ of plural marriage.

13 The United Nations currently defines 49 nations as LDCs, using criteria of: low national income (GDP per capita < US $900), weak human assets (a composite index using indicators for health, nutrition and education), and high economic vulnerability (a composite index measuring instability of agricultural production and exports, inadequate diversification, and economic smallness indicators) (UNCTAD, 2002).

14 See the table attached as Appendix A.
polygyny ‘crowds out’ investment in human capital (i.e. skills) and physical assets, with negative implications for the savings rate, aggregate capital stock, wages, interest rates, and gross domestic product per capita (Tertilt 2005; Tertilt 2006). Policymakers and planners following the development-based decline hypothesis thus favour “increasing a monogamous norm,” since it ostensibly brings with it rising investments in human capital and economic growth in the longer term (Gould, Moav & Simhon 2004, p.30). In Cote D’Ivoire, for example, polygyny was outlawed in the 1964 civil code in an attempt to legislate into being the Western-style household that was considered a precondition for economic development (ibid.). The Westernization of consumption patterns that often accompanies such development, promoting a consumerist ideal, has worked largely as political economists expected: rising lifestyle expectations and individualistic concerns about economic security have contributed to a growing perception of polygyny as prohibitively expensive, and as scattering wealth (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Anderson 2000; Comaroff & Roberts 1977).

This being said, accounts of polygyny’s decline based on economic modeling have, by and large, tended to beg the question.\textsuperscript{15} They have done so by decontextualizing choice, assuming the uniform availability, appeal, and priority of certain economic options – for instance, in their call for across-the-board investment in material rather than social spheres, when to do so appears wholly counterintuitive at the household level (i.e. when the present and future well-being of the family seems to depend on increasing the size of the domestic unit and the extent and robustness of kinship ties).\textsuperscript{16} The result is an account of rational behaviour that is blind to the very motivations it hopes to describe. This calls attention to the fact that, “[t]he economic determination of value is perhaps particularly pronounced in the West, but it has been projected onto African societies by Western writers who see these societies as somehow ‘simple’ and characterized by economically determined behaviour” (Kaufmann & Meekers 1998, p. 110). These authors devote insufficient attention to the fact that polygyny is neither a monolithic nor an insular phenomenon. Polygyny is, in fact, part of a complex web of context-specific social institutions; it is, as White (1988) has asserted, “multiply embedded” (p. 529).

\textit{Education and Urbanization}

Education and urbanization, both strongly associated with increasing levels of development, have emerged as the principal factors affecting intra-regional rates of polygyny. It is true that the higher the educational attainment of spouses, especially the wife, the lower the rates of polygyny observed (Agadjanian & Ezeh 2000; Coast 2006; Madhavan 2002). Of course, as Adams and Mburugu (1994) note, at best education can be cited as an indirect cause, since one must still explain how it actually acts to reduce plural marriage. According to supporters of the education-based decline hypothesis, ‘modern,’ educated lifestyles may be seen as antithetical to polygyny’s extended households for a number of reasons. Educated individuals are more likely to want to see all of their children educated, which may prove an economic hardship in larger families (Coast, 2006). Education also correlates with livelihood diversification in general, and urban employment in particular, both of which are limiters of polygyny (Coast 2006; Gulbrandsen 1986). Similarly, education tends to diminish the influence of polygynous elders, since an educated individual is more likely to become the head of an independent household at a younger age than did his or her parents (Coast 2006; Hasaye & Liaw 1997). Education may also directly limit the demand-side of the polygynous marriage market, since educated individuals often seek a comparably educated spouse (Bledsoe 1990). Finally, there is likely to be some truth to the hypothesis that Western nuptial norms have been disseminated through education, since many African schools have their roots in missions, and Christianized African elites tend to characterize polygyny as “‘backward’ or ‘bush’ behaviour” (Hasaye & Liaw 1997, p. 294).

Acknowledging the validity of the above arguments, evidence of polygyny’s continuing relevance is available even among the most highly educated African men and women. Although only a small minority of contemporary African university-educated women are co-wives, they have been articulate and passionate in their defence of that status. From these women comes a description of modern, urban polygyny as “a creative combination of legitimacy and autonomy” (Arndt 2000, p. 716), which allows a woman to regard her husband “as both lover and friend” (Crumbley, 2003, p.600). These women typically have a separate household, sometimes living in a different city than their co-wives, while still securing legitimacy and access to their husbands’ resources for their children (ibid.).

In terms of urbanization as a reason for polygyny’s decline, it is true that polygyny is far more common in rural than urban areas, and is strongly concentrated in those regions most affected, historically, by male-out

\textsuperscript{15} ‘Begging the question’ is a logical fallacy in which the premises assume (implicitly or explicitly) the truth of the conclusion, or even claim its truth outright. It is similar to circular reasoning.

\textsuperscript{16} Other problematic assumptions of the economic models include, inter alia: uniform production technology, homogenous productivity of women, homogenous cost of women, and “fair” prices of inputs (Kaufmann & Meekers, 1998).
labour migration and sex-based survivorship (Anderson 2000; Bergstrom 1994; Dorjahn 1988; White & Burton 1988). In fact, a survey of five diverse sub-Saharan nations found that the likelihood of an urban household being polygynous was 45% lower than that of a rural household, even controlling for factors such as education and wealth (Timaeus & Reynar 1998). Supporters of an urbanization-based decline hypothesis claim that the modern urban context mitigates against polygyny’s large households in several interrelated ways: a higher cost of living, which precludes co-wives having their own houses and thus lowers the desirability of co-wife status; lower incidence of widow remarriage; higher risk of unemployment; widespread housing shortages; impeded privacy; higher transportation costs; lower wages, especially in the informal sector; elevated costs of raising and educating children; erosion of supportive social mechanisms and socialization processes, including rites of passage; lowered economic contributions of minors, and unfavourable sex and age ratios (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Bledsoe 1990; Comaroff & Roberts 1977; Dorjahn 1988; Gage-Brandon 1992; Hasaye & Liaw 1997; Jacoby 1995; Klomegah 1997; Madhavan 2002; Meekers & Franklin 1995). There is also evidence that wealthy polygynists, who can afford metropolitan living, locate their households away from urban centres as a form of insulation against (what is perceived as) the city’s harsh or negative family environment (Anderson 2000).

All of these factors, though, can be said to drive down the urban incidence of the practice without necessarily depressing urbanite views of polygyny, or the practicality of extended households in certain situations. In a survey done amongst rural and urban Ghanaian women, polygyny was characterized by both groups as “a recognized and appreciated custom that can transverse certain social and economic structures” (Anderson 2000, p.111). Similarly, a 1995 study revealed that up to 80% of currently monogamous urban men in Francophone Africa desired a second wife (Ezeh 1997). It bears mentioning, too, that rates of all forms of marriage are lower in urban areas, where even monogamous couples may find that establishing a household is an unaffordable luxury (Anderson 2000).

EXPLAINING THE PERSEVERANCE OF POLYGYNY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Those who describe the waning of polygyny seldom base their accounts on a single set of factors. Whatever the contributing elements cited, though, the ebb itself is invariably painted as inevitable, rapid, unwavering – and further, as logical or ‘right,’ given the assumptions of the major decline hypotheses. What those theories gloss over is the fact that the institution of polygyny is not per se inconsistent with development, modernity, or more broadly, rationality. A robust analysis must posit plural marriage in contemporary sub-Saharan Africa as more than a cultural artefact, which entails looking at the benefits polygyny confers today, in the context of the region’s economic conditions, ethical systems, and social and political traditions.

Power, Fertility, and Social Elaboration

Social practices and institutions are geared toward the perpetuation of the society itself (Klomegah 1997), and in most of sub-Saharan Africa, “the indigenous model of social structure is still based upon the notion that plural marriage leads to the elaboration of the hierarchy of social units which comprise the society” (Comaroff & Roberts 1977, p.97). Simply put: if marriage can be seen as the creation of political, economic, and social ties – the alliance of lineages, rather than merely the union of individual persons – then many more such linkages can be made through polygyny (Hasaye & Liaw 1997; Klomegah 1997; Kuper 1975; Solway 1990). Further, polygyny allows the progressive accumulation of alliances as an individual manages a lifelong career (Bledsoe 1990; Comaroff & Roberts 1977). In many African societies, traditionally “the main strategy for social advancement [was] to secure followers or dependents, rather than gaining access to land, ritual knowledge, or livestock. The latter [were] employed chiefly as a means to increase the number of dependents and [did] not constitute ends in themselves” (Meekers & Franklin 1995, p.318). Polygyny may thus be practiced today for its symbolic value, if nothing else. As a form of conspicuous consumption it grants prestige long after the practical basis of that prestige has withered (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Aluko & Aransiola 2003). Thus, in societies in which polygyny is or has been normative, it is still “the model in terms of which political rivalry is ordered” (Comaroff & Roberts 1977, p.117).

Yet there are significant enduring (rather than vestigial), moral (as opposed to politico-economic) and practical (versus merely perceived) benefits to the institution. In sub-Saharan Africa, the kinship networks created by polygynous unions expand families’ usage rights over communally owned resources (Bledsoe 1990; Hasaye & Liaw 1997; Jacoby 1995). They also establish a kind of credit and insurance system where a formal market

17 In many of the areas under discussion, certain phenomena (for example, periodic or sustained armed conflict, or even the physical dangers associated with traditionally male occupations, such as hunting) acted to depress the number of men in the population.
for these is lacking, using risk-pooling to address long-term security, short-term shifts in needs and means, and periodic crises (Coast 2006; Jacoby 1995; Kazianga & Sinha 2005; Oppong 1992). Polygyny additionally acts as a retirement and disability strategy, since bride-wealth facilitates consumption in later life and failing health (Dorjahn 1988; Jacoby 1995; Tertilt 2006). Moreover, networks of kinship accomplish these various ends without resorting to contract-type relationships; they evidence, as Solway (1990) has expressed it, the logic of investments in people over investments in things. Polygyny is thus “an expression of a way of life which is deeply embedded in cultural obligation” (Klomegah 1997, p. 73), and in which there is far more going on than simple utility maximization:

A critical aspect of kinship which requires special consideration is its morality […]. Kinship […] is the basis of long-term commitment, characterized by sharing without reckoning and by generalized reciprocity within kin groups. Such relationships are invaluable for helping to maintain the viability of insecure small units in precarious circumstances, in which long-term reciprocity, with no immediate calculation of debt and repayment period, may make all the difference to survival (Oppong 1992, p. 75).

Polygynous kinship networks can also serve women’s specific interests and needs. Traditional lineage structures, with their networks of support and interdependence, secure access rights for women in contexts where men usually control resources (Caldwell, Caldwell & Urubuloye 1992; Cook 2007), while offsetting limited rights for unmarried women to own assets, confer legitimacy to their children, inherit, and make independent decisions (Anderson, 2000; Gould, Moav, & Simhon 2004). The more numerous and robust kinship ties established through polygyny also better protect women against the outright appropriation of their labour, since wives essentially exchange a share of their output for access to productive resources (Bay 1982; Jacoby 1995; Oppong 1992). Finally, for both men and women, meeting fertility goals is a very important incentive in pro-natalist African societies, wherein it is considered every fecund individual’s right to have children, generational succession is a key concern, and being childless is both a fearful and a pitiful prospect (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Aluko & Aransiola 2003; Caldwell & Caldwell 1987; Cook 2006). Polygynous men, on average, both desire and have more children than their monogamous peers – indeed, the desired number of children per polygynous man typically exceeds the total fertility rate, creating the perceived necessity of meeting reproductive goals by taking on additional spouses (Kazianga & Sinha 2005; Ezeh 1997).

Labour and Household Productivity

In most extensive agricultural and some semi-industrial societies the family is the unit of labour, and as such “must be structured in such a way as to maximize productive efficiency according to specific environmental and technological conditions” (Lee & Whitbeck 1990, p.22). Polygyny in sub-Saharan Africa can, therefore, be seen as a strategic response to the economic forces that make multiple-worker families advantageous (Lee 1979). These forces tend to arise where activity is small-scale and labour-intensive; production is extensive and non- or only superficially mechanized; and “large and differentiated work groups are at least potentially adaptive” (Lee & Whitbeck, 1990 p.22). Accordingly, polygyny is most often observed in non- and semi-industrial settings, where an increase in the number of workers leads to an increase in per capita productivity (Klomegah 1997). Herein, “it is labour […] that is the scarce factor in production, and it is not available on any market other than the marriage market” (Oppong 1992, p.74). The economic reasoning employed here is sound, since a polygynous household augments the workforce without the need for supervision, and without the need to pay wages (in this, the practice is similar to sharecropping) (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Hasaye & Liaw 1997; Jacoby 1995). Further, production is coincident with childcare, care for the elderly and ill, and work-at-home, while such cooperative activity often yields higher value in and of itself (Aluko & Aransiola 2003; Anderson 2000; Dorjahn 1988; Oppong 1992). It is for these reasons that Steady (1987) characterizes polygyny as both “a survival mechanism and a subsidizing institution” (p. 212).

Simply put: polygyny provides labour to the domestic enterprise (Kazianga & Sinha 2005). Cross-cultural studies have tended to focus on female labour in particular, noting that in Africa, “economic productivity in women is usually highly valued” (Bay, 1982 p.6), and that “the economic role of women [here] is significant – and in several respects unique” (Singh & Morey 1987, p. 744). Higher female productivity is correlated with polygyny in the sub-Saharan region where hoe/shifting agriculture is practiced, in certain semi-industrialized modes of production, and/or where women are active in trade networks – in all of which contexts they make significant

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18 Though fertility has declined throughout sub-Saharan Africa, which has for the past several decades undergone a unique ‘fertility transition’ involving all reproductive ages, traditional views endure (Hasaye & Liaw, 1997).
contributions to the household’s earnings (Goody 1973; Hasaye & Liaw 1997). Yet because women are also the mothers of sons, polygyny benefits productivity regardless of whether it is female or male labour that confers an economic advantage (Aluko & Aransiola 2003; Lee & Whitbeck 1990). Further, it is necessary to consider the economic contributions of children, which can be considerable in this context, and which are also maximized under polygyny (Bledsoe 1990; Cook 2007; Goody 1973; Gulbrandsen 1986).19

Labour contributions to the household, maximized under polygyny, are not just limited to production for internal consumption or external exchange. They also extend to work-at-home (Goody, 1973). In ‘less developed’ countries in particular, the work performed by the extended household is often critical to maintaining the family’s income and well-being (Singh & Morey, 1987). Study data from West Africa shows that, in one polygynous agricultural community, the value of home production amounted to almost two-thirds of the level of family income derived from the farm itself.20 Although goods produced by the household seldom show up in national accounts, since many are neither marketed nor even directly measurable, a high percentage of products and services consumed by families have traditionally been home-produced (Singh & Morey 1987). Though in recent years imported goods and changing tastes have eroded the efficacy of this practice, home production remains a major subsistence strategy in sub-Saharan Africa (Bay 1982).

Women’s Networks: Support, Autonomy, and Cooperation

Another key benefit of polygyny is its ability to give rise to various kinds of female networks. ‘Wealth-increasing polygyny’ is associated with co-wives’ profitable economic cooperatives, while in ‘subsistence-maintaining polygyny,’ women’s cooperatives devoted to work-at-home and child rearing are “expressed through the idiom of polygynous marriage” (Anderson, 2000 p. 102). Income-generating female economic networks are observed far more commonly in the Western region, since West African women are more likely to earn their own living, typically by trading (Caldwell, Caldwell & Orubuloye 1992; Steady 1987; Ware 1979). In these unions, co-wives are often invited into the marriage by a first wife looking for help with her market-based activities (Ware 1979). These second wives may be based elsewhere, for example along key distribution points in regional trade networks, yet the household still operates as a cohesive economic unit (Bay 1982). Even beyond the confines of the Western region, household-based female economic cooperatives are relatively common, and a broad range of skills training among co-wives has been noted right across sub-Saharan Africa (Bay 1982; Steady, 1987; White & Burton 1988).

Female networks in ‘subsistence-based polygyny’ orbit reproductive, rather than productive activity. African women often cite meeting children’s needs as their paramount concern, with income-generation outside the home valued only insofar as it helps them to achieve that end (Anderson 2000). Because “[s]ocial, economic, and cultural institutions in Africa prescribe different costs and benefits of childbearing and childrearing for women and men” (Dodoo 1998, p. 233), major childcare benefits accrue within female networks (Bay 1982; Bledsoe 1990), in which “the presence or absence of the husband seems irrelevant” (Anderson 2000, p. 102). Consequently, where fosterage and other alternative childcare systems are in place, rates of polygyny are lower (ibid.). In fact, one author asserts that Southern African polygynous marriages “resemble contracts among females to allocate child care far more than contracts among men to allocate women” (ibid., p.109). Further, because women-headed households throughout Africa and the diaspora allocate far more resources to meeting children’s needs, and polygynous households contain greater numbers of women, polygyny has been posited as a kind of ‘intermediate form’ between female- and male-headed family units (Anderson 2000; Kerns 1995).

Many beneficial aspects of female networks are simultaneously practical and emotional. Within the polygynous household, junior wives contribute to more than just a more equitable division of labour (Hasaye & Liaw 1997; Ware 1979). Their presence helps to counter the confinement and isolation a sole wife may feel, while lending other forms of psychological support that may not be forthcoming from the husband; indeed, polygynously married women often express that they are better friends with their co-wives than they could ever be with their husbands (Anderson 2000; Gage-Brandon 1992; Solway 1990). In fact, it is not uncommon for an estranged first/only wife to return to the household once a co-wife is in place (Anderson, 2000), since unhappily married wives are content to “share the burden of an unsatisfactory marriage with another woman” (Meekers & Franklin 1995, p. 321). This may help to explain why research from Nigeria, backed by similar findings in Kenya, shows that marriages with two wives are actually more stable than monogamous ones (Ezeh 1997; Gage-Brandon 1992). While competitiveness and covetousness certainly do exist between co-wives, they are not necessarily sexual in nature (as Western writers often insist) but rather often reflect a desire for each wife.

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19 In Burkina Faso, for example, almost 80% of children aged 10-15 are economically productive (Kaziga & Sina, 2005).

20 Where $770 was generated through crop production, $470 was simultaneously generated through work-at-home (Singh & Morey, 1987).
to secure resources for her own children (Meekers & Franklin 1995; Solway 1990; Ware 1979). Offsetting this negative potential, co-wives note that through polygynous marriage they can “plan together to advance the welfare of the household as a whole” (Ware 1979, p. 189). This synergy is especially important in certain social strata. In the families of ‘headmen,’ for example, negotiating the needs of many and frequent guests is seen as a socio-political necessity that is beyond the coping ability of a single wife (Meekers & Franklin 1995).

At broader levels of concern, it has been argued that polygyny’s domestic networks entail the kinds of bonds between women that help to limit patriarchy, providing a subtle resistance to male domination and offsetting economic dependence (Oppong 1992; Steady 1987). When discussing normative or liberatory strategies, African women can, and often do express different priorities, for instance emphasizing general economic interests (those affecting the community as a whole) over more familiar feminist issues (those affecting only women) (Ware 1979). In those contexts where the purpose of husbands is principally to confer legitimacy on children, some African women cite polygyny as an outright liberating force (ibid.). Arguably, wives can have more autonomy in a polygynous household than in a monogamous one – indeed, since the relationship between husband and wife is not 1:1, some measure of independence is unavoidable (ibid.). Further, the layout of a traditional compound sees each co-wife established in her own home, where she wields considerable authority (Madhavan 2002). These women feel that, because of the influence co-wives can collectively exert, they command more disposable income than do their monogamous peers, while enjoying a comparatively certain position in the household (unlike monogamously married women, who may well become co-wives in the future) (Anderson 2000; Ware 1979).

Ultimately, although Western authors almost invariably paint polygyny as straightforward female subservience to autocratic husbands, a counter-case can be mounted (Solway 1990). The ideological biases present in some of these analyses, while exhibiting an empathetic focus on the plight of women, tend to gloss women’s agency by viewing polygyny as inevitably imposed and always exploitative. These authors forget that “women are social actors in their own right who try to achieve their own goals within certain constraints imposed upon them” (Meekers & Franklin 1995, p. 322). Kaufman and Meekers (1998), for example, describe how “in societies that greatly value fertility, potency has a literal meaning, and women will choose [polygynous] marriage as a strategy to gain power” (p.110). Similarly, women interviewed in the late 1980s in South Africa stated plainly that they benefited from polygyny far more than did their men (Anderson 2000). In the end, even committed opponents of the institution must admit that African women’s views of polygyny are mixed, and only fully comprehensible within their particular cultural, historical, economic, and personal milieux (Madhavan 2002; Meekers & Franklin 1995; Timaeus & Reynar 1998; Ware 1979).

TRANSFORMATIONS AND VARIATIONS IN PLURAL MARRIAGE: THE EMERGENCE OF QUASI-POLYGYNOUS TEMPLATES

In situations of societal change, continuity and discontinuity often occur in tandem. This observation proves true of polygyny in the contemporary African context, so that plural marriage here is currently being both sustained and transformed. In sub-Saharan Africa, there has been a rise in alliances wherein one wife is ‘legal,’ and others are participants in a less formal union (Meekers & Franklin 1995). These quasi-polygynous templates include serial monogamy, deuxieme bureau, concubinage, outside marriage, polyandrous motherhood, and ‘sugar-daddy’ relationships (Bledsoe 1990; Dorjahn 1988; Madhavan 2002; Smit 2001). A man today may undertake several unions, and then begin to shape outcomes and manipulate costs by “selecting a principal wife and marginalizing the rest as outside wives” (Bledsoe 1990, p. 122). A woman, for her part, may opt to be the informal partner of a wealthy man, instead of either the co-wife of an affluent man or the sole wife of a poor monogamist (after all, it is not uncommon for ‘outside wives’ to be set up in their own homes, and even in their own businesses) (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Siegel 1992). Polygynously married women are aware, and somewhat fearful, of these informal partnerships; somewhat ironically, this fear serves to bolster their opinions of polygyny as an institution. Unlike co-wives, outside wives have a status that is “fluid and uncontrollable” (Ware 1979, p. 187), and are thought to command a disproportionate amount of resources, particularly if they have children of the husband’s lineage (Meekers & Franklin 1995; Siegel 1992). Thus, in a survey of urban women in Nigeria, 75% of interviewees stated that they would prefer a husband to take a co-wife rather than a girlfriend (Aluko & Aransiola 2003).

Of course, there are differences between traditional polygyny and these more recent quasi-polygynous templates. One is, as Solway (1990) rightly points out, that both sexes can play at this ‘new game’ of extra-marital sexual expression and alliance. Another difference concerns the effects that these newer forms have on social elaboration. Some authors argue that the structural implications of polygyny and quasi-polygyny are
identical, since the individuals engaged in informal or serial unions may still use them to initiate and manage a network of affinal alliances, while others point out that these new kinship ties are neither as broad nor as deep, and thus neither as enduring nor as powerful (Comaroff & Roberts 1977; Solway 1990). Despite these dissimilarities, practices like concubinage and serial monogamy are clearly strategies employed to resolve problems arising from “the transformation of a polygynous marriage system [...] as this is expressed in the context of [specific] cultural logic” (Comaroff & Roberts 1977, p. 119).

Polygyny is on the decline in sub-Saharan Africa – but so too is marriage itself. Here economic forces, attitudes, and behaviours have been changing apace. Alongside the rising feasibility of being a self-supporting widow or divorcée is found growing freedom in partner choice and extra-marital expression, and increasing acceptance of spinster households and extra-marital births (Comaroff & Roberts 1977; Hattori & Larsen 2007; Oppong 1992). In recent years, Africa as a whole has experienced a significant growth in the number of never-married women, and while marriage still “legitimates sexuality and fertility” (Timaeus & Reynar 1998, p. 149), it is decreasingly seen as the only means to this end (Mokomane, 2006). This behavioural shift may be an outcome of the fact that “contemporary marriage offers few of the protections of former times yet requires undiminished, even increased, energies from women” (Bay 1982, p. 13). In many regions the privatization of bride-wealth alone, by moving to cash instead of cattle, seriously weakened the obligations that traditionally bound menfolk to the causes and support of women (Adams & Mburugu 1994; Anderson 2000; Hasaye & Liaw 1997). Meanwhile, sub-Saharan African nuptial systems and household forms show adaptation, with a continuing influence of polygyny.

CONCLUSION

Though levels of polygyny in Africa fell precipitously between the late 19th and mid-20th century, they have levelled off since, and periodic rises have actually been observed. Further, in only three sub-Saharan nations is there evidence of a sharp drop in plural unions over the past few decades. As should be expected, polygynists are not a homogenous group, and therefore no single, well-defined hypothesis has proven able to account for patterns – past or present – of African polygyny (Spencer 1980; Timaeus & Reynar 1998). Micro- and macro-level factors affecting the practice occur, overlap, and penetrate to different degrees in different areas, with no one factor operating independently. Further, forces which fail to account for its prevalence or intensity in one context are often undeniably implicated in another. Unfortunately, the actual ‘complex social shift’ affecting polygyny has lent itself to simplification in the literature (Solway, 1990), with the only certainty being that “the nuclearization of the African family has failed to materialize” (Jacoby 1995, p. 939). The indigenous model, while undeniably changed, retains a firm foothold in the nations of sub-Saharan Africa today (Kaufmann & Meekers 1998).

Decline hypotheses forfeit much of their predictive power because they fail to appreciate that polygyny is not an irrational cultural artefact or per se impediment to development or modernity, but an internally consistent strategy that enables both individuals and groups, under particular conditions, to set, pursue, and achieve a broad range of goals (Hasaye & Liaw 1997). Plural marriage has not disappeared in those areas wherein the management of kin networks and household composition has clear political, social, moral, or economic benefits. In reflecting on the relative advantages and disadvantages of polygyny it is important to remember that, “every social system is a reflection of its historical response to human problems, and these constitute different solutions that are peculiar to the system. [Further], no two systems of social organization are ever the same, nor are human solutions ever perfect” (p. 75). As a highly contextualized adaptive strategy with strong cultural and moral roots, polygyny can and will continue to evolve as economic conditions, political pressures, personal preferences, and individual and collective values change across the diverse socio-cultural geography of sub-Saharan Africa.

REFERENCES


See Appendix A.

For example, in Senegal in the period 1974-94 (Timaeus & Reynar, 1998).

These are Ghana, Kenya, and Rwanda. See Appendix A.

See Appendix A.


**APPENDIX A**

**HIGHLY POLYGYNOUS SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN NATIONS: SELECT DATA AND INDICATORS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
<th>SSA REGION</th>
<th>DEVELOPMENT</th>
<th>STATUS OF POLYGYNY</th>
<th>GEI</th>
<th>SEX RATIO</th>
<th>PM. MEN</th>
<th>PM. WOMEN</th>
<th>CHANGE IN PM. WOMEN</th>
<th>WIVES/MAN</th>
<th>NEVER-MARRIED WOMEN</th>
<th>TFR</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Benin</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>Illegal</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>LDC</td>
<td>Restricted</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Cameroon</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>-3%</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Central African Republic</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Chad</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>Restricted</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Comoros</td>
<td>Southern</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Congo, DRC</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>Illegal</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Congo, Republic</td>
<td>Central</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Cote d’Ivoire</td>
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<td>LDC</td>
<td>Illegal</td>
<td>37</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>-12%</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Gabon</td>
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<td>Restricted</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Gambia</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>Illegal</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>...</td>
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<td>24</td>
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</tr>
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<td>12. Ghana</td>
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<td>Legal</td>
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<td>50</td>
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<td>23</td>
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<td>24</td>
<td>3.9</td>
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<td>Illegal</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.8</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>-34%</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>4.8</td>
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<td>Illegal</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
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<td>17</td>
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<td>Legal</td>
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<td>50</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Mali</td>
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<td>Restricted</td>
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<td>29</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>7.4</td>
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<td>LDC</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.1</td>
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<td>Restricted</td>
<td>64</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>...</td>
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<td>16</td>
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<td>20. Niger</td>
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<td>47</td>
<td>49</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>21. Nigeria</td>
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<td>Legal</td>
<td>43</td>
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<td>...</td>
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<td>-4%</td>
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<td>LDC</td>
<td>Restricted</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>5.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Senegal</td>
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<td>LDC</td>
<td>Restricted</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>50</td>
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</tr>
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<td>24. Sudan</td>
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<td>Legal</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>+20%</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Tanzania</td>
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<td>Restricted</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Togo</td>
<td>West</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>25</td>
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<tr>
<td>27. Uganda</td>
<td>East</td>
<td>LDC</td>
<td>Legal</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>-13%</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1. This table shows select development, gender equity, geographical, demographic, legislative, and marriage and fertility-related data/indicators for sub-Saharan African nations in which at least 10% of married men have multiple wives. Compiled using data from CIA, 2008; Mokomane, 2006; SW/TWI, 2008; Tertilt, 2005; Timaeus & Reynar, 1998; UNDP, 2007; UN/ESCCHR, 2003; and Von Struensee, 2005.
2. Level of development measured using United Nations criteria. ‘LDC’ refers to a nation classified as a ‘Least Developed Country.’ ‘Moderate’ is used to refer to countries classified as ‘middle income’ and having ‘medium human development.’ These are nations with a per capita income of between US $876-$10,725 and a Human Development Index (a normalized measure of life expectancy, literacy, education, standard of living, and GDP per capita, with a value of between 0 and 1) of 0.500-0.799 (UNDP 2007).
3. Legal status of polygyny, where ‘restricted’ refers to countries in which the consent of the first wife is required or the number of wives is limited by law. Note that in some nations polygyny is illegal only in Christian marriages, but not civil, Islamic, or traditional unions – Tanzania is one such example (Meekers & Franklin, 1995).
4. Score on the 2008 Gender Empowerment Index, which uses a selection of indicators in three different dimensions (education, participation in the economy and empowerment). A maximum value of 100 indicates complete gender equity in all three dimensions.
5. Sex ratio, or the percentage of the population that is female, using 2007 data tables.
6. Percentage of married men in a polygynous union (measured using both legal marriages and cohabiting unions).
7. Percentage of married women in a polygynous union (measured using both legal marriages and cohabiting unions).
9. Average number of wives per married man.
10. Percentage of women aged 15-49 who have never been married.
11. Total fertility rate, or the estimated number of children per woman over her life cycle, using 2007 data tables.
Informality and Autonomy in the Slums of the Developing World

By Jayne Grigorovich

ABSTRACT – Recurring narratives of victimhood in urban development discourse and popular media cement urban poverty in a (misplaced) state of passivity and permanence. By juxtaposing the portrayal of the urban poor to various innovative informal coping strategies across the developing world, this paper argues against such depictions. Instead, it is argued that various informal urban activities such as squatting on public land, encroachment, technological leapfrogging, networking, and gang surveillance initiatives are examples of self-directed anarchic activity. Because informality allows people to participate in associational frameworks of their own design, informal urbanism is said to be a source of agency and ultimately a challenge to state-centered perspectives that posit the state as the sole architect of social welfare.

RéSUMé – Les récits récurrents de victimes dans le discours du développement urbain et les médias populaires cimentent la pauvreté urbaine dans une (mauvaise) position de passivité et de permanence. En juxtaposant l’image des pauvres des zones urbaines aux stratégies novatrices diverses d’adaptation informelle dans le monde en développement, ce document fait valoir l’opposé de ces représentations. Au lieu de cela, cet article fait valoir que les diverses activités urbaines informelles telles que l’occupation illégale sur les terres publiques, l’empiétement, le bond technologique, la mise en réseau et les initiatives de surveillance des gangs organisés sont des exemples d’auto-activité anarchique. Parce que l’informel permet aux gens de participer à des cadres d’associations de leur propre conception, l’urbanisme informel est conçu comme une source d’agence et, en définitive, un défi lancé au modèle voulant l’État comme seul architecte de la protection sociale.

INTRODUCTION: SLUMS IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD

In the context of unprecedented levels of global urbanization and slum sprawl, informal urban activity shows itself to be a meaningful source of agency among groups generally perceived as having little control over their own lives. This paper will examine the gap between the availability and demand for municipal services within the slums of the developing world, and the various informal activities that slum settlers pursue in an attempt to bridge this gap in the course of their daily lives. Although popular perceptions of urban poverty suggest that the poor are passive victims, informal residents are in fact incredibly motivated and creative in meeting their livelihood needs. Case studies of informal activities in Cairo, Rio de Janeiro, Istanbul and others show that whether people steal, encroach on public space, network, or bribe government officials, “informals” are constantly working to provide for themselves and their families. Ultimately, urban informality has an important role to play in international development discourse because it repositions our perception of the state as the dominant provider and architect of social welfare. Framing informal activity within a wider body of anarchist theory, this paper will show how the activities of informal slum settlers are demonstrations of independent, self-directed action among some of the world’s most vulnerable urban residents.
WHY DO SLUM SETTLEMENTS DEVELOP?

Over the past fifty years the pace of urbanization and city growth in developing countries has surpassed the ability of municipal actors to keep up with the provision of adequate urban housing and services, with the result that today over 924 million people in developing countries live in slums (UN-Habitat 2003, p. 2). The provision of modern urban infrastructure is a monumental project consisting of huge piles of “capital and sunk costs running into the quadrillions of dollars...[it is] an expensive, interwoven, complex [endeavor] which takes many, many generations to build up” (Worldchanging 2006, p. 302). As Third World cities gradually industrialized, rural-urban migration, natural city growth and a decline in human mortality rates have led to a population boom that municipalities could not finance and service adequately (UN-Habitat 2003).

Rapid urbanization, however, is only a partial explanation for the proliferation of slums. Although servicing is undoubtedly expensive, the extent of inadequate housing and poor infrastructure seen today has also resulted from various interacting pressures working at the global, state and municipal levels (UN-Habitat 2003). At the global level, the imposition of economic austerity measures by international financial institutions has worked to shift investment away from urban infrastructure and social services (Davis, 2007) as well as shrinking the availability of formal employment within cities (UN-Habitat 2003). At the national level, authoritarian governments in many developing countries have hampered the emergence of civil society and social movements that would have otherwise lobbied for the redistribution for state resources for the urban poor (Singerman, 1995). Lastly, at the municipal level, various institutional barriers have hampered collaborative relationships in urban development and public works efforts between district and municipal bodies (Baharoglu & Leitmann 2002).

This, of course, is just a general snapshot of urbanization; each country adopts its own particular economic reforms and has its own unique civil-society relations that shape redistributive debates differently. This paper accepts this complexity, and adopts the perspective that within any given slum the form and scope of informal strategies are shaped by culturally specific variables that differ from one location to the next (Browne 1996). Thus rather than examining the structural causes of slum growth, the following sections will looks at what it is that slum settlers do to deal with their slums’ particular problems.

SLUM SQUALOR OR INFORMAL BEEHIVES OF ACTIVITY?

Rather than being described in terms of their varying levels of development and types of shortages, many slums are typically depicted as sites of total deprivation and hopelessness (Neuwirth 2007, p. 73; Pithouse 2007, p. 18). This simplification of the slum environment suggests that the people who live under such conditions are helpless victims condemned to a permanent state of poverty. Quoting a passage from Barbara Ward’s Poor World Cities, Colin Ward (1973) draws attention to scholars’ use of helplessness as a theme when describing the urban poor:

“[The glass and concrete of any big city] give way to the sectors in which half and more of the city dwellers are condemned to live...the visitor looks down the endless rows of huts, sees the holes, the mud, the rubbish in the alleyways, skinny chickens picking in the dirt, multitudes of nearly naked children, hair matted, eyes dull, spindly legs, and, above them, pathetic lines of rags and torn garments strung up to dry between the stunted trees” (p. 68).

Similar images of victimhood can also be found in various photojournalist narratives that depict urban life unfolding among piles of garbage and scavenging animals [Appendix A]. The camera’s lens is especially effective in freezing poverty in a position of permanence: once captured on film the people depicted are stuck in their pitiful condition. Rather than getting up, going to work or caring for their children, in such photographs slum residents remain permanently subjected to a state of passivity and fatigue.

Mike Davis’ (2007) description of urban poverty in Planet of Slums likewise evokes a sense of misery when he categorically states that “much of the Twenty-First Century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement and decay” (p. 19). For Davis, however, urban poverty is not just a state of adversity but an all-out humanitarian crisis. By using the theme of “squalor” as a principal variable in his analysis of Third World urbanization, Davis reduces the slum ecosystem to one big catastrophe of environmental hazards. More than anything, slum life is characterized by bouts of air- and water-borne disease, exposure to toxic industrial materials, resource depletion and “excremental surplus” (ibid., p. 136). The implication of Davis’ analysis is that nothing of value is to be found in slums, that misery is universal to informal settlements everywhere and that
“the very poor people have little choice but to live with disaster” (ibid., p. 122).

Some scholars have rightly criticized Davis’ analysis as simplistic and inattentive, referring to his writing as a “casual steamrolling of difference” (Pithouse 2007, p. 22). Such criticisms make an important point and speak of a larger issue of Davis denying agency among his subjects. While it is true that the urban poor are struggling because of various forms of environmental vulnerability and a lack of access to urban services, slums are also much more than unsanitary zones of hazard, ridden with disease and “skinny chickens.” Despite the absence of reliable infrastructure and social services, slums are neither zones of deprivation nor zones of war. Yet promoting such augmented images of impoverishment – while simultaneously sealing them with proclamations about having “little choice” and being “condemned” to live there – only reifies a general condition of helplessness among the poor. In her pioneering study of the “myth of marginality,” Janice Perlman (1976) argues that the concept of marginality is a social construction that misrepresents the urban poor. Perlman says that analysts conflate the physical traits of the slum with the presumed lifestyles and personalities of its inhabitants, thus “broadening the definition of marginality from the external habitat of the poor to their internal personal qualities” (ibid., p. 94). Taken together, the aforementioned narratives of marginality and squalor suggest that the material conditions of slums foster a certain passivity in people’s attitudes and behavior that perpetuates and entrenches their marginality. Ultimately the urban poor are sentenced to decay within the crumbling slums they occupy.

To be sure, the underlying ideological intent behind the exaggerated descriptions of slums are not without their merit: the overkill is intended to channel a legitimate and indignant critique at the negligent absence of state and municipal bodies in most slums. Yet the observations of Davis et al. nevertheless imply a level of passivity in their subjects that works to undermine the very people they are trying to help. While it is certainly true that life in urban slums is full of hardships and shortages, it is equally the case that its settlers are not resigned to their fate. Slums are economically, politically and culturally vibrant communities, and most importantly, life in slums is incredibly busy (Neuwirth 2007; Pithouse 2007). As Hernando de Soto (2000) writes, “the cities of the Third World are teeming with entrepreneurs.... The inhabitants of these countries posses talent, enthusiasm, and an astonishing ability to wring a profit out of practically nothing” (p. 4). Such entrepreneurship is not just limited to commerce, but includes various informal strategies to secure anything from housing, utilities, security, subsidized goods and credit. Much of this activity is unseen because it typically takes place outside of the formal frameworks of private markets and government (Browne 1996), and tends to be based on individual actions unaffiliated with larger political movements (Bayat 2002; De Souza 2001). While on the surface it may appear that settlers’ exclusion from formal state-society relations results in acute impoverishment, if one examines the informal mechanisms of association that the poor participate in, it becomes evident that slums are teeming with activity and exchange.

ACCESS THROUGH INFORMAL MEANS

Because slum residents often lack access to land tenure, they often have difficulty accessing accompanying resources like water, electricity and telephone services, as well as various goods like welfare, credit and subsidized food (De Souza 1999; UN-Habitat 2003). Often the process of legalizing land ownership is costly, time consuming and not guaranteed to yield results (De Souza 2001). Without a legal address or a bank account, however, the urban poor cannot access municipal services and goods, and must therefore devise alternative means to acquire the basic necessities of subsistence. One of the ways people acquire such goods is by improvising various strategies that parallel and circumvent formal markets and government surveillance (Bayat 2002). In practice, such strategies are technically illegal, and involve some variety of theft from government resources or occupation of public space. Bayat (2002) describes such activity as “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary,” otherwise understood as the

“Silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of ordinary people in relation to the propertied and the powerful in order to survive and improve their lives. It is marked by a quiet, largely atomized, and prolonged mobilization with episodic collective action- open and fleeting struggles without clear leadership, ideology or structured organization” (p. 90).

Slum infrastructure is the result of the quintessential encroachment activity: the occupation of public land and utilities by people who have no legal claim to these. Informal settlers routinely occupy government owned land, rooftops and even cemeteries in order to shelter themselves (ibid.). People further encroach on state services such as electricity and water by illegally tapping into municipal mainframes and piping (Pithouse 2007).
Although slum houses periodically start out as rickety shelters cobbled together out of found and recycled materials, it is important to emphasize that these homes are transitional in nature. While the aforementioned descriptions of squalor imply that the poor waste away living in shacks, in reality families gradually upgrade and expand their homes using materials such as concrete, brick and metal in order to demonstrate an informal claim to land tenure and improve personal security (De Souza 1999; Neuwirth 2007). Although illegal, encroachment is a relatively easy way to obtain housing and utilities in rapidly urbanizing cities where there is not enough legal, affordable shelter. Moreover, encroachment shows that rather than being passive, the urban poor are capable of housing themselves without necessarily requiring outside assistance.

In addition to obtaining illegal housing, there are other ways that the urban poor access goods and services. Developments in telecommunications and energy systems now allow the urban poor the opportunity to bypass expensive services they cannot hope to afford. Known as “technological leapfrogging,” this adaptive mechanism incorporates technology from the developed world for use by the urban poor (Worldchanging 2006, p. 302). The adoption of cellular phones, for instance, has been prevalent in urban slums where telephone lines and legal billing addresses rarely exist. Once companies started selling affordable “pay as you go” rates in small denominations, as well as used or analog standard handsets, the number of poor that gained access to telephone services increased exponentially (Zuckerman 2005, par. 4). Moreover, where access to electricity is typically limited or unreliable, the development of cheap, battery powered solid-state light-emitting diodes (WLED), have significantly improved access to lighting and reduced dependence on polluting and hazardous fuels (Mills 2005, p. 1263). Again, these developments operate within channels of informality, allowing the poor to independently gain access to services that the state is not in a position to provide.1

Other means of obtaining services include various informal patterns of social organization that slum residents devise to manage community and individual needs. De Souza (1999) demonstrates how squatters in Recife, Brazil, build supportive networks at the household and neighborhood level to gain access to credit, building skills and materials to gradually upgrade shack settlements into more permanent structures. Diane Singerman’s (1995) fascinating study of Cairo shows that in the absence of a functional state-sponsored social welfare net, local communities develop informal support networks where people exchange favors, information and gifts to help each other from slipping into poverty. Networks are organized around certain relatively influential community members that incorporate vulnerable residents into their sphere of influence. Any favors or loans granted come with the implicit expectation that when the time comes, even years later, help will be reciprocated. As an example,

“When one [Cairene] woman’s husband died at a very early age, leaving her with six unmarried children to support, a local organization where she had volunteered hired her as a permanent staff person. Men who had provided her husband with wholesale goods to sell...gave her shoes and other items they produced, on credit, so that she could sell them to her wide circle of friends” (p. 148).

Behind most of the giving that goes on in Cairo there is the implicit expectation for payback at some point in time. Even wedding gifts like cash and house wares, small tokens of thanks on Mother’s Day or exchanges of food on special occasions are actually loans that eventually get repaid with gifts of equal and sometimes double value (ibid.). In this way, the continuous exchange of goods that works its way through the community constantly increases the assets of the poor and allows them to maintain a level of economic security even under the most challenging of circumstances.

A more controversial organizational mechanism can be found in Rio de Janeiro, where in the absence of police presence in remote slums, residents have developed an alternative community-policing mechanism that delivers public safety with the help of organized crime syndicates. Various favelas (slum neighbourhoods) in Rio have been divided among rival drug gangs who use the slums to import and export narcotics (Neuwirth 2004). In return for the community’s cooperation and silence, drug gangs crack down on local criminal activity like robbery and interpersonal violence, which over time has cultivated local business development and made residents feel safer within their communities (ibid.). Many residents are incorporated into this “social contract” without ever getting involved in drug dealing (ibid., p. 266). Some residents are watchers on rooftops in strategic locations, others usher buyers in and out of the favelas, and still others (usually children) are paid to keep their eyes open and report suspicious activity (ibid.). Certainly this is not the most ideal security

1 Although presently bigger “dug in” infrastructures like sewage and water piping have yet to evolve into cheaper, decentralized versions, the hope is that as infrastructure evolves over time slum settlements could be slowly “wired together...from a thousand technologically advanced parts- forming a grid that provides the same basic services without the huge initial investment” (Worldchanging 2006, p. 303).
arrangement, and the degree of surveillance and social control to be found in these slums is disturbing, to say the least. Nevertheless there exists a strange symbiotic relationship between the gangs and residents that, in the absence of better alternatives, gives people access to basic security within their communities.

Most informal activities are carried out while trying to avoid the state, which could interfere in the pursuit of slum inhabitants’ goals. Some activities, on the other hand, seek to engage the government by developing mutually beneficial relationships with politicians and bureaucrats (Baharoglu & Leitmann 2002; De Souza 1999). In Istanbul, for example, national laws prohibit municipalities and utility companies from servicing illegal settlements, yet the complimentary interest of politicians to gain votes, combined with the interest of utility companies to expand their billing base, and the interest of informals to access utilities all create room for ad-hoc, “under the table” service arrangements (Baharoglu & Leitmann 2002, p. 121). For example, before an election politicians might split the cost with residents to build a road or a health clinic. While the politician gains the voters’ support, residents gain infrastructure improvements. In other situations, utility companies might agree to provide a legal electrical connection to an informal slum resident if he or she provides an application for a building permit, even though he or she may not legally own the house to be serviced (ibid.). Since the resident refrains from illegally tapping electricity, the utility company is assured that its infrastructure is not tampered with, while the resident gains a semi-legitimate claim to his or her property by virtue of being serviced by a utility company. Such agreements are not uncommon, and although patchy and inconsistent, they periodically allow residents to improve access to services.

Interaction with the government at times also operates through clientelist relationships meant to maximize access to government resources. In cases where state-subsidized goods fail to trickle down to slum residents, people will devise various ways to access commodities like soap, cooking oil and meat, among others (Singerman 1995). This is done by developing close relationships with bureaucrats and governments workers who have better access to resources (ibid.). For example Cairo’s notorious ‘id-dallalaat (female peddlers) make a living out of buying ration cards and developing close relationships with internal sources in government food cooperatives in order to obtain goods unavailable for public consumption. They then sell these goods for a premium on the black market to people who want to avoid “the humiliation, violence, harassment, and heatstroke from waiting for hours in the street for one or two chickens” (ibid., p. 169). Generally speaking, whether slum residents avoid or engage the government in their search for social welfare and goods, the various strategies that people develop to get by are evidence to their ingenuity and motivation. Residents regularly encroach on public property, employ cheap technologies, develop their own social welfare and security networks, and access state resources informally. The remarkable variety and bustle of such informal activity goes to show that there is rarely a moment to spare for ‘squatting in squalor.’

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND SCOPE OF INFORMAL ACTIVITY

So far, it has been shown that urban residents in slum settlements are incredibly resourceful and busy in the pursuit of their goals. Yet what is the overall impact and significance of informal activity for urban development? Even though informal activities show that people in urban slums are actively trying to gain access to goods and services, is urban informality ultimately a viable development strategy? This section will explore this question from both state-centered and anarchist perspectives.

A strong case can be made for dismissing informal activity as un-ambitious and even counterproductive to development. This perspective is rooted in a state-centered approach to development, which states that government intervention is necessary to make significant improvements in social welfare by providing infrastructure and incorporating informal residents into the formal economy (Browne 1996). According to the state-centered perspective, informal activities that circumvent government will be counterproductive and work to diminish any obligations the state might have towards its people. As Bayat (2002) writes,

“Despite the ability of the disenfranchised to extend their life-chances through a lifetime of struggle at the local level, crucial social spaces remain outside of their control...[they cannot get] the social goods which are tied to larger structures and processes, to national states and the global economy...the largely atomistic and localist strategies of the disenfranchised, despite their own advantages, do not answer the need for a search for social justice in a broader, national sense” (p. 98).

This critique reasons that informality is not suitable to engage in the political dialogue necessary to obtain major concessions from the state. This is because informal activities are not collective actions; they are often
apart, based on individual initiatives and an avoidance of government circles (De Souza 2001). Moreover, informal activities typically lack in ideologically motivated goals, which make it virtually impossible for informals to mobilize in any meaningful political sense so as to place new demands on the state (Bayat 2002).

Yet because governments are the source of financial, technical and organizational resources, people need the state to provide big, expensive infrastructural services like hospitals, roads, sewers and anything else that is impossible to steal or improvise. While technological leapfrogging is slowly challenging this perspective, for the moment people still need the state to access social welfare, and without government intervention, the gains people make in the informal sector will remain meager.

This is a very reasonable argument, as people in urban slums certainly do deserve better than what they can eke out with informal activities and on material grounds alone, informal strategies are found wanting. However, perhaps informal urbanism should be evaluated on its own terms regardless of the material results attained (Benjamin 1990). What is valuable about informal activities is that they allow the exercise of high levels of autonomy and control among those generally thought to have none (Pithouse 2007). This is not to say that people engaged in informal relations are free to come and go on a whim. As the case of Rio demonstrates, sometimes security comes at a cost: although people acquire personal safety, the movement and behavior of residents is highly regulated. In a similar way, informal networks in Cairo are invasive and subject private life to public scrutiny. Although they are reciprocal, informal relations are clearly ones of dependence between parties of unequal power.

However, autonomy in informal networks does not mean absolute freedom; a certain level of obligation between parties is essential for these relationships to remain functional. What autonomy really means is agency: having the power to decide. Informals are autonomous in the sense that they are willing participants in associational frameworks of their own design. They have taken charge of their circumstances, evolved and maintained solutions operational within the existing opportunity structures of their slums.

One way to highlight the significance of autonomy to marginalized groups is to situate it within a broader framework of anarchist organizational theory. Informal activity is an example of anarchy because the latter states that people left to their own devices will organize themselves and evolve collaborative relationships without the presence of an overarching authority (Ward 1973, p. 12). Both anarchists and informals operate less like “the stones of a pyramid where the biggest burden is borne by the lowest layer,” and more like “links within a network of autonomous groups” (ibid., p. 23). Likewise, direct action – the primary mechanism by which anarchic groups operate – nicely encapsulates the various informal efforts covered in this paper. Like informal activity, direct action is “action which, in respect to a situation, realizes the ends desired so far as this lies within one’s power or the power of one’s group” (ibid.). Rather than being somehow un-ambitious in scope, once informal activities like encroachment, leapfrogging and networking are examined through the anarchist lens they reveal themselves as practical and important efforts operating within the realm of local possibility.

More than anything, anarchist theory reveals that the autonomous nature of informality is intrinsically valuable in and of itself because of the range of meaningful activities it enables. As the urban anarchist Colin Ward (1973) explains, “the poor of the Third World shanty-towns, acting anarchically...have three freedoms which the poor of the rich world have lost...they have the freedom of community self-selection, the freedom to budget one’s own resources and the freedom to shape one’s own environment” (p. 70). Thus, rather than focusing on how much informals achieve, we should appreciate how they achieve it. From an anarchist perspective, slum dwellers are not making trivial gains but are actively operating within the existing opportunities and constrains of their environment through independent and self-designed action. That in and of itself is a worthwhile and meaningful pursuit.

Lastly, it is important to emphasize that state-centric and anarchic approaches to development are not necessarily mutually exclusive strategies. It is possible for urban groups to maintain their autonomy and pursue meaningful self-directed activities within broader, state-driven urban development schemes (Benjamin 1990). An example of such an initiative is evident in the Quinta Monroy Housing Project in Iquique, a slum settlement in Chile. After the government launched a slum-upgrade program in 2002, a local design team at the Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile set about redesigning the layout of the slum and achieved a design solution that took into account both the spontaneous, self-organizing activities of slum residents as well as the zoning and funding practices of the state. Because the government offered slum residents a rather meager subsidy to upgrade their homes, families unable to rebuild their houses for the stipulated amount would have been pushed out into peripheral slums. (Architecture for Humanity 2006). To address this issue the design team came up with a blueprint of alternating single-story and double-story units that could be built for under the subsidy amount (Appendix B). Families that could not afford a duplex moved into the single homes and could thus remain in the neighborhood. What is notable about this design is that the owners of the single units
had the option of building vertically and adding more rooms at a future point in time. In this way the design creatively took into account the tendency of slum residents to (informally) expand their dwellings, all the while keeping the project operational within a formal state framework. Considering the fundamental ways in which formal land development and regulation affect the urban poor's potential for successful livelihood generating initiatives sensitivity to the informal practices of urban residents was key to the coherence of the Quinta Monroy project (Benjamin 1990).

CONCLUSION

This essay explored a range of informal subsistence activities in an attempt to argue that urban poverty is not necessarily accompanied by passivity and helplessness. By positioning informal behavior as a meaningful self-help activity that fosters autonomy among the urban poor, it has been shown that although maintaining state involvement in urban development is important, development amounts to more than just material gains. The sense of control and agency gained through informal activity is instructive of the importance of autonomy and self-direction for human well being. As Benjamin (1990) reminds us, the urban poor derive benefits from development in both “monetary and non-monetary kinds,” and “Governments with such awareness, can help generate an urban system that provides multiple…opportunities for the poor, rather than as at present when opportunities are created in exclusive ways” (ibid., p. 166). As such, both state centric and anarchic developmental approaches are important strategies for meeting the challenges of rapid urbanization and slum growth.

RESOURCES


APPENDIX A

“THEY SLEEP ON THE STREETS”

PHOTOGRAPHED BY RAGHUBIR SING FOR THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC (JULY 1981)
APPENDIX B

PHOTOGRAPHS OF QUINTA MONROY HOUSING PROJECT IN IQUIQUE, CHILE
Troubled Waters in the Holy Land: Water Inequalities as a Barrier to Palestinian Statehood

By Aidan MacDonald

ABSTRACT – This paper argues that Israel’s unilateral control over the three shared water resources between Israel and Palestine, as well as the region’s water distribution mechanisms, inhibits the establishment of a viable Palestinian state. The paper begins with a theoretical discussion about the difference between establishing a state in a formal, legal sense, and establishing a state that is viable and sustainable. It is the latter form of statehood that is negatively affected by Israel’s discriminatory water policies and practices. The paper then explores the history of water in Israeli-Palestinian relations. It also examines the humanitarian, economic, and political consequences of the unequal water sharing between Israel and Palestine, as these are the specific ways through which Israeli water policies inhibit the establishment of a Palestinian state. Finally, the paper concludes that in order for a sustainable Palestinian state to be established, water must be treated as a primary issue in any final status negotiations.

Water is the foundation of human life. In order for a people to survive, and in order for a state to sustain itself, water is absolutely essential for everything from personal health and hygiene to industrial development, irrigation, and sanitation. The importance of water to both human survival as well as to statehood is especially pertinent in the Middle East, where, as Harald D. Frederiksen (2003), the former head of the World Bank’s Water Resources Unit, asserts, “a nation’s sovereignty depends on the adequacy of its water supply. Sovereignty over water in the Middle East climate constitutes sovereignty over the land, over the life and the future of the area’s inhabitants” (p. 70). In essence, this statement means that no state can survive without access to enough water so as to satisfy its fundamental humanitarian and economic needs. This consideration is important to keep in mind in the context of Palestinian statehood, because as shall be demonstrated in this paper, Israel’s unilateral control over the region’s water resources and distribution mechanisms prevents the current Palestinian entity from meeting the basic needs of its population, and inhibits the establishment of a viable Palestinian state.

In order to make this argument, this paper begins with a theoretical exploration of some of the fundamental elements that are necessary for a state to do more than merely exist in a formal manner, but to truly sustain itself in a more holistic sense. The paper moves on to deliver a brief examination of the history
of the water issue in Israeli-Palestinian relations, starting in the early 1900s, when water was considered to be central to the Zionist vision of the establishment of the Jewish state. Thirdly, the severe humanitarian consequences of the current Israeli water policies and practices are discussed, in an effort to demonstrate that no state can survive without a healthy and able population. Fourthly, the paper explores the manner in which Israeli water policies greatly stunt the potential for Palestinian economic growth, which is a vital element to a sustainable state. Finally, it argues that for international and domestic political reasons, it is absolutely essential that the Palestinian state be able to assert its sovereignty over its own water resources.

BACKGROUND: WATER INEQUALITIES IN ISRAEL-PALESTINE

Before getting into an analysis of the role of water in relation to Palestinian statehood, it is first necessary to explore some facts and statistics that will demonstrate the severity of the situation in Palestine. Israel and Palestine share three main water sources: the Jordan River, the Mountain Aquifer, and the Coastal Aquifer. The unjust distribution of these resources is evident in that Israel appropriates over ninety-five percent of the total amount of water available to itself and Palestine, even though the vast majority of the water sources are hydrologically and geographically situated within Palestinian territory (Frederiksen 2005, p. 74). The consequences of this unjust distribution are devastating to Palestinians, especially for the twelve percent of the population (over 466,500 people) who are currently unconnected to a running water network (Palestine Hydrology Group 2006, p. 26). Moreover, the Palestinian water infrastructure is in such a state of disrepair that even those who are connected to the running water network receive extremely poor water quality. The pipes running into Palestinian villages have not been maintained over the course of the forty-year occupation, and as a result, according to 2006 figures, an average of thirty-nine percent of the water that is carried through them is lost through leakage before it ever reaches its destination, and some towns, such as Qalqilya and Tulkarem, lose over fifty percent of their water to leakage (ibid., p.30).

Water inequalities in the region are best demonstrated through a comparison between Israeli and Palestinian water consumption. On average, Palestinians live on about 76 litres of water per person per day. This figure includes domestic, urban, and industrial water use. Israelis, by contrast, consume approximately 350 litres per person per day when all three uses are included (ibid., p.28). This wide gap between Israeli and Palestinian consumption is further exacerbated by the fact that according to the World Health Organization, the recommended minimum quantity of water necessary for basic human consumption is 100 litres per person per day (Lein 2000, p. 4). This amount includes domestic use, as well as consumption in hospitals, schools, businesses, and other public institutions. In short, Palestinians consume twenty-four percent less water than the minimum recommended quantity, while Israelis consume three and a half times that amount.

THE CASE FOR STATEHOOD AS MORE THAN A LEGAL CONDITION

Based on these statistics, it is clear that in terms of water distribution, there exist major inequalities between Israelis and Palestinians. By preventing an adequate supply of water from reaching the Palestinian people, Israel violates the Palestinians’ most basic human rights, and it also stunts their economic development and undermines their political sovereignty. This is extremely significant because these three factors – human rights, economic development, and sovereignty – are essential to establishing a sustainable state. It is important make clear that this paper will distinguish between a state that can simply exist and one that can actually survive as an independent political entity.

Indeed, without coming to an equitable resolution on the water issue, it is conceivable that a Palestinian state can come into existence in a physical and psychological sense. It is virtually impossible, however, for a Palestinian state to truly sustain itself without adequate access to its own water resources. In order for a state to simply exist, it needs what Robert H. Jackson calls “negative sovereignty,” which is a formal, legal condition that entails the freedom from outside interference (Jackson 1990, p. 27). With this legal form of statehood, certain elements of a state can be found, such as identifiable physical boundaries, a clearly defined capital, and a set of governing institutions that at least in principle has authority within the territory. It is possible that even if the water disparities between Israel and Palestine remain unresolved, these formal elements of statehood can be achieved for the Palestinian entity. The problem with negative sovereignty, however, is that the legal framework that it provides does not guarantee the survival of fragile states. Indeed, according to Christopher Clapham, states with negative sovereignty are only in existence because dominant states deem that they should be allowed to exist (Clapham 1998, p. 144). In other words, merely having a formal, legal “right” to exist does not mean that the right will be protected.
In order for a state to survive, therefore, it needs to meet a more substantive set of criteria that go beyond the formal conditions of statehood. Jackson calls this form of statehood “positive sovereignty,” and it entails the ability of a state to provide political goods for its citizens (Jackson 1990, p. 29). In other words, it must be able to support the basic needs of its population. Clapham makes a similar argument, as he asserts that the very survival of a state depends on its ability to support administrative structures, and to ensure that these structures deliver basic necessities to the population (Clapham 1998, p. 156). Furthermore, Christian Reus-Smit (2001) argues that in recent times, sovereignty and state survival are increasingly determined by the state’s role as a guarantor of human rights (p. 520). This means that a state cannot be dependent on external actors for the fundamental necessities of survival, such as the provision of water. A viable state must be able to provide its own citizens with basic social, political, and economic goods, or else it will have nothing more than negative sovereignty, which is an incomplete condition for sustainable statehood. It is this fundamental issue relating to the prolonged survival of the state that is undermined by the lack of adequate water in Palestine. Since the unequal distribution of water poses such a major barrier to the establishment of a viable Palestinian state, it is critical that water be treated as a primary issue in any future peace negotiations that take place. Indeed, if water continues to be treated as it has been in the past – as a secondary issue that is only to be addressed after a formal Palestinian state is created – the state will not truly be able to proverbially “get off the ground” and to exercise its sovereignty.

**WATER IN THE HISTORY OF PALESTINE**

When analyzing the Israeli-Palestinian water situation, it is important to note that ever since the advent of Zionism, control over water resources has been a key element to the establishment of the Jewish state. Indeed, according to Zionist thought, water was immensely important because when in “exile” from Palestine, the Jews were forced to be a largely urban and ghettoized people. They were thus denied the ability to work the land in the tradition of their ancestors. In this way, the Jews were alienated from what the Zionists saw as their biblical promised land, and from their historical roles as agrarian workers (Selby 2003A, p. 66). It was for this reason that when encouraging immigration to Palestine, Zionist leaders promoted a glorified relationship between the “Jew and the soil”. They claimed that by working the land, the Jewish settlers in Palestine would achieve a purifying experience, which would bring them emancipation from centuries of persecution (Dolatyar & Gray 2000, p. 97). The first waves of Jewish settlers in Palestine were therefore ingrained with the notion that they had to transform the Palestinian “wasteland” into a “land of milk and honey” (Dolatyar & Gray, 2000, p.97). This would bring about redemption for the Jewish people, and it would also lead to the creation of a Jewish nation that was rooted in the land (Selby 2003A, p. 66; Dolatyar & Gray 2000, p. 103).

In order to achieve these ideological objectives through agriculture, a great deal of water was required both for irrigation, and also to support the expansion of Jewish settlements. As such, gaining control over all of the region’s water resources was considered by the early Zionists to be a prerequisite to establishing the state of Israel (Dolatyar & Gray 2000, p. 95; Frederiksen 2003, p. 71). Driven by this belief, the Zionists used military force to take fertile land – most notably the Jordan Valley – from its Palestinian inhabitants, and they constructed settlements in strategic places so as to secure access to all of the region’s water resources. Indeed, Frederiksen (2003) asserts that according to Haganah1 records, as well as statements and documents from Zionist leaders, there is no doubt that Palestinian towns and villages near water were intentionally destroyed and taken by force (pp.75-76).

Once Israel had gained control over the majority of the fertile territories in the West Bank, it began to “tap, develop, and exploit unilaterally any available water resource” (Dolatyar & Gray 2000, p. 96). Many swamp drainage and well-drilling programs were undertaken, and a system of pipelines for water transfer was also constructed. These initiatives were seen as being necessary for the survival of the Jewish settlements that had already been established, and they also allowed for the construction of new settlements that were deeper in Palestinian land. The belief amongst many Zionist thinkers was that by piping water into new Palestinian territories, the Jewish settlers could begin to develop more and more land, thus making it “their own.” If the Jewish settlers failed to firmly impose their will on the land of Palestine, then the land would continue to be inhabited by Arabs, and this was antithetical to the Zionist vision of Greater Israel. Furthermore, by exploiting the water resources, the Zionists hoped to develop and industrialize the region, effectively “making the desert bloom” (ibid., p. 97). It was hoped that by developing the territory in this way, the Jewish immigrants could symbolize a collective success, and establish a national sense of “togetherness,” thus creating a Jewish

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1 The Haganah was the principal Zionist militia that was responsible for carrying out the attacks in 1948. The Haganah eventually became the Israeli Defence Force (IDF) which is the Israeli army that operates today.
attachment to the land (ibid., p. 96). As Israel slowly moved – and continues to move – to occupy more and more strategically valuable land, Palestinians were left with diminishing access to reliable water sources, and as such, a dimming prospect for statehood. Indeed, since Israeli expansion into Arab lands has, from the early 1900s, been in large part motivated by the acquisition of water resources, it can be said that Israeli water policy has historically been a major barrier to establishing a viable Palestinian state.

**WATER AS A BARRIER TO PALESTINIAN STATEHOOD**

Perhaps the most fundamental water-related barriers to the achievement of Palestinian statehood are the severe health and humanitarian repercussions of Israel’s water policies. In many ways, it is self-evident that in order for a state to go beyond merely existing, and to actually have the capacity to sustain itself, it must have a healthy and able population. Indeed, a state cannot survive without a population to support it; an ailing workforce cannot be economically productive, sick children cannot be properly educated, and the future of the state itself will surely be compromised.

In several ways, therefore, a state’s viability is dependent upon a healthy and able population. Given this fact, it is important to note that amongst the Palestinian population – and especially amongst children – there are grave health problems that are caused by inadequate access to safe water. Indeed, Palestinians suffer from excessively high rates of viral and bacterial infections, as well as diseases such as amoeba and Hepatitis A (Nettnin 2005; Palestine Hydrology Group 2006, p. 40). For instance, in a study conducted in three West Bank refugee camps, forty-eight percent of primary school children were infected with intestinal parasites (Rouyer 2000, p. 66). Similarly, a high proportion of children in many communities suffer from kidney problems that are attributed to the consumption of unclean water (Palestine Hydrology Group 2006, p. 41). Other significant health problems from which Palestinians suffer at a disproportionate rate include heart failure, diarrhoea, neurological symptoms, lethargy, and high blood pressure (Nettnin 2005).

According to many analysts, these elevated infection and disease rates amongst Palestinians are closely linked to water shortages, as the shortages force people to use polluted water for their basic daily needs (Lein 1998, p. 13; Rouyer 2000, p. 62). The inadequate supply of clean water is a direct result of the discriminatory Israeli water distribution practices, which have been in effect ever since Israel gained control over the resources. For instance, unlike Israeli settlements, Palestinian villages are subject to sporadic and lengthy cuts to their running water supply. These cuts are especially common in the summer months, when fifteen to twenty percent of Palestinian water is shut off in order to meet the increase in Israeli “needs.” Many Palestinians are in fact severed from the running water networks for the entire summer season (Lein 1998, p. 2). Furthermore, even those Palestinians who do have water flowing through their taps must be very judicious in their use of it, as they pay up to twenty times as much for their water as do Israeli settlers (Rowell 2005). The fees inhibit adequate Palestinian water usage, as the majority of Palestinians are simply unable to afford sufficient clean water for all of their basic daily needs. As such, the summertime water cuts and prohibitive prices are directly linked to the increased infections and deteriorating health conditions discussed above.

Additionally, the high levels of pollution in Palestinian water can largely be attributed to Israeli policy and practice. For instance, Israel’s massive overpumping of the Mountain Aquifer in the West Bank, as well as of the Coastal Aquifer in Gaza, has caused a significant decline in water table levels. The declining water table allows seawater to flow into the aquifers, thus raising salinity in the freshwater, and rendering it harmful for human consumption (Frederiksen 2003, p. 81; Rouyer 2000, p. 62). In Gaza, the problem is so severe that an estimated 70% of the water available to Palestinians is considered brackish (Rouyer 2000, p. 62). With no alternative water sources, however, Palestinians have no choice but to drink the saline water, which can cause serious infections and diseases, including intestinal illness, cardiovascular disease, kidney disease, as well as certain forms of cancer.

In addition to the salinity caused by Israeli overpumping, Palestinian water quality is further deteriorated by poor water infrastructure, which allows sewage water and water containing pesticides to flow into the water supply. Not only are Palestinian sewage pipes deteriorated and prone to leakage, but many Palestinian villages and refugee camps do not even have any sewage discharge systems. In fact, in 2006, only thirty-two percent of Palestinians living in the West Bank were connected to a sanitation network (Palestine Hydrology Group 2006, p. 32). Moreover, due to Israeli water laws, Palestinians continue to be prohibited from doing any repair work on the vast majority of these pipes (Selby 2003B, p. 129; Palestine Hydrology Group 2006, p. 31). In essence, this means that under the current circumstances, there is no way for Palestinians to prevent the pollution of their freshwater resources.

To further compound the sewage problem, many Israeli settlements allow their sewage to run into
Palestinian springs and fields, thus contaminating the water supply and creating adverse health consequences (Rouyer 2000, pp. 65-66; Palestine Hydrology Group 2000, p. 35). It is important to note that the argument being made here is not that individual Israelis are to blame for these types of situations, as many may not even be aware that they exist. However, the important point is that settlement planners and their sanitation managers are aware, as they are the ones responsible for making the decision to allow the sewage water to run into Palestinian water sources and farmlands. This free flow of sewage and pesticide water is responsible for alarmingly high levels of nitrate and chloride in Palestinian drinking water. According to WHO standards, safe drinking water should not contain more than 50 mg of nitrate per litre, and there should be no more than 250 mg per litre of chloride. In the Gaza Strip, however, Palestinians are forced to drink water with up to 100 mg of nitrate per litre, and 1,000 mg of chloride per litre. These extremely elevated levels of nitrate and chloride are linked to disproportionately high rates of kidney disease, gastric cancer, and “blue baby” syndrome amongst the Palestinian population (Nettini 2005).

Given these facts and statistics, it is evident that the disproportionate health problems faced by Palestinians are in large part caused by Israel’s unilateral control over the region’s water resources and distribution mechanisms. Thus, if the water issue is not addressed as a primary issue in negotiations to establish a Palestinian state, then the health consequences of Israeli water policies will greatly inhibit the survival of the state. It is important to emphasize here the distinction between a state that can exist and a state that can sustain itself. Since the physical health of the Palestinian population is integral to the viability and sustainability of an independent Palestinian state, it is essential that the water inequalities be rectified, and that Palestine’s sovereignty over its own water resources be explicitly acknowledged.

The second fundamental necessity of a viable Palestinian state is a sustainable economy. A state needs an economic base that can provide stable employment for its population, and that can also induce growth so that the country is able to participate in the global economic system. According to many projections of the potential Palestinian state, Palestine’s economy would initially be based in the agricultural sector (Pfeifer 2003, p. 24; MAS Research Team 2003, p. 107). This is because agricultural production would provide many essential commodities for Palestinian consumers, and it is also labour-intensive, thus creating a substantial job market in the fledgling state. A greater job market and improved earning power are significant, as they allow service and export production sectors to grow gradually from the agricultural base (Pfeifer 2003, p. 24). The development of these latter sectors is the key to moving Palestine up the chain of production, thus granting Palestinians more stability and greater economic well-being.

Since agriculture is one of the economic cornerstones of the potential state of Palestine, it is essential for Palestinians to have an adequate water supply for irrigation. Israel prohibits the achievement of an adequate water supply, however, as it has outlawed any expansion of Palestinian irrigated agriculture (Frederiksen 2003, p. 81). In order to enforce this prohibition, several water-related policies have been instituted, with the aim of severely restricting Palestinians’ ability to engage in agricultural activity. One such policy is the imposition of strict quotas on Palestinian water usage, particularly for agricultural purposes (Dolatyar & Gray 2000, p. 106). Partly in an attempt to ensure that these quotas were not exceeded, Israel has uprooted over 1.2 million Palestinian olive trees since 1967 (Monitoring Israeli Colonizing activities in the Palestinian Territories 2006). This practice still continues today, and given the fact that fruit and olive production were once the cornerstone of the Palestinian agricultural sector, it serves to cripple Palestine’s potential to become economically self-sufficient.

Another policy that was instituted in 1967 with the intention of undermining Palestinian agriculture was the destruction of Palestinian water pumps. In the first few months of 1967 alone, Israel destroyed approximately 140 water pumps and wells that served Palestinian irrigated land (Rouyer 2000, p. 47). Palestinians in the West Bank were also prohibited from drilling new wells without first obtaining special permits from Israeli water officials. These permits were virtually impossible to acquire, however, as is evidenced by the fact that not a single permit for wells was granted to a Palestinian from 1967 to 1995 (Selby 2003B, p. 81). To make matters worse, many Israeli wells were dug very deeply, so as to intercept Palestinian water and decrease the efficiency of the few Palestinian wells that were still functional.

This practice has had lasting effects, as even today, the deep Israeli wells serve to further diminish the already-poor supply of water to Palestinian agricultural areas. They also cause water table levels in the aquifers to fall, which increases the water's salinity. The health consequences of saline water have already been discussed, but salinity also has serious agricultural implications. Indeed, in 1967, Palestinians relied heavily on the citrus industry as a source of employment and income. Citrus fruits, however, cannot tolerate high levels of saline contamination, and as a result, the once-highly dependable industry has been decimated. In order to illustrate this claim, we only need to consider that in 1967 citrus accounted for forty-one percent of agricultural
value in Gaza. By 1989, however, after the salinity had taken its toll, this figure was reduced to a mere twenty percent (Rouyer 2000, pp. 61-62; Frederiksen 2003, p. 81). It is clear, therefore, that Israel’s discriminatory water policies and practices make it virtually impossible for Palestinians to raise their agricultural productivity and to increase profitability. In this way, Israeli discrimination with regards to water severely curtails the development of the economic foundation of the potential Palestinian state.

A third manner in which Israel uses water to undermine the Palestinian agricultural sector is its establishment of exorbitantly high prices for water that is to be used for Palestinian agricultural purposes. Throughout the 1990s, Palestinians paid on average $1.20 per metre cubed of water for agricultural use, while Israeli settlers paid only about $0.16 per metre cubed (Selby 2003B, p. 82). Agriculture and irrigation are therefore highly subsidised for Israeli settlers despite the fact Israelis have much higher incomes and much greater access to material resources than do Palestinians. This inequality seems particularly unjustifiable when we consider that, according to B’tselem’s Yeheskel Lein (1998), “from every aspect, agriculture is much less important [to Israel] now than it was in the 1960s” (p. 9). In other words, Israel does not grant these substantial subsidies to its citizens in order to protect an industry that is vital to its economy. Rather, Palestinians are charged so much more for agricultural water because it is in Israel’s political interest to inhibit the development of the Palestinian agricultural sector.

In total, it is estimated that there are 172,000 dunams2 of fertile land in the West Bank. Unfortunately, only half of this amount is used as irrigated agricultural land (Elmusa 1997, p. 160). This means that Palestinians are missing out on an enormous percentage of irrigable land, and as a result, they are losing a great deal of potential profit that could go towards supporting an independent state. Given the evidence presented here, it can certainly be argued that the discrepancy between fertile land and actual cultivated land is primarily caused by restrictive Israeli water policies. By undermining the agricultural sector, the current water situation greatly inhibits the overall economic development of the potential Palestinian state. Thus, once again, water must be addressed as a primary issue in any final status negotiations, as it is the key to laying the economic foundation for a viable Palestinian state.

In addition to the health and economic reasons why Palestine must have control over its own water, there are also domestic and international political factors that need to be taken into account. Domestically, the Palestinian government is the only body that is accountable to the population. In order for the people to have confidence in the strength of their government and in the sovereignty of their nation, the government must have the capacity to care for the basic needs of the population, and it must also be able to quickly respond to any changing conditions that alter the population’s water needs.

If a Palestinian state is created without addressing the water issue, however, then the Palestinian government will remain completely dependent upon Israeli authorities to provide it with water. Unfortunately, since the Israeli government has no sense of responsibility or obligation to the Palestinian people, it is unlikely that the Palestinian government will be able to obtain more water in order to meet changing needs, or to weather unforeseen emergencies. The extreme water inequalities between Israelis and Palestinians will therefore remain unchanged. As a result of the government’s inability to provide for the population’s basic services and to care for its fundamental needs, the people will likely lose confidence in their leadership. Moreover, the lines of accountability will be blurred, since Palestinians will not be able to turn to their government to demand a more just water distribution policy. With so little confidence in the government, as well as an unclear chain of responsibility, internal instability is sure to become a problem. It will be extremely difficult to develop any sort of national unity when the Palestinian people are (rightfully) questioning their government’s ability to perform basic functions. With respect to domestic politics, therefore, Israeli water policies serve to undermine the integrity and the capacity of the Palestinian leadership.

Israel’s discriminatory water policies also serve to inhibit the establishment of a viable Palestinian state from an international political perspective. Similarly to the domestic sphere, where the government must have the confidence of the people, in the international sphere, the state must be respected by other sovereign states. If Palestine is seen as being unable to assert its sovereignty over resources that lie within its own borders, there will be very little incentive for other countries to respect it as a strong and sovereign state. In order to be respected as an equal, therefore, and to avoid being marginalized and forced into one-sided relations with other states, Palestine needs to be able to assert control over its water resources.

This risk of being dominated by external actors is particularly true with regards to Palestine’s bilateral relations with Israel. Indeed, Israel has historically refused to respect Palestine’s sovereignty over the resources that lie within its borders. This is a major barrier to establishing equal relations between the two parties, and to giving Palestine the chance to exist as an independent entity. Since Israel has control over the quantity and

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2 In Israel and the Occupied Territories, one dunam is equal to 1000m².
quality of the water that flows into Palestine, it has a tremendously powerful bargaining chip that could allow it to impose its will over the potential Palestinian state. It is for this reason that from the Palestinian perspective, Israel's 2004 proposal to build a desalination plant to supply the West Bank in exchange for implicit control of the water resources themselves is unacceptable; in addition to the serious environmental consequences that make desalination an unsustainable long-term solution, Israel would maintain this bargaining chip and could easily use it to violate Palestinian sovereignty.

For instance, if the Palestinian government attempted to implement a political, economic, or military policy that Israel saw as being against its interests, it could threaten to curtail Palestine's water supply unless the latter agreed to abandon the policy in question. In essence, by controlling Palestine's water, Israel has the power to choke off the lifeblood of the Palestinian state in order to maintain or enhance its privileged position. Palestinians cannot be said to have achieved self-determination if the very lifeblood of their state is controlled by Israel, a potentially hostile external state. Therefore, arriving at a water-sharing agreement would be a major step towards fulfilling the Palestinian right to self-determination, and also towards achieving equality between Palestine and its peers.

CONCLUSION

As stated at the beginning of this paper, in order for a state to exist, it needs features such as clearly defined borders, and a set of institutions that govern the territory. In order for a state to survive, however, it needs much more than merely these formal elements. Instead, it needs positive sovereignty, which entails the ability to provide basic social, political, and economic goods to its populations, as well as the capacity to guarantee the protection of the population's human rights. Water is crucial to all of these elements of substantive statehood, as adequate water supplies will allow the state to build a healthy and able population. It also facilitates the establishment of a strong economy that produces employment, induces growth, and allows the state to be economically independent from external actors. Furthermore, control over its own water resources will help Palestine to garner respect for its sovereignty, both from its own population, as well as from the international community.

As this paper has demonstrated, however, Israel's unilateral control over the region's water resources and distribution mechanisms serves to undermine each of these critical elements of a viable state. Indeed, Israeli policies cause severe water shortages, and are also responsible for declining water quality in Palestinian territory. As a result of these policies, Palestinians suffer major health consequences that pose great challenges to their daily survival, and that inhibit their ability to come together to form a strong, unified population. Israel also deliberately enacts water policies that are detrimental to the most productive Palestinian economic activity, which is agriculture. This stunts the potential for sustainable economic growth in Palestine. Finally, Israel's lack of recognition for the water resources that lie within Palestinian boundaries serves to undermine Palestinians' confidence in their leadership. It also places the potential Palestinian state in a subordinate position in relation to Israel and to other members of the international community.

In short, in its current condition, Palestine is an underdeveloped entity. However, the health, economic, and political difficulties that face Palestine and Palestinians would not be felt to such an extent if they had access to adequate clean water. As such, Israel's discriminatory water policies are a primary method of inhibiting the possibility of viable Palestinian statehood. This position is supported by analysts such as Andy Rowell (2005), who asserts that "if Israel continues to deny Palestinians access to the basic human right of access to clean water, they will deny Palestine its right to be a nation. It will mean there will be no peace". It is therefore critical that high-level negotiators accept and embrace the immense significance of water in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Up until this point, water has always been treated as an issue that will only be addressed after an agreement is reached on the "key" issues of refugees, Jerusalem, and borders. If future peace negotiations follow this trend, and insist on only addressing water after a formal state is created, then the Palestinian state will be nothing more than empty symbolism. Indeed, while it will have the formal structures and institutions of a state, Palestine will not have the substantive elements of statehood that are necessary to allow a state to sustain itself in peace and prosperity. As much as any other issue, therefore, a water-sharing agreement will be a key to establishing a viable Palestinian state, and to solving this seemingly intractable conflict.

REFERENCES


Women and Non-violent Forms of Activism in the Niger Delta Oil Resource Conflict

By Jonathan Patch

ABSTRACT – Oil related conflict in Nigeria dates back to debates in the late 1940s, when a federation of ethnic regions was established and the three dominant ethnic groups competed for the state’s oil resources. Since the 1990s the oil-rich Niger Delta has been the site of communal rivalries and violent protests by deprived oil communities against the alliance of the Nigerian State and multinational oil companies. Grievances have focused predominantly on unemployment, ecological damage, and the absence of basic social amenities. In 2002, non-violent protests by women from different ethnic groups led to the occupation of oil platforms. This paper will examine how, by employing peaceful means in engaging both multinational oil companies and the Nigerian state, women have been remarkably successful in realizing demands for economic empowerment. It will show how their efforts advanced the important process of raising awareness and attracting much needed support, thereby increasing the potential for a comprehensive ‘pan-Delta’ resistance to evolve.

INTRODUCTION: THE IMPACT OF OIL EXPLOITATION ON WOMEN OF THE NIGER DELTA

Oil-related conflict in Nigeria dates back to debates in the late 1940s, when a federation of ethnic regions was established and the elites of the three dominant ethnic groups competed for the state’s oil revenues. Since then, constitutional debate – complicated by the competing claims of national and sub-national spheres – has been a virtual constant in Nigerian politics (Ejobowah 2000). Beginning in the 1990s, however, there occurred an intense escalation of civil unrest as ethnic minority groups like the Ogoni people, represented by Ken Saro-Wiwa, became increasingly determined in their struggle against ‘oil infrastructure’ (Douglas & Okonta 2003). Among the many civil society groups involved in the various forms of violent and non-violent activism that followed, attention has often gravitated to the militant activities executed by communal groups (often male youths), and the crushing counter-actions undertaken by the Nigerian state and the multinational oil companies (MNOCs). This ongoing sequence of protest and repression has produced a cycle of violence in which both sides employ ‘extreme’ tactics that continue to destabilize the region today (Guttschuss 2008;
Given the fact that male dominated violence has consistently characterized events in the Niger Delta struggle, it is not surprising that the highly influential role of women and organized women’s groups in non-violent forms of activism has received a comparatively minimal focus. Yet this unique, gender-specific form of resistance is precisely what this paper will seek to explore. Giving attention to the engendering of resistance in the Niger Delta region, the historical roots and contemporary role of grassroots women’s group activities in protest and activism will be examined. In particular, the marginalization of women will be presented as a mobilizing factor; since the 1980s, gender-specific economic and socio-political marginalization has combined to stimulate the formation of organized women’s groups. Moreover, failed attempts by other civil society groups to rectify community issues have translated into increased interest and participation among women in non-violent activism. Community women’s organizations (CWOs) have proven to be among the most active and effective participants in engaging actors in the oil economy (Ikelegbe 2005). Finally, it shall be argued that the nature of women’s group protest in the Niger Delta highlights the productiveness of gender-specific, alternative forms of non-violent activism. By employing peaceful means in engaging both MNOCs and the Nigerian state, CWOs have been remarkably successful in realizing demands for economic empowerment. Most importantly, their efforts have advanced the process of raising awareness and attracting much needed support, thereby increasing the possibilities of a more comprehensive ‘pan-Delta’ resistance.

Historically, women of the Niger Delta have long been active participants in civil society protests. As inhabitants of a prominent area of colonial-era resistance in Africa, women of the Delta region were involved in gender-organized activism during the 1929 Aba protests that opposed British taxation policies (Afigbo 1966; Mba 1982). Following the capitulation of male-led initiatives in 1928, women from three provinces in south Nigeria managed to bring about government re-evaluation of the detested tax legislation. Similarly, in both 1941 and 1947 women protested colonial exploitation through forms of civil disobedience, the autonomous nature of which took both their male counterparts and the region’s colonial administrators by surprise (Ukeje 2004). These actions illustrate the capability of women to mobilize en masse and engage in successful, self-determined activism. This capability was again demonstrated at various intervals in the 1980s, when the issue of oil derivation became especially contentious due to the adverse effects of the federal government’s 1979 decision to ignore ethnic groups’ claims and thereby expand the ‘legal structure’ of oil-resource ownership. Faced with the forced seizure of communal lands that followed, the collective view among women took aim at United States-based Pan-Ocean and ‘oil-capitalism’. The fact that all of these actions were inspired by disturbances to an established socio-economic order exposes a well developed tradition of autonomous, gender-specific reaction to marginalization. Here already, the historic relationship between capitalism and the marginalization of women in Nigeria is suggestive of the fact that economic volatility generates conditions for the proliferation of gender-specific resistance (ibid.).

For the Niger Delta region, the 1990s proved to be a period of escalating frustration, in which women suffered most severely as a direct result of the expanding oil-economy. For many, this fundamentally transformed their livelihoods. Pollution damaged the local environment and oil-related land encroachments curtailed their traditional subsistence-based economic activities. For example, the degradation of creeks and rivers eliminated fishing jobs (typically held by women) and extinguished fish as a dietary staple. As traditional forms of work have been rendered impossible, there has been a noted increase in prostitution, as destitute young girls of the region “respond” to the desires of foreign oil-workers. Compounding all of this is the fact that while these indigenous populations suffer social, economic and environmental crises induced by oil exploration and exploitation, the oil company workers enjoy conditions of relative comfort and prosperity. Of all societal groups in the Delta frustrated by these circumstances, women have received the least of the meager ‘token compensation’ provided by MNOCs for the immeasurable devastation they have brought upon the region (Ikelegbe 2005).

For women of the oil-rich Delta, marginalization has not only been economic, it has also been socio-political. Studies of recent protests reveal a correlation between increased instances of women’s group activism and the failure of gender-exclusive, violent, and all too often fruitless male-led communal actions. A related and motivating logic for the participation of women can be seen in the stereotyping of male youth activists by ‘authorities’. Due to the diverse forms of violent and non-violent action they frequently employ, ‘terrorist’ labeling has become commonplace and has complicated the legitimacy of many male-organized initiatives. For women, the strain of complete economic exploitation has combined with the frustration of watching from the socio-political sidelines as male protests degenerate into violence. Increasingly, these circumstances have propelled them to the very ‘threshold of exasperation’ (ibid.). Contrary to actions undertaken by their male counterparts, however, protests by women have been unique in the consistently peaceful manner in which
they are conducted.

WOMEN’S RESPONSE TO OIL-RELATED MARGINALIZATION

The particular nature of this gender-specific, grassroots-organized, and non-violent protest is an important aspect of the Delta struggle which derives considerable legitimacy from the fact that within African societies women are regarded as the most “patient, respectful and morally compelling segment of the community”. The fact that women are also held to be the “embodiment of sanctity, dignity, morality and purity” lends an even greater degree of credibility to efforts they undertake (Ikelegbe 2005, 259). Added to these powerful intangible factors is the fact that on a practical level, community-based organizations are comprised of women of varying levels of age, wealth, and social background; this facilitates a high degree of information sharing and a broader understanding of issues. In other words, the diversity of the grassroots and CWO groups better generates a common sense of purpose, stimulating a localized collective mobilization that has proven to inspire and attract the grassroots support of other local women and less-organized women’s groups (ibid.). It is also true that women have been involved in engaging the oil economy on different levels. Interestingly, in some instances their efforts have been directed at other community protest groups, usually in attempts to reduce insecurity caused by the participation of local males in violence and sea-piracy. These local women’s groups – often distinct from the more formally organized CWOs that agitate against MNOCs directly – have also come together voluntarily to conduct peaceful interventions when inter-communal, ethnic-group conflict occurs (Oruwari 2003). An example that is illustrative of the complex motivations that frequently lie behind grassroots-level women’s group protest occurred at Umechem, an Etche village within Rivers State, when

The community women group worried over the neglect of the community by Shell, and pervasive conflict between youths and elders/chiefs over youth allegations of compromise and betrayal by the latter; [and] the women after their monthly meeting decided to embark on a peaceful demonstration. This followed the failure to get an audience for discussion from Shell management. They marched peacefully, carrying leaves, along the road leading to the Shell facility on the outskirts of the village. (Ikelegbe 2005, p. 261)

With this example, one can appreciate the complications within communities that women engage in in addition to those related to MNOCs. Furthermore, this Etche protest is demonstrative of the sort of non-violent modes of agitation frequently deployed by women despite their enduring frustrations on numerous fronts. It is possible to view women’s non-violent activism on a spectrum, moving from dialogue through small-scale disruption and ‘radical behavior’ to high profile non-violent actions.

One of the most significant results of the manner in which women groups have undertaken activism has been the success rate of negotiation. Through non-violent approaches, resolutions with oil companies are often realized at the grievance level, following meetings between CWO leaders and liaison officers of MNOCs. On occasions where these initiatives become frustrated, however, CWOs have demonstrated a willingness to engage in more disruptive forms of protest. Within these actions, there are again multiple levels or degrees of activism, and escalation from one to the next is indicative of frustrations not being resolved. Following from foiled attempts at the dialogue level, more direct forms of protest are commonly undertaken. Engagement in these forms of protest – such as peacefully visiting the houses or palaces of communal leaders – signals that circumstances have escalated to a point that may prompt ‘radical’ behavior. Public nudity represents the epitome of such behavior. The adoption of this form of protest by women in many African cultures heralds the failure of all other efforts and is understood to symbolize a shaming and/or cursing of society (Ikelegbe 2005, p. 259-60; Turner & Brownhill 2005, p. 28). Activism of this nature was employed with success against oil infrastructure in the 1990s when negotiated deals with MNOCs resulted in short-term compensation. Ultimately, these extreme cases amounted to rare, localized victories that nevertheless managed to garner the degree of attention required to reach other women’s groups.

Gendered protest proved even more successful in the early post-millennium when marginalized and disillusioned Itsekiri and Ijaw women staged high-profile, non-violent actions against Chevron-Texaco oil facilities in Ugboro between July and August of 2002 and were awarded compensation. For over three weeks, hundreds of local women occupied four of the MNOC’s oil platforms, peacefully disrupting production and effectively holding the flow stations hostage (Ikelegbe 2005; Ujeke 2004). The Itsekiri protest, which occurred first and persisted for two weeks, witnessed the articulation of various demands relating to the local ecology, environment, and infrastructure and inspired Ijaw women into similar action. This second protest
amounted to a highly coordinated occupation of the Chevron-Texaco’s Abiteye, Otunana, Dibi and Olero flow stations, and was organized and carried out by women from the Gbaramatu and Egbeama kingdoms. These actions resulted in Chevron-Texaco having to implement a *force majeure* clause with its customers, while the Ijaw women secured a Memorandum of Understanding that included monetary compensation from the company in a number of areas including education, healthcare, and N200 million in micro-credit loans for community economies (ibid.). In addition to the realization of tangible benefits, however, these events have been recognized as an important point in the engendering of resistance in the Niger Delta struggle. Until the Ugborodo protests, coordinated CWO activism was “a most neglected segment of women group struggles” that was rarely reported on (Ikelegbe 2005, p. 259). Conjointly, however, these highly conspicuous ‘incidents’ served to attract international media attention on the one hand, and inspire similar efforts by women’s groups in other areas of the Delta on the other, including a shut-down of two Shell flow stations by Urhobo women that same summer and numerous other CWO actions against MNOCs, the Nigerian government, and militant male youths in the five years since (Ikelegbe 2005; Turner & Brownhill 2004; Unoarumi 2008).

**OPPORTUNITY FOR A PAN-DELTA MOVEMENT?**

While the events at Ugborodo in 2002 did much to reveal the effectiveness of gender-specific action, it is important to recognize the existence of two impediments to the formation of grassroots community groups in areas of conflict. For CWOs, identifying and examining these weaknesses is necessary because they pose serious challenges to the process of unifying a region-wide coalition committed to non-violent activism. First of all, interest and mobilization in protest has been community-based, relating to particular local issues that may or may not be shared throughout the entirety of the Niger Delta region. Second, widespread poverty and a lack of education and essential resources translates into limitations in the capacity of dispersed communities to move beyond their own respective petitions for the necessities of life and articulate more complex and united claims (Ikelegbe 2005; Ukeje 2004). Here, Robert Bates’ (1981) groundbreaking study of markets and state policy in tropical Africa is instructive. In the early 1980s, he found that public and private sector elite interests formed a ‘political pact’ that exploited the ‘mass unorganized’, while, simultaneously working to subsidize the politically potent urban minority. Undoubtedly, the primitive infrastructure of the Delta region hampers the potential for communication and education to amalgamate the vast number of communities. Moreover, as was discovered by Bates, this scenario enables public and private elites to identify and then compensate only the most dangerous factions of rural society. Commonly, these select beneficiaries are appeased in order to fragment community cohesion, using resources gained through the exploitation of their fellow Africans (Bates 1981).

Together, the aforementioned resource limitations and the potential for societal fragmentation through selective side-payments present very real organizational obstacles for women of the Delta, yet it would be a mistake to overlook the merits of community-based activism. More recently, scholars have found that local resistance has a bottom-up orientation that is hostile to local elites who are seen as clients of the Nigerian federal state and in league with the oil companies. In particular, the work of C. I. Obi (2001) demonstrates how various community movements that have emerged gained grassroots-level support and legitimacy by appealing to a shared local culture, rallying around area individuals who contributed notably to the development of their respective communities. By forming a common political identity at the community level, social cohesion can begin to generate a foundation for large-scale alliances upon which to expand (Obi 2001).

Most significant in a culturally diverse state like Nigeria, gender commonality represents one of the few sources of unification with the potential to transcend ethnic, religious, regional, and political differences. Insofar as the commodification of oil has disrupted established social relations, a united coalition of this nature might well provide individual women with a unique opportunity for empowerment amidst the limitations and restrictive boundaries that have long demanded adherence to entrenched traditional gender roles. Simultaneously, community-based groups retain an organized structure and a high degree of mobility that enables them to act swiftly and decisively when extreme circumstances are encountered. As witnessed at Ugborodo, this capability has resulted in incidents of activism that have done much to raise the profile of women in the Delta region. Indeed, it should be acknowledged that these flares of publicity have attracted NGOs who have increased awareness about the dire circumstances facing Delta women further still (Ikelegbe 2005). In this way, one can begin to view the grassroots base of organized women’s groups as a ‘core’ from which an evolving wave of consciousness radiates onwards. As more sophisticated external groups are drawn into the region, it seems reasonable to expect levels of inter-community or regional cooperation to increase.
Articulating the perspective of women in areas of conflict is something that has long been neglected but, more recently, efforts have been made to address this issue. The United Nations Development Programme’s comprehensive 2006 Niger Delta Development Report provides an example of one such initiative: the document offers an extensive overview of the post-millennium situation in the Delta region, and declares women to be a group who bear an “extra burden” in the ongoing conflict as they continue to be marginalized socially and economically. The subsistence-based issues related in this international publication underlie the recent and powerful politicization of Nigerian women in the resource struggle because, for Niger Delta communities, claims involving the necessities of life are essentially universal. In another UN gender-related report, which appeared in 2006, former Secretary-General Kofi Anan observed that “[i]n war torn societies, women often keep societies going. They maintain the social fabric. They replace destroyed social services and tend to the sick and wounded. As a result, women are the prime advocates of peace” (UNDP 2006a, p. 4). Thus, women represent a critical element to the Niger Delta question, both in coping with the conflict and in attaining a workable resolution. Because women make up the majority of the population – a percentage that is growing as men die in violent conflict or are arrested – the issue of their economic and socio-political marginalization is becoming increasingly more relevant. Where Delta women are concerned specifically, these documents reveal transnational recognition of gender-based inequalities and confirm that these must be rectified in order for there to be stability in the region (UNDP 2006a; UNDP 2006b).

CONCLUSION

Within multi-ethnic Nigeria, government formulas to manage and distribute revenue derived from the nation’s petroleum-based economy have long been uneven and unacceptable. This is evident in the fact that, despite experiencing its longest cycle of civilian-led governments since independence in 1960, the resource-rich federal republic continues to lay claim to rampant inequality and regional violence. One recent report claimed that despite the Delta’s considerable oil wealth, roughly seventy percent of the region’s inhabitants eke out an existence on less than $1 per day (Lindsay 2006). Bridging the divide between politics and the economy is vital to moving towards a progressive solution in which the benefits derived from oil exploitation are distributed more equally throughout the country’s population (Ejobowah 2000). Women stand to gain the most from greater socio-economic equality because it is they and their children who suffer most harshly from the ill effects of the oil economy. Indeed, it has been due to the marginalization caused by the oil economy that women have become exasperated and subsequently inspired to participate in collective action. As suggested by the content of a number of UN reports, it is important that gender analysis is expanded upon and that initiatives mindful of the gender-specific needs of women impacted by conflict are further developed (UNDP 2006a; UNDP 2006b). Without question, the various protests undertaken by women’s groups in the Delta region have contributed to the development of this awareness.

In sum, the activities of women’s groups in the Niger Delta oil conflict provide an interesting case for the effectiveness of alternative, non-violent activism that is often completely overlooked. More than anything, the evidence from various initiatives undertaken by CWOs and grassroots support groups in the Delta region suggests that protest by peaceful means can result in the sort of compensation and negotiated settlement that so often evades militant male-led endeavors. While women are inspired to act because, like their male counterparts, though arguably to a greater degree, they face a situation wherein the environment that supports their basic needs is blatantly exploited, the methods of activism they utilize have proven to be the more productive. Rather than perpetuating and escalating the cycle of violence and counter-violence, the peaceful manner in which the women conduct themselves reinforces their traditional moral status within society and thereby lends a distinct credibility and legitimacy to their claims. As demonstrated through the case of Ugborodo, ‘business-as-usual’ can be disrupted without the use of violence, and, furthermore, the unique form of such disruption can compel oil companies to recognize demands. In the longer-term, activism of this nature encourages the formation of a powerful ‘pan-Delta alliance’ by attracting much needed international support and raising regional awareness.

REFERENCES


ABSTRACT – Although Cambodia’s recent era of war has ended, this does not guarantee peace for Cambodians. The country still faces many obstacles to building a positive peace – a concept of peace that means more than just the absence of physical violence. This paper evaluates the role of the formal education system in Cambodia in promoting this positive peace through the mechanisms of gender equity, poverty reduction, HIV/AIDS prevention, and reconciliation. Although positive changes are being achieved, this paper concludes that these mechanisms are hampered by economic, cultural and political factors. Furthermore, the underlying effect or “hidden curriculum” of these factors may directly contradict the state’s education policy, and promote conflict instead of peace.

RÉSUMÉ – Bien que la récente ère de la guerre au Cambodge ait pris fin, il n’y a aucune garantie de paix pour les Cambodgiens. Le Cambodge doit encore faire face à de nombreux obstacles à l’édification d’une paix positive - un concept de paix qui ne signifie beaucoup plus que la seule absence de violence physique. Ce document évalue le rôle du système formel d’éducation au Cambodge dans la promotion de cette paix positive, par le biais des mécanismes de l’équité entre les sexes, la réduction de la pauvreté, la prévention du VIH-sida, et de la réconciliation. Bien que des changements positifs aient été obtenus, l’impact de l’éducation par le biais de ces mécanismes est compromis par des facteurs économiques, culturels et politiques. En outre, l’effet sous-jacent ou « de curriculum caché» de ces facteurs pourrait directement entrer en contradiction avec la présente politique de l’éducation, et promouvoir des conflits au lieu de la paix.

INTRODUCTION

From the 1970s until recently, Cambodia was a site of violent conflict. Its recent history of violence includes the Vietnam War, the Khmer Rouge Revolution from 1975-1979, the Vietnamese occupation from 1979 to 1991, and the 1997 coup led by current Prime Minister Hun Sen. The Khmer Rouge alone inflicted an estimated 1.7 to 3 million deaths in a brutal attempt to form a utopian agricultural society (Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, 2008). Since then, under the continued power of Hun Sen’s Cambodian People’s Party, the country has achieved peace. However, the absence of physical violence (“negative peace”) does not automatically constitute substantive and lasting peace that is built through human and food security, employment, health, and freedom (“positive peace”). Cambodia continues to work towards this type of positive peace through policy development and practice (UNDP 1994, p. 23).

This paper evaluates the influence of formal education towards positive peace building in Cambodia. While recent education policies appear to support such peace in theory, economic, political, and cultural restraints limit their impact in practice. In fact, these restraints risk creating a school environment where the “lessons” learned are completely contrary to the stated intentions of policy. Where these mixed messages occur, the education system is likely contributing to conflict instead of peace. This paper examines the intended curriculum as stated in policy, as well as the hidden curriculum: the lessons that result when the schooling context is taken into consideration. This approach takes cue from Michael Apple (2004) that “any
serious appraisal of the role of education in a complex society” requires knowledge, schools and educators to be situated within their context (p. 11).

CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE IN A POSITIVE PEACE PARADIGM

Because evaluating the role of education in peace building involves assumptions about what causes conflict, this paper is also founded in the work of Johan Galtung. According to Galtung (n.d.),

When violence breaks out there are usually two structural causes: too much dominance, politically as oppression and/or economically as exploitation; or too much distance, between classes or other groups, including countries. Combine the two and we get the phenomenon known as (social) exclusion or marginalization. (p. 59)

On this basis, we might assume that a standard of economic, political and social conditions is necessary to achieve positive peace. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to debate what the necessary standard is, we can assume that it should be based on equity: the idea that no one person or place has “too much” or “too little”. Within Galtung’s framework, any action which produces inequity is therefore violent, and when this imbalance is reproduced systemically in institutions, the term “structural violence” is applied.

EVALUATING THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATION ON POSITIVE PEACE

This paper seeks to identify specific mechanisms through which education can contribute to peace, evaluate their success to date, and hypothesize their success in the future. Gender equity, poverty reduction, HIV-AIDS prevention, and reconciliation are the mechanisms evaluated. While the first three were chosen because they are self-identified in Cambodian policy, the fourth, reconciliation, is curiously absent. Given Cambodia’s recent history of conflict, reconciliation would seem to be an obvious and necessary mechanism for promoting peace (Galtung n.d., p. 7). The evaluation shows economic and occasionally cultural restraints hamper gender equity, HIV-AIDS prevention and poverty reduction, while political restraints explain the absence of reconciliation in policy. The culmination of these restraints, symbolized by violent attitudes within schools themselves, calls into question the ability of the education system to produce positive peace in Cambodia.

EVALUATING THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATION ON GENDER EQUITY

Gender equity is promoted as a major goal in education policy (e.g., MoEYS, 2005a) and has the potential to promote peace in Cambodia. McGrew, Frieson and Chan (2004) illustrate, for example, how women’s involvement in Cambodian politics contributes to “good governance” and how this greatly improves prospects for nonviolence, especially in the context of an allegedly corrupt Cambodian government (p. vi-viii). Accordingly, considerable efforts are being made to increase school enrollment for females in particular. In 2001, there was a 61.8% increase in male primary school enrollment, and 72.9% increase for female students (Velasco 2004). The number of female students continues to rise gradually according to the most recent statistics (MoEYS 2005a).

In 2005, the Ministry of Education, Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) reported that there was “still a 2.5% gender gap overall with more boys than girls” (2005a, p. 17). However, this represents considerable improvement from only 2 years prior, which is due in part to the provision of bursaries for poor students and females. According to their Education Sector Performance Report, MoEYS has provided some 21,000 scholarships to encourage equitable access to education, in partnership with NGOs. Still, few females ever finish secondary school, and dropout rates are higher for females at all levels (Velasco 2004).

In the same report, MoEYS admits that scholarships do not prevent dropouts. The reason for this is that initial access is not sustained by one-time scholarships. Instead, the “gender gap” tends to increase along with the grade level. In 2002, there was an 8% gender gap at the primary level, 23% at the lower secondary level, and a considerable 36% at the upper secondary level. The economic and cultural context of the family provides some explanations for this pattern. With a per capita income of only US$320, children are often needed to stay home and do domestic work. If a choice must be made, a male child will be given priority, in part because females typically have more domestic responsibilities (Ledgerwood n.d.; Velasco 2004; Tan 2007). Education planners need to take these economic and cultural realities into consideration, especially as they plan to increase the hours of the curriculum. If education is to be meaningful and effective, students
cannot be burdened by full-time study and full-time work; flexibility is required within the formal education system, especially for female students.

For all of the desirability of universally equal access and empowerment, there are unwanted side effects of the rapid push for enrollment increases. In their Education Sector Performance Report, even MoEYS recognizes that, “[t]he significant growth in quantity is causing the quality in lower secondary education to drop” and it is a fair guess that overcrowding and lack of materials persist at all levels (2005a). Furthermore, both the content of the curriculum and its delivery have not yet adapted to concerns of gender equity in a meaningful way. Textbook writers and reviewers tend to be men, and tend to lack theoretical teaching knowledge and practical experience as educators in the classroom. Their approach to a gender sensitive curriculum can be described as “gender blind”: they include an equal number of examples portraying women and men in textbooks, but portray them in their culturally traditional roles (Velasco 2004, p. 43). The content of such a curriculum does not support active political participation by women.

Gender equity is further undermined by the way in which the curriculum is delivered. Affirmative action programs have increased the number of female teachers, but like their students, they are concentrated at the lower levels of education and make up only 38% of the overall teaching force (Velasco, 2004). With a literacy rate of 45.1% among Cambodian women (Ledgerwood n.d., p. 6), there are not many educated female role models to encourage female students in the usefulness of their studies. This problem is exacerbated when the curriculum fails to have relevance for the daily lives of female students, a criticism made by sociologist Esther Velasco (2004). The general lack of female facilities like washrooms and dormitories may have an economic explanation, but it sends a message contrary to policy that males are a higher priority to be educated. In total, these circumstances explain why the gender gap increases beyond primary school, and raises questions about how effectively Cambodian schools can promote gender equity, and in turn, positive peace.

EVALUATING THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATION ON POVERTY REDUCTION IN A LIBERAL FRAMEWORK

In fact, the assumption that education can change or control society, by influencing attitudes towards gender or reducing poverty, is fundamental to a liberal conception of education (Apple, 2004). If education can indeed reduce poverty, and if reducing poverty contributes to equity, then logically, education can contribute to peace. Such an assumption is difficult to prove anywhere however, and especially in Cambodia where change is so recent. At least one commentator suggests that this liberal assumption (linking social development with economic progress, in particular) is a form of modernization theory, the implication being that what worked for the West historically may not work for Cambodia today (Tan 2007). Nevertheless, this liberal assumption is definitely echoed in Cambodian policy. UNESCO’s International Bureau of Education (IBE) writes of Cambodia that, “[t]he goal of basic education is to develop useful citizens into a skillful workforce” (n.d., p. 4). The government’s Education Strategic Plan echoes this same sentiment in the phrase “human resource development” (MoEYS 2005b, p. 1).

Of course, for this liberal assumption to hold true (for education to support economic growth), education must be relevant to the lives and future work of students. With its NGO partners, the MoEYS attempts to provide this relevance through the Local Life Skills Programme (LLSP). The LLSP offers specialized vocational training, essentially through a local apprenticeship (MoEYS 2004). Pilot programs through Kampuchean Action for Primary Education (KAPE) allow students to select a skill they want to learn, such as vegetable growing, bicycle repair, or music, and to nominate the local community member under whom they want to train (Pellini 2005).

While such programs show promise, they presently function on a small scale. One author suggests that to provide real relevance, the education system should abandon the colonial model and focus on supporting its largest economic sector: agriculture (Ayres 2000). Furthermore, regardless of the curriculum content, structural factors continue to limit the effectiveness of education in reducing poverty. As noted previously, sending a child to school is itself the sacrifice of an economic asset. When a child is sent, large proportions of the school costs are placed on the family. Recent estimates suggest that families and communities absorb anywhere from 56% to 74.8% of these costs (Pellini 2005; Ledgerwood n.d., p. 13). According to Tan (2007), these school costs can represent as much as “79% of the per capita non-food expenditure” for the poorest 20% of the population (p. 21).

The high cost of education for families is due mainly to fees charged by teachers. Although such fees are officially illegal, they persist because teachers’ wages are extremely low: one estimate puts the figure at $35-60 per month, another at as low as $10; either figure is less than half the amount considered necessary to
support a family (Tan 2007; Ledgerwood n.d.). While these fees are necessary to keep teachers out of poverty, they reduce access for the poorest students, barring them from whatever economic benefits education may provide. This situation actually increases inequity, and represents structural violence in Galtung’s terms. Theoretically, poor wages also reduce the quality of teaching, if for no other reason than that teachers limit school hours to work second jobs. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that some teachers exchange good grades for fees. Those students who cannot pay either repeat the grade or drop out (Tan 2007). Again, not only does this practice exacerbate inequity, it reduces education to purely economic terms. This is, unfortunately, the natural extension of a “human capital” development paradigm where human lives are treated merely as economic units.

Furthermore, this situation sends the message that learning is not important if one can pay, and that money trumps morality and law. Especially in a country of alleged government corruption and extreme economic disparity, this lesson will not contribute to peace in Cambodia. The education sector represented 17.3% of the government’s budget in 2004-5, which, despite being a considerable increase from 13.9% in 2000-1, is still below the mandated target of 19.5% (MoEYS, 2005b). For education to contribute to peace through poverty reduction, the government needs to increase teachers’ salaries, and reduce the burden of costs on families. However, MoEYS (n.d.) projects education costs to rise from 419 billion riels [Cambodian national currency] to 855 billion riels in 2015. (Therefore, the prospects for such change are not immediately promising.

EVALUATING THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATION ON HIV/AIDS REDUCTION

Education policy also attempts to address inequity through HIV/AIDS education programs. Although HIV infection is a medical situation, it is also a product of, and contributor to, social and economic inequity. Indeed, the MoEYS Education Strategic Plan (2005) recognizes the reality that certain vulnerable areas and groups are in greater need of prevention programs. Persons infected with HIV face tremendous social stigma (e.g. UNESCO 2007). Also, to procure treatment, they must pay so-called “catastrophic” medical fees (O’Donnell, Doorslaer, et al 2005). In purely economic terms, a person with full-blown AIDS is likely unable to work, and is a potential financial burden to their family. Therefore, because HIV/AIDS marginalizes people socially and economically, prevention programs represent a form of social and economic justice for particularly vulnerable persons. In other words, the issue of HIV/AIDS must be addressed in the movement towards positive peace. It is probably for all of these reasons that MoEYS (2005b) seeks to integrate HIV prevention into the curriculum.

Despite these good intentions, a study by UNESCO (2007) that this integration is effectively lacking in Cambodia and elsewhere. According to the study, the scale of coverage is too low, due to an abundance of small-scale pilot programs rather than unified national programs, difficulty in distributing materials, and discrepancies in teacher training. The integration of HIV prevention into the curriculum is too narrow, and generally fails to be accompanied by counseling and linkages to the community. Not enough time is allocated, perhaps because the curriculum is already overloaded, and because of economic realities of teachers, students and their families many students do not spend full days at school in Cambodia (Working Group for Weapons Reduction, 2003). The study concludes that, even where teaching materials are distributed, they are considered to lack quality.

Furthermore, the predominant pedagogy is still a traditional rote-memorization style with an emphasis on facts, and this likely reduces the impact of what needs to be treated as a non-academic topic. There is, for example, little focus on changing the attitudes of stigma and discrimination towards individuals with HIV/AIDS. It is difficult to judge how effective this or any other approach might be, because there has been no study of learning outcomes. To their credit, the UNESCO study found that Cambodia is the only nation among the six studied which is also attempting to develop a workplace HIV/AIDS policy, in accordance with the values of their education policy. This suggests that there is at least a genuine and concerted effort to address and change the attitudes of discrimination towards persons with HIV/AIDS.

Nonetheless, without even considering the effect of HIV/AIDS on society, it is clearly an obstacle to an individual’s human security and equity, and therefore to any concept of positive peace. Yet, for all of the policy attention given to HIV-AIDS, its estimated incidence was only 0.8% in 2007, down from 1.5% in 2001 (UNAIDS 2008, p. 220). Cambodia has the second highest incidence in the region next to Thailand, but it is still far below Sub-Saharan Africa. Meanwhile, other issues such as physical disability are virtually ignored in policy, despite a similar incidence and resulting marginalization, as well as causes, such as landmines, which are a direct result of conflict (The Cambodia Trust 2005). This silence is very likely due to the relative supremacy of
HIV/AIDS in international development and foreign aid discourse. Likewise, we shall see that the discourse of internal/national politics also strongly influences the peace-building impact of Cambodian schools.

EVALUATING THE INFLUENCE OF EDUCATION ON RECONCILIATION

The absence of reconciliation measures in Cambodian policy is a severe limiting factor to the peace-building impact of education. It seems odd and troubling that reconciliation is not being discussed even within the context of peace education. The reason for this may be that, according to the aforementioned study by UNESCO (organizations that are active in shaping Cambodian education policy), Cambodia has already achieved national reconciliation. This attitude seems to have informed the curriculum, and is problematic for several reasons. First, this attitude assumes that “peace” is static, and that “reconciliation” is something achieved definitively and then never considered again. It is also questionable whether the government has truly attempted national reconciliation, let alone achieved it. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Cambodian students today are not being taught about their history, particularly the Khmer Rouge era, to any significant degree. Khamboly Dy, a Cambodian who recently compiled a textbook of Khmer history, recalls, “[i]n grade 9 we had only 5 sentences [about the Khmer Rouge]… in grade 12, we had only 5 or 6 pages. It’s not enough.” (Sullivan 2007). According to Kinetz (2007), textbooks of the 1980s, produced by the Vietnamese-led government, “depicted the Khmer Rouge with such graphic ferocity that some children grew up thinking they were actual monsters.” (p. A14). The lack of a fair and complete history means that students will not learn the only positive message that comes from the Khmer Rouge era: that social change is possible, but that achieving it through violent conflict is an utter mistake. The deprival of this shared history is a great obstacle to reconciliation and conflict prevention.

Pich Sophoan (1997), a Director in Cambodia’s MoEYS, claims that “[t]extbooks in Cambodia do not reflect ideology” (p. 43). But Sophoan fails to realize that texts are always ideological, if not for what is put in, then for what is left out. That a government review panel censored two phrases in Dy’s textbook, and then ultimately deemed it “unsuitable for use in the regular curriculum,” demonstrates the role of ideology (Kinetz 2007 p. A14). Kinetz (2007) writes of the controversy:

[Prime Minister Hun Sen’s] education adviser, Sean Borat, generally praised the book but took issue with Khamboly’s failure to characterize the Vietnamese action as a liberation. He also objected to the book’s characterization of Cambodians who returned with the Vietnamese in 1979 as “Khmer Rouge defectors.” That phrase, Sean Borat wrote, must be deleted because “the Cambodian People’s Party did not originate from Khmer Rouge soldiers but from a massive movement that emerged to oppose the brutal regime led by Pol Pot (p. A14).

The incumbent Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) recognizes the political nature of history and memory. However, as Kinetz explains, many of its members including Hun Sen have been linked to the Khmer Rouge. Their response is associate themselves with the ostensible Vietnamese “liberation.” This is, of course, only one interpretation of events. Rather than risking losing face with the next generation, the CPP apparently intends to skirt dialogue on the issue of legitimacy, a strategy not exactly conducive to reconciliation. According to Kinetz (2007), the government claims the MoEYS will use Dy’s text as the basis for its own. However, one can be skeptical: according to one member of the review panel, history “should be kept for at least 60 years before starting to discuss it” (Kinetz 2007, p. A14). By this criteria, it will be 2040 at least before Cambodian students can expect their textbooks to deal with the controversial but necessary topics in their recent history of conflict.

Other means to reconciliation beyond history are equally as lacking. So-called “Moral-Civics,” a Western construct, has usurped a more culturally appropriate choice: teaching Buddhism. While the government’s motto reads “Nation, Religion, King” (in that order, notably), there does not seem to be any effort to include the moral teachings of Buddhism or any other religion in the curriculum (e.g. UNESCO n.d.). One reason may be that Western thought (which, again, is shaping Cambodian education policy) often perceives Buddhism as an ideological tool through which hierarchy and deference is legitimized, in a way that contradicts democracy and social change (Pellini 2005). However, according to Yos Hut Khemacaro, a Khmer Buddhist monk who might therefore be considered an authority on the topic, practicing the teaching of the Buddha can indeed promote social change (Chea 2003). As with history, it is not Buddhism itself that is problematic, or any religion for that matter, but how it is used, ideologically and politically. According to Vannath Chea, former president of the Center for Social Development in Cambodia, “[t]here must be a role for ordinary people to play in reaching
reconciliation” and Buddhism represents such a way (p. 53). Unfortunately, reconciliation does not appear to be on the government’s agenda, and Buddhism has not been granted a place in the curriculum.

SYMBOLIZING THE FAILURE: VIOLENCE AND IDEOLOGY IN CAMBODIAN SCHOOLS

A small survey for the Cambodian Peace and Disarmament Education Project suggests the hypocritical and political nature of education in Cambodian. The survey, taken by the Working Group for Weapons Reduction (2003), addresses the exposure of students and teachers to violence in schools, and their attitudes towards war and peace education. Eighty-six per cent of students report being hit by a teacher. More alarmingly, 90% see this violence as justified, and 95% believe it contributes to their capacity to learn. Such views likely reflect high levels of violence in the homes, another factor that must be addressed in concert with peace education. Such a learning context may promote obedience, but it is not likely to encourage peace on any scale. This is a shame, because 100% of students surveyed said they would like to know more about peace education, and war was most often identified as their greatest fear. Most tellingly, when given one choice, 47 of 90 students named Hun Sen as their positive role model. Students gave reasons such as: he “developed non violence and peace,” “he liberated the country from the Khmer Rouge,” or he “eliminate[d] poverty in society by giving gifts such as schools” (p. 15). The language of “liberation” explicitly echoes Sean Borat (suggesting this interpretation of history is being taught in schools) and the idea of “gifts” reveals a particular conception of political leadership. Ironically, two students named “all of the famous people in the world” as their role model, and only one student named the Buddha (p.15).

CONCLUSION: OBSTACLES TO EDUCATION AS AN AGENT OF POSITIVE PEACE

While the Cambodian education sector has adopted some policies that may support peace, effective implementation is lacking to date. Although the content of the school curriculum itself supports peace in theory, the way the curriculum is delivered sends mixed messages to students. In turn, the way the curriculum is delivered is a product of economics, because, put simply, the formal education sector does not have the money to do everything it might wish. These economic restraints, shaped further by culture, are responsible for the mixed messages that limit the potential impact of education in promoting gender equity, poverty reduction, HIV prevention, reconciliation and, in effect, positive peace. When looking at reconciliation, political obstacles also hamper the impact of education on building peace. In Galtung’s terms, all of these obstacles represent forms of structural violence. If the education system is going to promote positive peace, or if violent conflict is going to be prevented in the foreseeable future, these are the kind of obstacles that need to be addressed.

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According to the survey, 58% of students report seeing parents hit each other regularly.

Someone suggested to me that the high incidence of reporting Hun Sen may have been out of fear, or to please surveyors could be perceived as government officials. This is a factor. However, considering the large number of students that readily reported their teachers, and even their parents as violent, it appears that their answers were not entirely motivated out of fear or desire to please.


The End of Poverty: A Critical Review

By Jenna Meguid

ABSTRACT – This critical review argues that Jeffrey Sachs has suggested a path towards extreme poverty eradication which is a-historical, culturally insensitive, and inappropriately hierarchical. Sachs’ a-historicism precludes an important conceptual debate about the goals and legitimacy of development. His prescriptions are ignorant of the importance of embedding development projects within local contexts. Finally, Sachs conceives of development as a top-down process wherein poverty is a product of technical under-capacity, instead of entrenched political realities. These three critical flaws render many of his prescriptions impotent, and his goal – the eradication of extreme poverty by 2025 – unreachable.

RéSUMé – Cette critique de Jeffrey Sachs « La fin de la pauvreté » fait valoir que Sachs a mis au point des prescriptions pour les individus extrêmement pauvres, qui sont a-historique, culturellement insensibles, et indûment hiérarchiques. L’anhistoricisme de Sachs tait un important débat d’idées sur les objectifs et la légitimité du développement. En outre, les prescriptions de Sachs font fi de l’importance de l’intégration des projets de développement dans les contextes locaux. Enfin, Sachs conçoit le développement comme un processus top-down dans lequel la pauvreté est un produit d’une sous-capacité technique, au lieu d’être le produit de réalités politiques ancrées. Ces trois manquements fondamentaux rendent beaucoup de ses prescriptions impuissantes, et son objectif - que l’extrême pauvreté puisse être éliminée d’ici 2025 - clairement inaccessible.

The End of Poverty is a seductive piece of development economics. Seductive, because its author is portrayed as an unquestionably competent expert, who we can thank for more than one macroeconomic miracle. Seductive, because it provides specific, practical, and comprehensive interventions which its author claims will revolutionize the lives of the extreme poor. Seductive, because when you finish reading it, you are convinced that Jeffery Sachs has ended poverty as we know it. However, Sachs’ account is ultimately dangerous. This slick and seductive piece of writing can best be characterized as fiction, not an accurate or evenhanded account of the plight of the world’s poor. This critical review of Jeffery Sachs’ The End of Poverty argues that there are three flaws in his characterization of the solution to extreme poverty. First, Sachs’ work provides an account of the current state of the African poor that is a-historical and fails to recognize the role of Western colonial powers in the production of poverty. Second, Sachs provides top-down, a-cultural solutions instead of locally owned and culturally appropriate ones. Third, Sachs understands poverty as a narrow technical process, not as an intractable political one. Substantively, Sachs’ work has little practical value above being a well-oiled public relations device. I begin with a brief summary of Sachs’ work.

The End of Poverty begins with a glowing and lengthy account of its author’s career, taking us through the breathtaking successes of Sachs’ economic interventions in Bolivia and Poland. He goes on to blame the failure of Russian market reforms on the unwillingness of the international community to buy his shock therapy prescription, not on his own failure to accurately diagnose the problem. Sachs then moves on to give readers his account of the current state of poverty in Africa, and outlines a comprehensive set of reforms which would, within 20 years, eliminate this poverty (Sachs 2005, p. 4).

Sachs distinguishes between extreme poverty, moderate poverty, and relative poverty (Sachs 2005,
Sachs argues that extreme poverty creates a ‘poverty trap,’ wherein people are so poor that they cannot manage to reach even the bottom rung of the development ladder. Essentially, people are too poor to save, and capital depreciates more rapidly than it can be accumulated. Add populations which grow faster than capital can accumulate, and the “ratio of capital per person actually falls from generation to generation” (Sachs 2005, p. 245). Families are so poor that they are unable to achieve even minimal progress onto the development ladder. If the amount of standing capital within the system increases (in Sachs’ example, doubles), people become able to meet their basic needs, as well as invest and save to offset depreciation. As a result, “the economy grows rather than declines, because savings offset capital depreciation” (Sachs 2005, p. 249). Sachs ends by arguing that at low levels of capital per person, “the likelihood is that doubling the human and physical capital stock will actually more than double the income level” (Sachs 2005, p. 250). He relies here on the ‘threshold effect,’ where, for instance, repairing half of a road will double the amount of usable pavement, but will more than double the economic impact of the road, which only becomes usable once the entire stretch meets a minimum standard of repair.

Sachs argues that to increase the capital stock in the poorest countries, investments in five areas of development are required. These “Big Five” include education, agriculture basic health education, infrastructure (power, transport, and communication), and sanitation and drinking water (Sachs 2005, p. 233). When investments are made in these five areas, the poverty trap can be broken, and individuals, communities, even entire nations, can climb onto the first rung of the development ladder. As a final flourish on an impressively wide-ranging account, Sachs demonstrates that these investments are all possible within the scope of financial commitments already made by the developing world (namely, within the promised funding target of .7% of GDP by the G8).

Upon publication of Sachs’ work, the academic world whipped itself into a furor. Many support Sachs: D.J. Shaw (2005) argues that The End of Poverty is an enormously valuable work, as it constitutes a readable and clear macro-level account of a complicated issue (p. 619). Some argue that his superstardom is what makes his work important and useful: “When Sachs speaks, people are more likely to listen” (Koechlin 2007, p. 379). Perhaps his most important contribution is the very fact that, in a current neo-liberal climate, he has made a persuasive moral argument that devoting significant resources to ending poverty is still a worthwhile endeavor (Berman 2006, p. 69).

There are, however, voracious and cutting critiques of Sachs’ approach. Peter Townsend (2005) has argued that The End of Poverty lacks a critical discussion of transnational corporations, their growing power, and missing accountability mechanisms for their actions in the developing world (p. 1379). Ioannis Glinavos (2006) criticized Sachs for being “too general to serve as a useful tool in advanced academic research” (p. 577). According to Glinavos (2006), the intellectual sacrifices required to make the discussion on development accessible to the non-specialized public have eroded the utility of his arguments (p. 577).

However, the problem with Sachs’ work is not that it is too vague, or fails to dwell on particular phenomena. Instead, the problem is that he has failed to accurately conceive of the nature of poverty, and appropriate methods for its alleviation. A vague account of the problems of aid could be forgiven—especially in a book that aims to create dialogue in a popular audience about an extremely complicated issue. The problem with Sachs’s work is not that he is imprecise, it is that he is simply inaccurate. To begin discussing my substantive concerns with Sachs’ work, I will argue that Sachs has provided an account of the current state of poverty which is a-historical, and which refuses to place blame for under-development squarely where it lies – with the West.

As well as providing a technical economic explanation for the current state of poverty in Africa, Sachs paints us a background picture wherein poor geography and a high disease burden contribute to low levels of standing capital in Africa. Africa has more landlocked nations than any other continent, frustrating the efficient transport of goods to lucrative Western markets. Populations are concentrated in the interior, where soil fertility is better but transport costs are unreasonably high. Africa’s tropical climate is ideal for the transmission of diseases that seriously impede productivity, such as malaria and African sleeping sickness, and HIV/AIDS is ravaging the productive sector. It is no wonder, he argues, that the poverty trap in Africa is worse than in any
other developing region of the world.

This account is damagingly a-historical. It fails to lay the blame for African poverty squarely where it lies, on a global system that emerged out of years of irresponsible and self-interested Western interventions into Africa. Geography and disease are two conditions which will need to be addressed to alleviate poverty, certainly, but what of the 50 years of patronizing and exploitative post-colonial relationships with the West? What about the incompetent agendas of misinformed and paternal Bretton Woods institutions? What of decades of colonial rule before that? What of the slave trade? An account of Africa's current situation that excludes these factors is, at best, incomplete.

Sachs' a-historicism pre-empt questions about the intent of development, and the attitudes which motivate it. Some African nations have been ruled by foreign masters for centuries. Cultures have been decimated, economies ruined, and social systems degraded by Western missionaries, colonial bureaucrats, and entrepreneurs who, in the full glory of Western arrogance and racist ignorance, tried to “save” Africa by rebuilding it in the Western image.

Crewe and Harrison (1998) note that the colonial interventions in sub-Saharan Africa were justified by a conception that white Europeans could help other ‘backwards’ races catch up with them (p. 28). The white race was conceived of as being “biologically ahead of blacks,” and the black Africans were conceived of as being in need of help: “Modern science has shown that races develop in the course of centuries as individuals do in years, and that an underdeveloped race, which is incapable of self-government, is no more a reflection on the Almighty than is an underdeveloped child who is incapable of self-government” (Crewe & Harrison 1998, p.28).

Luckily, these obviously offensive ideas are no longer conceived of as legitimate, and are no longer used to publicly justify interventions on African soil. We now work within a framework that largely applauds the use and celebration of indigenous knowledge. However, many of the current views about development bear eerie similarities to predominant ideas from the colonial era. For instance, “the local, indigenous, or poor people are still ‘them’” (Crewe & Harrison 1998, p. 29). Graham Hancock (1989) agrees, and notes that the development orthodoxy has imposed upon the developing world “a fictitious unity upon nations that were widely separated in every sense—geographically, culturally, economically and politically” (p. 69). Crewe and Harrison (1998) go further to note that “the categories vary, and great confusion about who is local, indigenous, or poor abounds, but it remains clear that it is ‘they’ who have the problems” (p. 29). Indigenous, poor, local: these words can quickly become euphemisms for other words: savage, primitive. Though we now use the word ‘indigenous’ or ‘traditional’ to discuss people we may think of as ‘primitive’, the idea masked by the newer language is rooted in the colonial era (Crewe & Harrison 1998, p. 30).

Another eerie example of colonial ideas maintaining a presence in current ideas about development is the use of technology. Crewe and Harrison (1998) argue that the European obsession with technological advancement and its connection to modernity “cannot be overstated” (p. 30). Indeed: “Non-European civilizations were measured according to their knowledge of European science and technology as far back as the seventeenth century” (1998, 31). Technology was seen as a necessary precursor to social progress.

Nothing much has changed. Though the obsession with technology is couched in different language, one of the key aims of the development industry within the last 50 years has been bringing Western technology to Africa. Indeed, Sachs' own diagnosis of African under-development focuses heavily on the lack of technology. He claims that “scientific and technological know-how” are an essential component of African development, without which Africa will continue to stagnate (Sachs 2005, p. 245). He argues aggressively for technical innovations in health, in agriculture, in infrastructure, and in governance.

This implantation of technology, however, is often inappropriate, ineffective, and makes people's lives more difficult, instead of easier. For instance, Graham Hancock (1989) notes that in the last half of the 20th century, thousands of dams have been built in the developing world, absorbing gargantuan amounts of aid money (p. 140). These projects have largely been colossal failures. The disruption in water patterns creates a home for the parasite which causes river blindness and schistosomiasis, displaces local populations, and decimates agricultural land through waterlogging and salinisation (Hancock 1989, p. 141). Overwhelmingly, these dams lose their capacity early, either due to shoddy design or a deficit in the technical capacity needed to maintain them. Indeed, not only do dams contribute little to the local economy, they have the capacity to "infinitely worsen" the state of the poor (Hancock 1989, p. 140).

Crewe and Harrison (1998) note that just as technology was used to justify the civilizing missions of the past, current aid interventions are rationalized with reference to the West's more advanced technical expertise (p. 31). The implantation of technology has often been conceived of as ‘value-free, politically neutral,” (Crewe & Harrison 1998, p. 32) a conception which Sachs undoubtedly shares. However, this conception is only

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possible through massive historical amnesia. Why does the West continue to insist upon bringing technological advances to Africa that are irrelevant or counter-productive? Without an accurate, critical understanding of the role of Western interventions in developing countries, the West is likely to make the same mistakes, and do so for the same reasons.

Sachs has failed to situate the current development industry in its appropriate historical context. Without a sober look at the history of the West's interventions in Africa, we cannot appropriately question the methods and motives of our current efforts. Sachs has presented a solution to poverty which he conceives of as value-free and politically neutral—however, this is inaccurate. It is imperative that we examine the motives of the current round of Western interventions in Africa, and ensure that bringing ‘development’ to Africa is not simply the newest iteration of bringing ‘civilization’ to Africa.

The second major flaw in Sachs’ work is that he conceives of development as a cultureless, top-down process that is best coordinated by Western elites, instead of a bottom-up process that is necessarily dependent upon knowledge of local cultures and norms. Sachs believes the time to investigate and experiment with small-scale interventions is over (Sachs 2005, p. 277). He believes that the time has come to “scale up”, dramatically, the scope of development interventions. Further, in his Big Five development interventions, he has provided specific programming that he believes is crucial in the fight against extreme poverty. For instance, as essential agricultural inputs, Sachs argues that improved seeds and hybrid animals, fertilizers (such as nitrogen-fixing trees), irrigation technologies, and storage facilities for grain are necessary (Sachs 2005, p. 233). In health, Sachs argues for the importance of childhood vaccinations and free mosquito nets.

These interventions sound fantastic. They are easy to implement, inexpensive, and measurably beneficial. However, they are also blind to cultural norms, and, if widely implemented, could be massively ineffective. For example, the question of improved seeds and fallows brings to mind the work of journalist Andrew Rice (2008), who recently wrote about the introduction of the Holstein cow to farming communities in rural Uganda. According to his account, the introduction of the high-yield Holstein is as much a curse as a blessing. Though the cows produce as much as twenty times as much milk as the domestic Ankole cow, they remain unresistant to drought, are particularly susceptible to local diseases, and eat and void so much that they are decimating grazing land. Further, the implantation of the Holstein is destroying longstanding cultural traditions which rest upon the Ankole, and is contributing to the ongoing erosion of biodiversity (Rice 2008).

William Easterly (2007) provides a second example of the futility of implementing technical agricultural reforms which are not tailored to suit the local context. He describes a Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) project that spent massive amounts of resources bringing in technical experts to train a community in Lesotho to begin commercial farming (p. 193). The CIDA technical experts brought in fertilizer and hybrid animals at great expense, and painstakingly educated locals on farming best practices, only to have the crops fail and the animals die. They realized, too late, what they would have understood immediately had they engaged in even the most cursory consultation with the local community: the land was arid, infertile, and unable to support commercial agriculture (Easterly 2007, pp. 193-194). Indeed, in almost any discussion of development, it is not difficult to find an example of well-intentioned projects that fail because of top-down, context-insensitive planning. Local ownership and design of projects is essential for their success. No one model or program will work everywhere (see, for instance, Hancock 1989).

Easterly also explains how development projects which seem so simple and self-evidently useful, such as providing free mosquito nets, can become quite complicated. When malaria nets are given free of charge to communities without the proper education, there is a high probability that they will end up being used as fishing nets or wedding dress material (Easterly 2007, p. 13). Even when accompanied by the appropriate education, when nets are given out for free large numbers are generally diverted for activities which have absolutely no impact on malaria prevention (Easterly 2007, p. 13). No matter how effective in theory, many development projects will be simply untenable if they do not take into account the local context. Health interventions cannot be appropriately targeted if they convey only a Western, bio-medical logic, and are devoid of knowledge of local medical logics and customs. Since these local contexts are unlikely to remain consistent throughout Africa, the scaling up of such interventions is needlessly and wastefully ambitious. If development projects are not based upon a ruthlessly thorough assessment of the needs in a particular community, then the success of these projects will be thoroughly undermined.

There is a third reason why Sachs’ argument is better understood as a fictionalized account of the cure for extreme poverty than a realistic path towards development. In The End of Poverty, Sachs has characterized poverty as a technical process which must be tinkered with, not a set of complex and intractable political realities. He argues that extreme poverty is a trap caused by low levels of capital accumulation (discussed above), and people can be freed from this trap if five different types of intervention are undertaken. Once
these levels of capital have accumulated, poor people will be able to pull themselves out of poverty. Poverty is conceived of as a technical process: ensure the right inputs are present, and poverty will disappear: simple. Indeed, Sachs goes so far as to argue that “the level of required effort [by the West] is, in truth, so modest” (Sachs 2005, p. 289).

While this is a soothing argument, it is completely ignorant of the political realities that create and reinforce poverty. Sachs completely ignores questions of power in his assumption that increasing capital will be sufficient to eradicate extreme poverty. For instance, within poor communities, not every member of that community is poor. There are internal power dynamics within communities that shape the experiences of every member of the community differently. If, therefore, the farm yield per family is doubled in poor communities, nutritional status and income security will improve for many. But providing adequate income to families does not ensure that disadvantaged members of those families – women, girls, the disabled, ill, and HIV-positive, for instance – will receive their fair share of the resources. Indeed, women and girls in developing country contexts tend to enjoy lower access to adequate nutrition within the household, and therefore an increase in total household food consumption does not necessarily mean an increase in food consumption for the women and girls. Technical solutions do not address the inequitable power relationships existing within families, and between different groups within a particular community.

As another illustration, consider the power differences between households headed by men and by women. Even if all households are given an increase in absolute resources, if damaging political structures and attitudes towards women are not changed, households headed by women will still be disadvantaged relative to those headed by men. Women will remain underrepresented in decision-making bodies, and structural changes that will enable them to subsist adequately will not be made. If all households are given the same basic capital increase – in the form of agricultural inputs, for instance – , as long as men are socially advantaged relative to women, women in many communities will not be able to use this increased capital effectively.

If local conditions dictate that men have increased access to education, are more literate and numerate, are given preferential access to small loans, and that women are routinely denied the right to own and inherit property, women’s ability to participate meaningfully in the economy will be crippled. The rate of capital growth achieved by women-headed households will be markedly slower than that of households headed by men, and women will be more likely to remain trapped below a level of income which allows them the security of savings. In contexts where political power differentials between men and women are not addressed, increases in capital will not achieve across-the-board increases in the ability to save. Women-headed households will be disadvantaged.

Sachs’ blindness to political realities exists at a global level as well as domestically. The doubling of agricultural produce is an excellent goal, but if all farms double their output and Western agricultural subsidies are not eliminated, there will be nowhere for African farmers to sell their output. Instead, local prices for crops will be driven down due to over-supply, and the marginal and total profit achieved by farmers may in fact decrease. An increase in agricultural output is only a path out of poverty if the market for agricultural products grows. An increased demand for agricultural products can, in turn, only be achieved if Western nations stop protecting their markets and goods. This is unlikely to happen if the global power imbalance between Western nations – and Western-dominated financial institutions – and the under-developed nations is not addressed.

Poverty is not just the presence or absence of physical goods: it is inextricably linked to power. Eliminating poverty is not simply tinkering with economics at a household level, but involves drastically restructuring national and global economies. We have to face, head-on, the power differentials within households, communities, and between nations. These large, more abstract obstacles to development are less tangible than increasing farm yield, and less easy to address through practical programming. It is in addressing these larger, structural problems that the more intractable nature of poverty is exposed, and the foolishness in Sachs’ optimism truly revealed.

Indeed, if the end of poverty were as simple as Sachs would have us believe, we would have already seen the end of it. The story that Sachs has woven about extreme poverty and its end is soothing, wieldy, and ultimately dangerous. It is blind to historical realities, inappropriately top-down, and presents a narrow and technical view of poverty, instead of one which takes into account broader issues of power and status. It is, perhaps, a characterization of the thoroughly uncoordinated and impotent state of international development that even a plan so profoundly flawed as Sachs’, if implemented with some thoroughness, has the potential to improve the lives of many.
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**Sam Grey** is a recent graduate of Trent University, having earned undergraduate degrees in Indigenous Studies, International Development Studies, and Philosophy (with an Emphasis in Applied Ethics). Her academic interests have, not surprisingly, nested at the intersection of development, law, and ethics. She is consistently drawn to the ethics of international intervention and foreign aid; theories of justice and rights across both borders and cultures; issues of intellectual and cultural property; and normative readings of the future of global governance and international relations. In the coming months Sam will begin to view these issues from the perspective of a first-year law student.

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