Prestige is the Argument: Ideas of Power and Development Aid in Ethiopia

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Historically, Ethiopians exercised the right to challenge injustice. With a charitable spirit encompassing respect and compassion at its centre, this right contradicts the ‘modern’ practice of giving and receiving resources in a competitive spirit. Explaining how the development process in Ethiopia altered the sense of power relations between ordinary people and those giving aid, this paper illustrates this change with reference to a self-help scheme that was negatively affected by the dominance of state and international non-governmental organization views.

Ethiopian traditions of power relations

The paper hypothesizes that misunderstanding Ethiopian traditional views on power relations has affected development, particularly as a process of equitable use of resources. In pre-modern Ethiopia, the weak managed their resources, land specifically, through continuous negotiations of power. The tensions in domination and subordination were relieved with a charitable sense of rights and justice acceptable to all concerned. Regardless of their social, political or economic status in fact, political authorities were expected to relate to others as equals – the emphasis being on the overriding dignity of being human. Even in the politico-economic arena (Clapham, 1988:22), the dominant were morally expected to relate to their subordinates with a sense of respect and compassion. This refers to hazeneta². A word conveying the multiple meanings of sympathy, empathy and a feeling for humanity in a universal sense, it gave a sense of prestige to the powerful.

The traditional ideas of such power relations are still extant in an array of mutually beneficial social relationships. These include associations for work (debo, wenfel), credit (equb), burial (edir) and religion-based socializing (mahber). At the core of all of them is a sense of welfare, mutuality and catering for the membership. Members relate to each other with the same sense of equality as has just been mentioned. Membership tends to be exclusive to neighbourhoods, localities of origin, or, in the case of the mahber, to devotees of specific saints. Though membership numbers vary, they also share common organizational principles, including concerning financial and material input (as in equb). In self-help schemes, giving and receiving of resources operate through forging relationships that ensure equality. Though the ideas in these schemes enable individuals to challenge the strong in managing resources in the pre-modern social order, they have no coherent and wide-based organizational structures.

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² For the legal adjudication sense of this spirit, see Aberra Jembere, 2000:32-33.
In the power politics of the pre-modern state, society used these ideals to relate to the powerful around land, the means of the economy to which all had access. During the ‘modernity’ process, the political structure of the state failed to institutionalize its administrative systems, and land too was less central to the state’s economy. In the contemporary institution-based development, aid has replaced land, and this paper attributes the disempowering of the poor to the legal changes that have supported the transition. Some of the enduring legacies of the traditional ideals conflict with the unequal relations between donors and receivers. They challenge the almost alms giving spirit with which donors bring inputs for processes that they specify and expect to result in competitive use. Besides, government feared the emergence in the 1960s of welfare-oriented ‘associations for mutual help’ (*meredaja mahber*). These remarkable types of ventures involved office holders making voluntary contributions for activities such as building roads. Though the members followed the emperor’s lead in being seen to be benevolent in that sense, this very fact meant that belonging to an association entailed political risk, so that at least one latter-day liberation movement traces its beginnings to the political crack-down one such association faced at the time (Bonnie Holcombe and Sisai Ibssa, 1990). Thirty years on, the same fears led to renegotiating power relations; accommodating ‘the target’ population as the equals of the do-gooders had to be negotiated. As will be illustrated in the case study, the fear arises from the traditional expectation of transferring powers – especially relinquishing decision-making powers over resource management – to the weak.

Others attribute the continuing poverty to prescriptive social forces of continuity and order that thwart the efforts for development. Ecological disasters, recurring famines, severe poverty, rising population figures, wrong directions in planned processes of change (Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, 1991:96) have also been blamed. For development experts, the responsibility lies with local socio-economic and political contradictions and the economic interests of certain social groups. Definitely seen as part of an incoherent process (Dessalegn Rahmato, 1995: 143-193), the country’s incorporation into the global market and increasing dependency of the state on external sources have their contributions too. Only the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, that promote, not to say impose, trade interests and globalization on the grounds that these help ‘local and innovative’ ways for poverty alleviation (Ian Goldin and Kenneth Reinert, 2006: 193-194), feign hope. Needless to say, the details of the transformations in the relations of power under various governments form the archaeology of the bureaucracy as agents of power running the political economy.

**State-led development and patrimonial power**

Under the monarchy that lapsed in 1974, large gatherings known as ‘supplication’ (*abetuta*) were a popular means of communication with those in power. Even officials of various governments in the Ethiopian state who undertook to ‘do good’ in the 1960’s understood their intent largely as the search for patrons. A characteristic feature of historical bottom-up communication, now replaced by demonstrations, is still manifest in the migration of destitute rural people towards the capital and other seats of power.

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3 An example was the road construction association sponsored by people like General Jagama Kello. Another was the Metcha Tulema Association whose efforts were later to be claimed as the beginnings of the Oromo Liberation Front due to the crack down on their developmental intentions.

4 See for instance Bonnie Holcombe and Sisai Ibssa 1990.

during droughts and economic crises. The main way to become a patron in the pre-modern period was to support people’s access to land as a resource. Significantly, the rivalries for the self-serving exercise of power that patronage gave were permeated with a sense of justice in accessing land in a spirit of charity. This changed, not legally and formally, but in the way the state allowed its bureaucracy to work when they introduced and ran development. As office holders became increasingly incapable of separating the self-serving exercise of power from the routine dispensation of public duties that the ‘modern’ institutionalized state supposedly expected of them, they transposed the traditional sense of charity onto the administration of development programs. By personalizing the workings of the state, they challenged mutuality and charity-based power relations, and their confused practice led to the emergence of a patrimonial political culture. The emergence of patrimony undermined the right of the public to challenge injustice and to relate to the authorities in the spirit of charity.

As practices of power failed to institutionalize the means of removing the barriers between the powerful and the weak, dialogue was abandoned as a political strategy for forging relationships. The conditions intensified under three different consecutive governments: the ‘modernized’ monarchy, the “Marxist-Leninist” dergue (1974-1991) and the ethno-Marxist Ethiopian Peoples Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF, in power since 1991). When Menelik II (d. 1913) created line ministries (Marcus, 1975:227-228), state services that depended on traditional collection and distribution of tribute by ‘feudal-like’ provincial governors changed to a centralized bureaucratic administration (Baheru Zewde, 2001:114-120). Roughly between 1941 and 1960, when the monarch’s centralized control of state bureaucracy and decision-making was at its height, the bureaucracy forced the provision of public services to take on the guise of distributing the emperor’s patrimonial largesse. In addition, the drive for involving Ethiopia in the international market gave the bureaucracy exclusive access to economic power. Aside from incapacitating the internal economy (Mesfin Wolde-Mariam, 1991:2-3), this dependence on external markets, and subsequently aid, led to direct external intervention in the lives of the poor. Land, state and bureaucracy became redundant in relating with the poor. With government policies bolstering the relative economic power of the bureaucrats, and with land losing its economic value for re-establishing equitable relationships, even the politically motivated land redistribution after 1976 (Wogene Yirko, 1994:19) failed to make this local economic resource the critical base of the political economy in relating the population with the state. Corruption and irregularity set in while furthering and strengthening the idea of doing-good to the unequal ‘others’ in the development process; these conveniently landed lower officials in trouble but gained public applause for the benevolent statesmanship of those at the top. Aid money replaced land as the main bone of political contention in that sense, and the state became free to suppress the traditional charitable sense within the dynamics of domination and subordination, even in its development programmes. An image of an Ethiopian state that was powerful and fearsome, and a society that was weak and cowed, emerged, evoking fear and suspicion of officialdom; service delivery became merely political. “Prestige” was the bureaucrats’ argument for convincing themselves that they were untouchable and unaccountable.

The idea of ‘development’, literally translated in Amharic as “lemat”, conveyed the idea of fertility, ultimately as in sometimes falsified numerical expansion and growth of
agricultural wealth with the involvement of bureaucrats who easily considered it a route for prestigious giver-and-receiver charity-based distribution of resources. State cash crop production for foreign exchange, such as the World Bank’s Wolayta Agricultural Unit and Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit, caused internally displaced populations. Along with the victims of natural disasters, these attracted international aid delivery, with patron-client relationships as the vehicles. Emperor Haile Selassie I (r. 1930-1974), created extra-state institutions, namely a palace treasury and a palace judiciary system that operated to provide money and other favours to members of the public (Baheru, 2001: 201-202), and members of his bureaucracy engaged in “lemat” projects formed ‘associations for mutual help’ (meredaja maheber).

The result was the introduction of the notion that the poor were the unequal ‘others’ who should be looked after. With the state beginning to function as a vehicle of competitive charity, and with the cumulative effects of famine, war, destitution and rising oil prices, the Marxist-Leninist revolutionaries injected charity into their politics of totalitarian redistribution of wealth. Their Relief and Rehabilitation Commission (RRC) was mandated to regulate the activities of local charitable organizations and international aid agencies (Dawit Wolde Giorgis, 1989:120-142). Under the EPRDF government that, controlled by the Tigray People’s Liberation Front (TPLF), took over in 1991, bureaucrats, members and political supporters have accessed resources for their personal use.

The ruling party’s “development” wing, the Relief and Emergency Society of Tigray (REST), has also covertly channelled resources into commercial enterprises (Assefa Negash, 1996: 5, 34, 57, 78 et passim). Neither the monarchical five-year-plan-based development programmes, nor the mega-theory-based populist ideologies, nor the ethnic-based ‘decentralization’ that began in 1991, have worked to improve the population’s economic power (Girma Seyoum: 1992:134-135). No longer the social base of the dependent ‘modern state’, the land-based peasantry remain unintegrated into the market economy, as scholars have noted (Dessalegn, 1995: 143-193; Eshetu, 1995:228).

International challenges to the spirit of charity
This backdrop of complexities, sustains economic vulnerabilities and lack of power; but the international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) lack an understanding of the ordinary Ethiopian’s view of charity-based management of resources. The practitioners and advocates of local survival strategies promote the participatory bottom-up approach, and advise tempering the tensions in dominance and subordination in local terms, but only some acknowledge their own relatively higher political and economic power. This failure is key to the aid paradox. It partly precludes communication over the issues of

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6 Dessalegn Rahmato calls this sector the ‘capitalist farmer, 1995: 184
7 The TPLF guerillas’ secessionist rhetoric to defend and promote the collective identity of ethnic people from Tigray has been belied by their hold on the national economy and state power. They assumed ethnic identity as a result of their Marxian analysis of “nation/nationalities,” as well as their anti-Amhara stance. See Assefa Negash, 1996: 4-5.
8 Ibid.
10 That the moral arguments derive from the UN human rights charter, as defined by the Bretton Woods Institutions of bilateral aid, and that these depend on Keynesian and business oriented poverty reduction policies, is succinctly presented by Ian Goldin and Kenneth Reinhart, 2006: 2-16,
local importance and generates the possibility of controlling donor-provided resources as a source of local ‘corruption’. The corollary to this power is the expanding scope of INGO influences on UN and other official multilateral and bilateral agencies, and commercial and other financial institutions. In perspective, not only is the over-worked term ‘globalization’ pertinent to their power and subsuming of the local sense of direction to their interests, but not surprisingly, ‘while many individuals are responsible for ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of aid, no one is accountable’ (Gibson et al., 2005:72).

The differences between the traditional Ethiopian ideals of power and those of the ‘modern state’ and INGOs, revolve around the mediation of power in providing and receiving resources. At least in the sense of the public having the capacity to influence policies pertinent to its interests, Western traditions are attributed by Robert Putnam to how de Tocqueville understood the ways Americans were developing their “democracy” in the nineteenth century. De Tocqueville observed that the driving force of civil power was the competitive spirit of the market economy of his day (Howell and Pearce, 2001: 42-43). As indicated already, acquiring economic and political power for becoming patrons has continued to be quite pervasive in Ethiopia. Indeed, rather like Putnam’s study of Italy, the power position and prestige of the wealthy and the rulers in Ethiopia, who were historically expected to fulfil certain obligations towards the public, depended on their positive response to those expectations; failure to fulfil them caused discontent and rebellion. The similarity of the Ethiopian to the Western tradition ends there, however. The failed processes of ‘modernity’ and institutionalized bureaucratic systems have left only the powerful in Ethiopia with the ability to access wealth from international sources; ordinary people have lost their medium: land. The power within society for asserting justice-based charity and challenging undue dominance has changed. In addition, state and international NGOs fail to distinguish between international advocacy and internal dialogue. With the confusion between what constitutes the programmatic and reflects the reality in development dialogue, their processes are irrelevant despite the much needed INGO and state inputs. The following illustrates the various disparities discussed do far.

Case study of an independent local NGO

This case study draws on the story of a self-help scheme around an Ethiopian Orthodox churchyard11 over the period when the state was continuing to transpose the multi-layered agenda of contemporary global politics onto the processes of delivering and/or acquiring development resources. Interfaced with an INGO that insisted on helping the poor without understanding the socio-cultural process of survival around an Ethiopian Orthodox church compound, the project was eventually transformed almost into non-existence.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church (EOC) was the only nationwide institution that Emperor Haile Selassie I permitted to carry out charity work12. In the 1980s it became one among a large number of NGOs that responded to the dergue’s invitation to set up aid camps for the displaced population. As church-based INGOs set out to work...
together to meet emergency/relief needs, member agencies of the Europe-based Churches Drought Action Africa/Ethiopia (CDDA/E) worked themselves onto the map of Ethiopia, dividing the country between them for emergency relief distribution (Solberg, 1991:67). The CDDA/E excluded the EOC as not being interested in social concerns (Solberg, 1991:15)\textsuperscript{13}, as being affiliated to the World Council of Churches (WCC) rather than itself, and as working with the Marxist-Leninist government. Officially it told the EOC to work with the “national” church agencies in Ethiopia, these being the foreign-based minority churches. With such interventionism, it took two years before the EOC became part of the Joint Relief Partnership.

In that context, destitute people who had migrated to the towns in the 1984-85 crisis had found patrons around an EOC church in the centre of Addis Ababa. The patrons attempted to ease their poverty. Since the 1984-5 famine, they worked with the Christian Relief and Development Association (CRDA), the consortium of INGOs and local NGOs set up in 1974 to coordinate the relief and development activities of member NGOs\textsuperscript{14}. Confusion arose when new regulations by the government that took power in 1991 required all aid agencies to work within the framework of the RRC, renamed the Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission. REST\textsuperscript{15} facilitated the transfer of the majority of local NGOs either to its ownership or at least to its direct control behind the scenes. In addition, the multi-lateral agencies, notably the World Bank and the Inter-African Development Bank, justified “social fund” loans to the ‘disparate ethnic groups’ that ‘lacked unity in nationhood’. A new set of individuals competed in developing prestige and patron-client relationships, and many local patrons channelled resources to their ethnic bases. The church-based NGOs working within the ambit of local EOC churches came under the influence of the new patriarch appointed by the regime from its favoured ethnic group. The beneficiaries in the present case study were characteristically from all religious, social and ethnic backgrounds, and were congregated around a church in Addis Ababa, but this was eventually to affect them seriously\textsuperscript{16}.

The patrons of this group had formed a parish based Welfare Association (WA) led by a woman whom the authorities of the Patriarchate, the head office of the EOC in Addis Ababa, knew as a social functions organizer interested in constructing roads and renovating church buildings in important monasteries. Because she was unfamiliar with bureaucracy, accountability and such formalities, the relief and development wing of the EOC, known then as the Department of Inter-Church Aid and Development, vouched for her trustworthiness, and wrote letters endorsing her collection of donations from an international NGO through the CRDA. They handled the paperwork, performing the difficult task of observing her regular distribution of relief supplies consisting of emergency food supplies such as flour and oil, blankets, second hand clothing and other items that were delivered at the compound of the church and clothes. She and the parishioners sifted through the donated clothes, sold what they could not distribute, opened a bank account in the name of the WA, and accumulated money for their

\textsuperscript{13} The denial of such traditions is untenable, of course, for anyone who knows the history of the church in Ethiopia.
\textsuperscript{14} CRDA publications otherwise a good account of a joint effort by various denomination of churches in the land.
\textsuperscript{15} Especially in the 1980s and early 1990s, this aid wing of TPLF had a heady combination of support from western INGOs and Marxism-Leninism.
\textsuperscript{16} For reasons of safety and security, names and identities of local people, and in many instances of foreign NGOs, have been withheld. Cf footnote 12.
charity. They also cooked festive food at Christmas and Easter for the target population around the church. Workers, worshippers and others who happened to be near partook of the feasting that was also seen as “breaking bread” with the poor; it gave the woman and her group a special recognition as charitable patrons.

By 1989, they had established regular relationships with about a hundred and thirty recipients of benefits. Bothering very little about its source, the recipients saw the systematic delivery of the supplies as gifts from the church’s parishioners’ council, particularly from the lady handing out the largesse. Whenever they saw her, they ululated and honoured her in many ways. The WA considered that acknowledgement more important than the accountability and other requirements of ‘modern’ sector NGO administration. At that stage, both donors and recipients alike relied on the traditional trustworthiness of patrons to look after the poor.

Changes began to occur when ‘development-conscious’ parishioners consisting of two medical doctors and other professionals – hereafter the ‘new group’ (NG) – joined the WA. They were attracted to the target population by the large number keeping up loud appeals for support right inside the church building, only to be harassed for disturbing the proceedings of the Mass. Some of the professionals worried that poverty related diseases were causing havoc among the poor sheltering in the graveyards and the immediate surroundings of the church. They were conscious that children and the weak especially were endangered by the lack of environmental hygiene. It was also obvious that lack of HIV/AIDS awareness was affecting many who were seeking medical aid from unqualified people mishandling needles and other medical supplies in their “back street” activities.

The NG saw the need for working with a set of people who could gradually become independent of charitable handouts. They engaged the WA in a dialogue, held group and individual interviews with some able-bodied men and women among the potential beneficiaries, and floated the idea of a self-help scheme for empowering them. Seen as part of the “modern” sector, the NG’s perceptions complicated matters. Their proposal provoked two points of dialogue, both creating power tensions. The first was on the parishioners’ perspectives on the rights and responsibilities of beneficiaries and benefactors; the other was on distinguishing the priorities of receivers and givers of emergency supplies.

**Dialogue at the crossroads of patronage**

The NG found it difficult to impart the idea that economically dependant people were capable of making decisions on their own behalf. The old WA members thought that decision-making powers over emergency supplies should not be extended to the “beneficiaries”. Emphatically pointing out the constantly increasing numbers of the poor, and referring to the new services as *lemat* in the sense discussed above, they argued that allowing such decision making powers would jeopardize the process of acquiring further assistance and disbursing alms. An elder with whom the new group were discussing their proposal gave a striking explanation: “They are telling you [the NG] that they themselves are the poor!” The statement encapsulated the point that everybody who was not in the “modern” sector expected to benefit from the resources it

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17 At the time, HIV/AIDS was not acknowledged openly by the government.
18 An elder, who had many years of experience with the transition from the old system to ‘modernity’, and who had to observe the *lemat* process while being prevented from participating in it for political reasons, used this phrase in order to explain the thinking of the old patrons.
could bring. Yet the forms of power relationships by now went beyond the patron-client linkages already at work, and bringing members of the WA to engage in dialogue with the poor was necessary. The views of overlapping benefactors and beneficiaries, control of the authority to distribute largesse notwithstanding, needed to be negotiated.

Free medical care provision and clerical and social services would maintain the status of WA members, who, usefully, accepted diversifying the assistance to include medical attention, and endorsed a plan through which the beneficiaries would achieve independence without challenging their patronage. The church administrators supported the NG in some fashion. Explaining that they expected the old and new members alike to work according to the rules they set out for doing good, they insisted that the NG must provide clerical and health services to the church administration. They asserted that *lemat* meant expanding the services of the WA to the benefit of all concerned, including the administrative structures of the church and the WA. They appropriated direct supervision and control of the resources, both human and material, including the emergency supplies. Income generation and medical service provision would have to operate directly under the parish management committee, the authority higher than the charity groups and closer to the church administrators. They thus initiated a subtly built-in power tension in the very process of implementing the self-help scheme. The *lemat* proposed by the NG would have to benefit a wide category of beneficiaries and enhance the prestige of an expanding category of patrons.

The NG formulated ways of distinguishing their administrative authority from the medical professionals’ practices. They convinced the patrons that their leadership encompassed superiority over those from the ‘modern’ sector who performed the voluntary research, medical and clerical services as free contributions. They also requested that a small number of the target population be involved in decision making on the proposed phased self-help scheme of income generation. For some time the distinction between the WA members and the target population had to be kept as vague as possible. Despite these negotiated responsibilities and rights, defining the authority of WA members, church administrators and beneficiaries remained a problem.

While the “target” population now included everybody not in the ‘modern’ sector, the problem of losing sight of how best to ensure that the supplies and services acquired in their name could reach the beneficiaries, was real. The solution to centralize the homeless, the hungry and destitute in the vicinity of the church, came after six months, when the scheme was translated as a process of “capacity building” for the church administration, the WA and, of course, the main beneficiaries. With this redefinition, the volunteer medical professionals would dispense their services and medication only to benefactors whom they examined; the lady would remain as chairperson of the WA, the head of the church would remain the overseer, and the present writer would be a volunteer coordinator. The NG would work directly with the destitute on the self-help scheme, while involving the patrons, recipients and church administrators in planning and working towards the specific goal of the self-rehabilitation and sustenance of everyone, including those receiving emergency relief. Enhancing the old patrons’ capacity to provide help respected their interests, authority and sense of prestige.

**Popularizing rights-based self-help**

Even with these strategic conclusions on power and authority, it was a long process to see the project into practice. Orientating the beneficiaries to be involved on their own behalf proactively needed as much energy as easing the WA committee to agree to
make space for some of the poor to decide for themselves about their self-rehabilitation. At the end of a further series of meetings, the beneficiaries addressed the problem and held their own meetings, largely through the efforts of a group of young Sunday school students (hereafter the youth group, YG) who were voluntarily serving the church administration and the parishioners\(^{19}\). These ‘foot-soldiers’ had been assigned by the administrators to work on distributing the emergency food and other supplies, and were known to a large number of the regular alms recipients. Already critical of the old patrons for failing to utilize the supplies effectively, they readily accepted the NG’s idea of empowering the poor in a different way. The NG coached them in identifying people with similar skills, in orientating them to work together, pooling their labour and dividing their time between begging and assuming control of their self-rehabilitation, as well as asserting their rights over the emergency supplies and other services. A retired university lecturer in social work provided the YG with a crash course on several aspects of assisting the target population, including on liaising with the target group as though they were case and/or social workers.

The NG, having put up some finance, involved the YG in conducting a three-tier pilot research. The first level of research was among the parish committee members. The result showed that the committee members suspected that the members of the NG would prove to be opportunists trying to create paid jobs for themselves, that they would not deliver the promises they were making to increase and diversify the assistance, and that they would even take over the administration of the church. The NG conducted the second level research among potential donors, and found that the INGO community would support a self-help pilot project provided the scheme could be replicated elsewhere in the city. The third level of research was a survey of the target population concerning the self-help project, and specifically on whether the proposal would be acceptable to them and how, if at all, it could proceed.

The findings showed that the proposal posed potential threats to the target population: Some interviewees reported that a rumour had already been circulating that anyone who would be involved in a self-help project would be removed by force to unfamiliar environments. Others feared they would be de-linked from their existing benefactors around the church. Biographical notes from some interviewees showed that many above the age of fifty-five had found themselves in extremely dire straits during the upheavals of the socialist revolution in 1974/75 that impoverished the urban wage earning population, losing them their supportive families and social niches. A few had already tried to survive as domestics or day labourers, but even such employment was not available to them because they were homeless\(^{20}\). Most of the target population did not need convincing about engaging in self-help, and the YG proposed to enrol those who wanted to try it out.

Negotiating for the self-help project to be planned jointly by the 29 candidates and the patrons was a real hurdle. After conversations stimulated by the research effort, the youth drew up a list of 29 beneficiary volunteers and invited them to attend a meeting with the church administration and patrons. The latter could see the transfer of some of their prestige to a self-help group that was increasingly managing its own affairs. Having retained traditional expectations of prestige from the patron-client relationships,

\(^{19}\) Most of the males among them were in fact taking the chance of avoiding forced enlistment in the militia, while the girls were trying to find appropriate waged employment.

\(^{20}\) The reason given was that the government was insisting that potential employees provide home addresses.
many of the patrons were ambiguous about working with the ‘modern’ sector and with the poor who expected them to relate to them with equality in distributing the resources.

The beneficiaries too were at first reluctant to be in the face-to-face joint decision meetings with ‘the target population’. In the event, they spelt out their desire to try out the proposed scheme, and the patrons endorsed their rights to engage in the self-help scheme. The traditional skills the beneficiaries had between them included spinning cotton, weaving clothes, carpentry and rug making. Interestingly, the male beneficiaries opted to make rugs, and the women to spin for cloth making. Though most were unable to specify the work they could do, some of the 29 expressed interest in acquiring raw material for producing cotton thread, baskets, rugs and clothes, along with having a working space. Some of these men and women eventually chose to try to organize and work jointly. With the continued assistance of emergency supplies, together with the effectiveness and strength of the medical service, and of the YG ‘social workers’, the beneficiaries’ made finding accommodation their first priority. Their additional worry was seed money for starting production and regular marketing, and almost all mentioned the need for stability, space and resources to tide them over a period when they could start to produce marketable goods.

Constant dialogue having established their felt needs and the seriousness of their thinking about self-help and self-sustenance, the NG put up seed money for raw materials from their own pockets, and volunteered time and labour to help the 29 beneficiaries engage in the initial stages of their self-help activities. Other beneficiaries learned new skills from the 29, and how to plan their lives around the production of marketable goods for income-generation. Eventually, all the beneficiaries orientated themselves towards pooling part of their future income as a revolving fund. This was their way of enhancing the benefits of the supplies that came in their names. By the end of 1990, the 29 were generating income for themselves, assisted by the regular services of the YG, the volunteer medical doctor, the social services coordinator and the overall coordinator. Some of them had taken rented shelter in the neighbourhood, away from the streets and the graveyard. As initial beneficiaries paid back the cost of the original inputs for raw materials into the revolving fund, others took their place to start similar schemes. About 120 were on a waiting list. Within a year, the WA renamed itself the “Church Society to Help Aged Men and Women” (hereafter “the Society”). It continued to collect and give out emergency supplies for many among the needy.

As the rehabilitation process began in earnest for a small number of people, external input also increased. DED, a German INGO providing help to grassroots initiatives, gave the Society a grant for the remuneration of the eight youths and a part-time office coordinator. Help Age International, then still struggling to register its operational status in the country, became involved in providing office supplies and clerical assistance. Finally, the Society’s activities drew positive attention from the church administration, which had already provided office space, and the head of the church handed over to the care of the NG the money that the patrons had been accumulating since 1984-85. The church administration accommodated both the old patrons and the newcomers in working with the beneficiaries. Further, the NG had already established a liaison with the CRDA due to the clerical help they were providing to the WA, and it organized with the CRDA a one-day workshop on distinguishing between giving alms and engaging in rights based development21. Some parishioners and staff of NGOs around town attended

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21 An in-house CRDA publication came out as the proceedings of this meeting.
it. At the end of the workshop the participants were invited to visit the base of the WA at the church. The guests received a guided tour by the lady chairperson, and even spoke with some of the beneficiaries.

Thus drawn into a city-wide dialogue, the WA entered another phase: it established both a reputation and commitment for a rights-based self-help oriented scheme. Seeing this confidence, the church administration made available an office space for storage of supplies, and for medical and social service consultation. The volunteer medical doctor also started ‘home-based’ health and social care for the poor, going around and visiting the very weak elderly people, assisted by the YG. She attracted other volunteer doctors, and other residents of the parish began to avail of her services too. Through her efforts, an INGO provided a laboratory and blood testing equipment. These were housed in two containers donated to the WA, on the recommendation of the CRDA, by the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus, the main Lutheran church of Ethiopia, and the Department for World Service (the international aid department) of the Lutheran World Federation. Pleased with the enhanced recognition they received, the patrons relinquished further administrative responsibilities to the ‘modern’ sector volunteers. They even relinquished to the YG the distribution of the emergency supplies of oil, flour and blankets, as well as, at this stage, medical supplies. The changes in the self-help oriented Society meant that it developed an image of a viable “modern” organization with a potential for enhanced prestige for the patrons.

Challenges

With its raised profile, the leaders tried to register the Society as a charity. Unwittingly, this brought it to the attention of the state, and evoked internal rivalry and an inappropriate suggestion to expand. Towards the end of 1990, the lady chairperson came up with an additional ‘lemat’ project. Aware of homes for senior citizens from her visits to the USA, she negotiated with the municipality for land and requested that the NG prepare a project proposal to raise funds for a substantial “day care centre for the elderly.” Though certain that such a centre would be irrelevant to the scheme, the NG felt obliged to find a volunteer architect to design it, and started to look for grants from donors. Also at this stage, two events that related to one another on the level of state politics began to affect the Society. The patriarch opened a new hall at the church, and the Society and its premises became a centrepiece of his visit. Subsequently he removed the head priest, whom he appointed a bishop without portfolio, and replaced him with someone who, like himself, was from the preferred ethnic group. Automatically that made the church and the parish amenable to the new ethnic politics pursued by the patriarchate; the new overseer presided over the ‘prestigious’ Society. In an unrelated event, the volunteer coordinator left the country in 1993. This opened space for a damaging conflict of roles among those responsible for running the scheme.

In that context, a newly appointed expatriate administrator of one of the donor INGOs found ‘faults’ with the existing social service coordinator over administrative-cum-reporting matters. She informally suggested that the Society would ultimately benefit if someone else replaced the social service coordinator. Interestingly, but perhaps not surprisingly, her proposed candidate was a former guerrilla fighter with “better experience” of running voluntary organizations, “having worked with REST”. As the social service coordinator was facilitating the handover, she found that six out of

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22 For partly ethnic reasons, she was targeted for arbitrary dismissal from her university teaching post, along with 41 other mainly senior professors. Subtle harassment forced her to leave the country.
eight of the YG who worked as social and case workers were also dismissed. While the remains of the NG continued to work irrespective of these changes, the lady chairperson fell from grace in the eyes of the EOC headquarters.

These various changes coincided with nationwide dismissals, harassment and re-assignment of workers on the basis of newly drawn up ethnic boundaries. Setting out to work with the state that was undertaking a re-hauling process, the new INGO administrator was challenging the Society with the new ethnic-based relations of power. In the context of the patriarchate’s appointment that followed the regime’s lead, and aiming at accommodating government-sponsored individuals, organization and thinking, she set to reinventing the claim of standing for the downtrodden yet again\(^{23}\). Unwittingly she reversed what the Society had achieved through dialogue\(^{24}\). Her reference point was the wide socio-political complication of power – the government – and she used the economic resources she was disbursing to distance the beneficiaries from their self-initiated scheme. Her contribution to making the local NGO vulnerable to manipulation, by both her organization and the state, directly impacted on this locally initiated development process. By the end of 1995, both the old patrons and the NG, including the medical volunteers, had been marginalized. The beneficiaries who initiated the self-help scheme were also marginalized from the resources of the Society. The new “volunteer” medical officers of the medical and clinical services commercialized the facility. Nothing of the self-help activity has remained operational, and the upshot was that the elderly men and women reverted to trying individually to meet their subsistence needs around the church by begging from church-goers.

**Conclusions**

Differences in perception, practicalities and continuities of power relations made dialogue difficult. As lemat, ‘development’ had eventually become a process of handouts and largesse, leaving service provision open to the arbitrary good will or whimsical social engineering of officials. In particular, the transposition of the ideas of justice-based charity onto the workings of the bureaucracy in the ‘modern’ sector of the Ethiopian state, had made patrimonial relations pervasive of both state guided ‘development’ and that of do-gooders who had accepted it as a route to acquiring prestige. As different governments translated patrimonial relations to suit their ideologies and to accommodate global forces, the local dynamics of development were ignored. The Society and the associated self-help scheme that had emerged during the last phases of the totalitarian but tottering military power could not withstand the patrimonial cloak of the successor regime. The INGO that worked with it failed to distinguish between the local beneficiaries who already had taken their own initiatives, and others who were favoured by the government of the day\(^{25}\). Selecting ‘local’ beneficiaries according to the state criteria co-opted the local NGO to the patrimonial politics of the government party. It undermined the local effort to make development a

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\(^{23}\) A scenario articulated in, among others, Porter, 1995: 65, who argues ‘...the contemporary recasting of the original master metaphors [of development] and their buttressing by neo-populist sentiments can be read as a new attempt to reassert order, stability and continuity in the face of global biospheric and societal uncertainty and discontinuity that constitute the call-signs of the post-modern epoch’.

\(^{24}\) Lack of state accountability to aid beneficiaries, in this case, the homeless who are automatically ruled out of voting or tax payments threatened the cadres who were responsible to the new government that came to power in 1991. The theoretical implications of such disconnection between the state and beneficiaries of aid are discussed in Gibson et al. 2005: 73.

\(^{25}\) Further light is thrown on this process by the fact that a number of INGOs, including Help the Aged, already had a close relationship with REST long before TPLF came to power.
rights-based participatory process through dialogue. Without meaning to do so, the INGO leader made the Society and its self-help scheme irrelevant, and returned the poor to live under indefinite patronage, thus re-entrenching the local inequalities. Her actions towards the local NGO contradicted the bottom-up transformation and empowerment of the poor that was already in place in this particular case.

The paper has illustrated that the terms of state and socio-political relationships among stakeholders are not clearly understood in Ethiopia, and that charity-based dialogue over those relationships is an important process of strengthening local initiatives. Appropriate systems of dialogue over the relations of power should mean implementing a policy that prioritizes the weaker over the powerful party. Rather than defining their target population, it is vital for international actors and governments to create an environment that enables the poor to work on their self-empowerment, including mitigating resistance that focusing on the local poor may engender. The “partnership” between local and international NGOs must be premised on equality between them. Even when using their human resources and finances, they should especially accommodate local ideas of mediating relations of power.

**List of acronyms:**

- CDDA/E: Churches Drought Action Africa/Ethiopia
- CRDA: Christian Relief and Development Association
- DED: Deutscher Entwicklungsdiens (German Development Service)
- DPPC: Disaster Prevention and Preparedness Commission
- EOC: Ethiopian Orthodox Church
- EPRDF: Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front
- INGO: International non-governmental organization
- NG: New Group
- NGO: Non-governmental organization
- REST: Relief and Emergency Association of Tigray
- RRC: Relief and Rehabilitation Commission
- TPLF: Tigray People’s Liberation Front
- WA: Welfare Association
- YG: Youth Group

**Amharic words used:**

- Abetuta: supplication
- Debo: agricultural work association
- Dergue: (also derg) literally ‘council’, a self-descriptive term adopted by the military government of Ethiopia, 1974-1991
- Edir: burial association
- Equb: credit association
- Hazeneta: sympathy, empathy, considerateness and a feeling for humanity in the universal sense
- Lemat: development
- Mahber: an organized social group
- Meredaja mahber: association for mutual help
- Wenfel: women’s work association mainly for cloth making
References


