

***Liberal Imperialism*... more of the same**

« THE WORLD BANK DOES NOT HAVE SUCCESSFUL EXAMPLES »

By SERGIO FERRARI*

The failure of the dominant neo-liberal model is a fact. « Its results over the past few decades have been pitiful ». These are two of the central theses of Peter Niggli, director of the *Swiss Coalition of Development Organisations*, an umbrella organisation which brings together some of the main Swiss Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

Following an extensive period of debate, Niggli has just published : « Globalisation .. and beyond. What kind of development in the 21st Century ? » , which captures the deep concerns of important sectors of European civil society. Although it doesn't propose a change of the system as an alternative, Niggli's book criticises the new concept of « Liberal imperialism » being brokered by the dominant elites and looks ahead to viable, alternative measures to change the current course the world is set upon.

LIBERAL IMPERIALISM

Q : A key conceptual starting point of your analysis is the attack on the Twin Towers on the 11th September 2001. Could you explain ?

A : Since the 11th September we have been faced with pretty much a common front adopted by the governmental elites of the industrialised nations. They feel threatened and surrounded by enemies with irrational and incomprehensible motives. They have the idea that we are in a world-wide situation in which chaos reigns, and in which it is practically impossible for the normal tools such as diplomacy, negotiation and international co-operation to function. They think that « re-establishing order » is the principal task for the coming future. There is a very intense debate taking place in the United States - and in the English-speaking world generally – of the need for a new imperialism, tagged « liberal », that respects freedoms, democracy and human rights. The aim is to intervene in regions where countries are facing explosions (such as Somalia, Sierra Leone, Liberia). According to them, these weak States run the risk of becoming bases for Islamic terrorist groups.

Q : It's not so different to what many countries in the formerly called « Third World » had to put up with....

A : Exactly. After the 11th of September, the Bush government and its allies in Europe have been asserting that the terrorists are fighting against democracy, freedom and the emancipation of women, in other words, against « our civilisation ». They don't want to acknowledge that the behaviour of Al Qaida might be a reaction to the political and military interventions of the United States. The support which some Islamic groups enjoy in the Islamic countries would be incomprehensible if we don't take into account anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist sensitivities. In a situation like this, to think of resorting to « imperialism » is paradoxical, even though it tries to differentiate itself from the imperialism of the past using a new liberal and « liberating » face. The long history of Europe's conquest of the world is perhaps hazy in our memories, but not so in the memories of the people of the three continents that suffered it in the flesh.

THE CRISIS OF DEVELOPMENT

Q : To go from the global context to the concrete situation of the Swiss NGOs, (and the European ones in general) ... all this debate in some way lays bare the limitations of the very concept of « development » . Is this really the case ?

A : The concept of « development » is something that came out of the US in the 1940s, with a promise to help the former European colonies to free themselves and to catch up economically with the industrialised nations. In fact, this development policy was aimed at simultaneously immunising Africa, Asia and Latin America from communism. It was quite an attractive « offer » in the middle of the twentieth century. Nowadays, there is a debate raging over the fact that this type of development destroyed the traditional economies of the South and gave rise to the very misery that it was theoretically supposed to overcome. After 40 years of « development », the traditional economy, especially agriculture, has been destroyed everywhere, or is in the process of being so. Cities are getting larger and barely offer any alternatives for their inhabitants. To get out of this situation requires, on the one hand, reinforcing what remains of the subsistence economy, which implies « modernisation », and on the other hand to continue with industrialisation in each country.

Today we can see that the development strategies that were used in the 1960s and 1970s in Latin America, and to some extent in Africa, produced better results than the policies imposed by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund after the debt crisis of 1982. Those strategies were focussed on the development of the domestic market. After 1982, the international financial institutions obliged the indebted nations to open up their markets and to follow a new strategy of forced integration into the world market. The results : stagnation in Latin America and a net regression in Africa. Over the past 20 years, only the developing countries which were able to adopt a heterodox economic strategy after 1982, involving strong state intervention, have been able to benefit. These are South Korea and Taiwan, which are industrialised nations today, and other countries of south-east Asia such as China and India.

Paradoxically, when the World Bank tries to highlight certain countries as a development model, it mentions the countries which have never followed neo-liberal policies. They have great problems to find any successful examples which have followed its recommendations to the letter.

COHERENCE FOR THE SOUTHERN COUNTERPARTS

Q: How did this critical debate get underway ?

A : Our NGOs co-operate with counterparts in the South which are of a very diverse nature : grass-roots organisations, mass movements, small communities etc. When they meet their counterparts and discuss international policy, they frequently discover that the perception from the South is very different to their own. It was necessary to examine these points of view and understand them... The financial crisis in Asia in 1997/1998, the failure of the ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Seattle and the birth of the anti-globalisation movement, has intensified the debate within our own organisations. What is needed now is to encourage a global debate over the direction that development policy should take. What type of changes do we want ? In which direction should we go ?

I don't think we are proposing very radical concepts. But we are now faced with the reality that after 25 years of world-wide neo-liberalism there have been very disappointing results. The results have been very bad for the majority of people, excellent for a very tiny majority and only slightly encouraging for the people of the industrialised nations.. and because of that we are convinced that the regulatory regime of the world's capitalist economy must be changed. A stop must be put to forced and imposed integration into the world market, which lies at the heart of neo-liberal policies.

We propose giving nation-states more controls and room for manoeuvre in their economic policies. We support the demands of developing countries – made in the framework of the United Nations institutions – to give them greater room for manoeuvre in their economic policies. Meanwhile, without a certain « renationalisation » and « deglobalisation » of economic policy, there are fundamental decisions being taken which are moving further and further away from democratic procedures.

We are aware that some will say we are going too far in our proposal. But in proposing a change in the manner of regulating the world economy, we are not seeking to replace the « capitalist system ». I would like to point out that the specific proposals and international campaigns of the anti-globalisation movement are pointing in the same direction as the ideas we are supporting.

Q : Do you consider yourselves part of the anti-globalisation movement ?

A: By virtue of our aims, our organisations are close to this movement. We participate in the World Social Forum and in many international campaigns that are being promoted by it.

Q : Do you think that this position of the Swiss NGOs could be viewed as a « declaration of war » by sectors of the growing Swiss far-right ?

A : We have not declared any war. We are contributing to the international political debate which is taking place in many countries. Nobody can deny that world economic institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO are suffering a credibility crisis, ever since the Asian financial crisis and the end of the « new » economy which in reality was never new.

Q : Finally, what is your reaction to the slogan « Globalisation with a human face » ?

A : It all depends on how that expression is defined. I think that if the manner of capitalist regulation is changed, if a stop is put to forced integration into the world market, and if greater room for manoeuvre is given to countries in determining their economic policies, we could then talk of globalisation « with a human face » .

***Sergio Ferrari**

Contributor to UNITE, NGO platform of Swiss solidarity personnel development North-South-North

.....

Box

The Swiss NGOs and their call for change

Most of the major Swiss NGOs which work in co-operation, are grouped together under two principal umbrella organisations. Those that are dedicated to the interchange of people – known as personnel development co-operation – are grouped under UNITE which brings together some thirty organisations with around 200 development workers placed primarily in Latin America and Africa. Meanwhile, six of the Swiss NGOs that are most active in the area of project work, are grouped together in the Swiss Coalition of Development Organisations.

What is the common thread linking this diverse group of non-governmental organisations? They are making a growing and daily effort to achieve greater cohesiveness with their counterparts in the South. This goal has been the driving force behind a specific study on the issue carried out by UNITE last year, and is also forms the basis of the book by Peter Niggli.

« Globalisation .. and beyond. What kind of development in the 21st Century ? » comprises two sections. The first deals with Niggli's viewpoint on the world situation and the new challenges facing development co-operation. The second covers the Swiss Coalition's new development policy guidelines. This practical plan of action, together with « The Strategy », another base document, was approved by the organisation's directorate at the end of June 2004.

The Swiss Coalition focuses their action plan on 16 central issues which are aimed at bringing about new rules of the game in the globalisation process «which respond to the economic and social needs of the developing countries ». This implies, amongst other things, re-regulation of the international financial markets, promotion of the application of the Tobin Tax to international financial transactions ; and a push for a fundamental shift in the current world trade policy.

« The Swiss Coalition is committed to a world order based on negotiations, treaties and solutions which are founded in international law... » (and not on military force), proclaims « that all States have equal rights », recommends a strengthening of the United Nations as an « institution which most closely embodies this equality » and calls for a democratisation of the international financial institutions.

The Swiss organisations' guidelines do not overlook the great environmental challenge either. They call for the implementation of the United Nations' Agenda XXI ; they highlight the importance of renewable energy technologies; they commit themselves to the biodiversity Convention and support the concept of water being declared a global public good.

As regards development, the Swiss Coalition proposes the implementation of new strategies which do not prioritise exports and forced integration into the world market and which take into account the economic sovereignty of States, and the strengthening of their social purpose.

In conclusion, the Swiss Coalition considers development « as a process of social confrontation which allows peoples to gradually liberate themselves from the oppression ... of misery. We support the weakest in the developing countries and give preference to the social and political forces which defend the interests of the disinherited ».

Sergio Ferrari – Press Service UNITE

Translation Tim Coone