Introduction: the Scenario for Cooperation

1. In the last decade, voluntary agencies have become larger and more powerful actors on the scene of long term development. The doctrine that small is beautiful (and efficient) was strongly advocated in the 1970s. It created the climate for important changes in the organisation of overseas aid programmes in the 1980s. Ironically, while smallness was identified as the source of voluntary agencies' organisational and logistic virtues, the policy of channelling public revenue through them (alongside private contributions) has had the effect of making the larger of these agencies larger still. Therefore, the NGOs face a critical question about their future. How will the present institutional characteristics of

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small non-government development aid entities be altered, as a rising share of the government aid budget is semi-privatised in this manner? Are they about to become middle-sized bureaucracies?

2.

In Britain, an increasing role in the aid budget has been played by the Government's Joint Funding Scheme, which matches private donations to the four largest voluntary agencies in the long term development field (OXFAM, Christian Aid, CAFOID and Save The Children Fund). Under this scheme, the government's contribution to these agencies has quadrupled since the financial year 1983/84, and still further growth is envisaged. These financial subventions are made in response to the special advantages which it is believed that NGOs enjoy. In 1987, the Minister of Overseas Development described these advantages as follows:

"(NGOs) often have ready access to the grass-roots and village levels where help is most needed. This inevitably involves closer contacts with local people and a better appreciation of their needs and aspirations."

The NGOs are credited with the strength of an idealized populism by many observers. NGOs have good communications with the people: not for them the suspicion and hostility which so often the rural poor show to outsiders. NGOs are effective in promoting change because they are not bureaucratic in the perjorative sense. They accomplish their developmental tasks
in conformity only to the people's needs, unconstrained by formality and rule-bound procedures. It is an enviable image.

3. In reality, it is far from clear how valid this ideal image has been. But certainly, the recent trend towards the public funding of NGOs must lead us to ask how much of it can be preserved in a transition to larger and less lean leading voluntary agencies. This is a question on which research could throw some light, and which NGOs might even find is worthwhile to pay finance. As yet, it has been little explored.

4. Meanwhile, the 1980s have seen the universities and research institutes for long term development experiencing a contrasting and apparently less fortunate fate. They have become leaner and hungrier. The big retrenchment exercise of 1981 has been followed by persistent financial pressure on the University Grants Committee, and by the U.G.C. in turn on the individual universities. In the late 1980s, the universities have achieved "level-funding" in nominal terms. But the effect of inflation transforms that into an aggregate squeeze on real resources.

5. Some development research institutes have not been squeezed as badly as their parent universities. This is because many have remained peripheral to their university's financing. Suspicion of their academic integrity had often been coupled with a demand for greater financial self-reliance on their past: grudging toleration was granted as long as no claims were
lodged on the university's central coffers. When the central coffers are placed in jeopardy, it is ironically an advantage to have been forced into self-finance at an earlier date. Hence the somewhat better position today of some development research institutes, compared with their parent universities.

6. Even this, however, is only a relative advantage. Some development research institutes have been slimmed down to ease the pain of the "academic core" departments of their university; and often also have to face new competition for research contracts and consultancies from "academic core" colleagues who have been more strongly pressured to find non-government money. Increasingly, the capacity to attract non-government funding is made a yardstick for measuring the "value for money" achieved by public funds (a doctrine which, taken to its logical limits, is plainly absurd). Thus both types of university department are increasingly in the market for paid research work. This search includes turning to the enlarged and strengthened NGO, as potential customers for their research services.

7. The purpose of this paper is to enquire whether the conjuncture of severe financial pressure on universities and the aggrandizement of the NGO through the aid budget provides the basis for a fruitful university-NGO cooperation in research. Many people in both types of institution would probably welcome in principle the close working links that such a rapprochement implies. Uniting efforts for the common purpose of development
has a strong moral and emotional appeal. Nevertheless, it could be argued that the prospects for research cooperation are actually much more clouded. A number of major obstacles stand in the path, and would have to be overcome.

**Obstacles to Cooperation**

8. The four major obstacles which seem to loom largest are:

(a) general institutional culture;

(b) attitudes to self-evaluation;

(c) problems of confidentiality;

(d) the costs of change.

Each needs to be explored before we can turn, in our concluding section, to the question of whether they are surmountable, and by what means they can be surmounted.

9. There are cultural obstacles to university/NGO cooperation on both sides of the fence. Every institution has its own self-image and an internally shared outlook on other institutions from whom they differentiate themselves professionally. The NGOs appear to have a shared stereotype of academic development research: it is abstract, arcane and has little or no connection with the problems which NGO personnel
are likely to face in the course of their work. This view has been expressed quite forcibly and wittily by NGO representatives at discussions and conferences on possible closer NGO-university links. It is not too much to state that development academics have been taken aback by the strongly unfavourable perception of their contribution which these discussions have revealed.

10. Its roots seem to lie in a strong ideology of practicality which permeates the development NGOs. The central idea is that NGOs working in the field rely for their success essentially on practical skills. Examples would be the ability to change the tyres of a lorry in the middle of the desert, or to set up good radio communications with obsolete equipment or to mend a broken electric water pump in the middle of a drought. Rather evidently, if these are the key problems of NGO effectiveness, university-based development research has little to offer and university-based development training is largely an irrelevance in this context. NGOs are seen as being "at the sharp end", "at the coal-face" or "down among the nitty-gritty" where tasks are so urgent and engulfing that there is time and space for nothing but basic, down-to-earth action.

11. Clearly, all of this has some force. But its force derives more from situations of emergency relief than from the work of long-term development, which the voluntary agencies say is their ultimate objective. For that, there is and must be time for reflection and choice of development policy. To follow a
particular policy first and think about it later is not sensible, and those who have done this in the past are now being rightly criticized. The trouble is that the ideology of practicality in NGOs often becomes a general form of anti-intellectualism, and a tenacious one at that. Although the necessary thinking is performed but sloppily, the stance of anti-intellectualism tends to be reinforced despite the sloppiness.

12. Perhaps an example will help here to illustrate this point. How often when the performance of NGO projects is being internally evaluated, does one hear the following line of argument? "At first, we thought that the successful projects were those down in the plain, with ready access to water transport. But then we found one or two successes up in the hills and a few failures on the plain. So we guessed that success must be linked with something else - more regular extension advice - until we found that the advice was technically incorrect. Then we looked at factor X, then factor Y and factor Z. There did not seem to be any single thing invariably associated with successful projects. So we concluded that no generalisations were possible and fancy attempts to pin down causal factors are a waste of time. In the end, it is all down to the people in the project. Some of them have the entrepreneurial attitudes necessary for change and the others do not, whatever the characteristics of the project." There is an element of parody here. But the foregoing is by no means uncharacteristic of the way in which
NGO leaders assess their own agency's performance in development projects.

13. Thinking of this kind manages to combine methodological naivety with disdain for systematic enquiry. It manages to deny the possibility of general statements with the affirmation of particular wild generalizations, such as the role of entrepreneurial attitudes as determinants of project success. An illogical scepticism, based on unwillingness to think through propositions sufficiently carefully, serves to prepare the way for a credulous acceptance of populist prejudices. Thus the ideology of practicality breeds an anti-intellectualism which is self-sustaining.

14. In saying this, however, it is not intended to imply that policy research can ever be scientifically validated in the most absolute sense. Research never produces answers which are guaranteed for complete accuracy and certainty. There are only degrees of ignorance. Research can and does roll back ignorance substantially, without unfortunately ever being able to dispel it completely. It is the disposition not to roll back ignorance as far as it will go which is the characteristic of the anti-intellectual approach to policy.

15. Apart from the question of inadequate performance evaluation, of which more shortly, the damage caused by the ideology of practicality goes further. Any sensible development policy needs to have a well-reasoned analysis of the major problems
inhibiting development and the efficacy of particular remedies for overcoming these problems. The ideology of practicality tends to suppose that the problems of under-development are obvious: they are out there for all to see and all that is lacking is the commitment to energetic remedial action. But this is not necessarily so. Research should, by contrast, begin by questioning the obvious. It should ask whether the problems which everyone agrees are problems are the real problems after all? This is often a question of scale. There will always be a multitude of problems. But measuring them can put them into a correct perspective and help to establish which are the priority problems which have the most urgent claims on the resources at an NGO's command.

One interesting example here is the question of post-harvest losses of foodgrains in developing countries. In the middle 1970s, these losses were widely believed to be very substantial. It was alleged that, in some developing countries between 30 and 40 per cent of each crop was either spoiled through poor storage or consumed by insects and rodents. Following Sir Thomas More's critique of England as a land which fed sheep but not men, the voluntary agencies created an image of many developing countries as places where rats prospered while people starved. The research which began at this time at the Institute of Development Studies started with the intention of proposing the best solution for this scandalous situation. What it found, however, was that the scale of the problem had been grossly exaggerated. The best estimates that could be
made put the percentage of crop loss nearer to 5 than to 40, much nearer to the levels experienced in developed countries. It also showed that in many rural areas grain storage technologies were both sophisticated and the product of a long-established learning process. Improvements were still possible, but what had been perceived as a major problem was in fact a relatively minor one. We all know that Venice is sinking and that this is a problem. But what kind of a problem it is depends critically on whether it is going down by a centimetre a decade or a centimetre a day!

Apart from the investigation of particular perceived problems, the academic development researcher usually possesses a fund of practical knowledge which is vital for the determination of the broad strategy of activity which an NGO should follow. This is perhaps more easily recognized by newly-established NGOs, like Band Aid, which are well-resourced, and which are keenly aware of the dangers of repeating past mistakes in the use of development aid. But perhaps it might be said that academic advisors on strategy are a poor substitute for an NGO's own accumulated experience. Perhaps. It is too soon to decide. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating — with special emphasis on "eating".
A special obstacle to greater NGO-university cooperation is an apparent unwillingness by NGOs to undertake more systematic self-evaluation. Paul Mosley has complained recently that there is a "folklore" about private voluntary organizations which has not been subjected to proper theoretical and empirical assessment. He suggests that "the effectiveness of voluntary agencies in promoting development remains a question wide open for investigation". Certainly the fragmentary evidence that is available does not uniformly confirm the idealized image which is so prevalent, the easy assumption that small is beautifully effective.

There are several reasons which lie behind this state of affairs. It must be the case that NGOs adapt their behaviour to the wishes of their financial subscribers, that is, the particular segment of the whole charitable community which provides their financial support. It may well be that the subscribing constituency prefers to maximize the share of the funds subscribed which are delivered directly to recipients in developing countries. Payments for research presumably have to be accounted for as part of administrative overheads, and most NGOs regard a low percentage of overheads to money received as a crucial indicator of their successful performance. Secondly, the NGOs have become accustomed to a situation in which they could call on a number of friendly academics to undertake inspection and reporting missions for them without having to pay any more than an air fare and local subsistence. Even though financial pressures on universities are making it harder
for academics to donate their services in this way, the NGOs have not felt the need to supplement this ad hoc and amateurish use of academics with more systematic evaluations. Thirdly, the process of giving development assistance is often treated as intrinsically good, an act so obviously praiseworthy that no justification by means of evaluation reports is really called for.

20. It would be misleading to suggest that these forces have entirely prevented NGOs from commissioning independent evaluations of their work. We know that that is not so. A major NGO concerned with emergency relief in the 1984-85 Sahelian famine called in an academic from a major development studies institute to evaluate its relief operations. This brave move was not, however, followed up by the publication of the resulting study. Here we see the third obstacle to university-NGO research cooperation - the problem of confidentiality. There are opposed interests here. NGOs will not wish to see evaluation reports published, especially when they reveal that there are indeed important lessons of experience to be learned. Critical reports presumably reduce the inflow of funds as well as denting internal staff morale. Academics have a personal and professional interest in gaining credit through the publication of their work, and an intellectual interest in accumulating case material in the public domain as the basis for testing their theoretical generalisations. As far as the NGOs are concerned, publication may raise political problems for their operation in the
developing country where they work. They do not want to be seen as the conduit by which politically sensitive information (which may be relevant to a project evaluation) finds its way to the scrutiny of Western media and public opinion. Development academics also face this problem to some extent. But the consequences of exclusion from a particular developing country are more serious for an NGO than for an academic.

21. A fourth and final major obstacle may well arise on the university side. It is the cost in terms of the fundamental research that is foregone of doing evaluation studies for NGOs. Every university institute, whether it realises it or not, faces a choice between fundamental and applied research. If it opts to do only applied research, it will inevitably be parasitic on fundamental research that is done elsewhere. If all university institutes opt to do only applied research, no fundamental research gets done by any of them, and their applied research becomes stultified. Perhaps relatively few university institutes doing development research have yet estimated the nature of this trade-off. The Institute of Development Studies has tried to evaluate its own performance in this respect, using the Social Science Citation Index to measure its contribution to fundamental research. There has been a clear inverse relationship in the 1980s between fundamental research (measured in this admittedly rather crude fashion) and the operational assignments which it has undertaken. At the very least, the evidence does not refute the idea that academic resources devoted to operational work
have a positive cost in terms of the production of more basic knowledge about development. To the extent that university finances are increasingly linked to research performance, university institutes will want to think carefully before incurring this cost.

Possible Remedies

22. One should not run away with the idea that all of these obstacles to better NGO-university research cooperation are insurmountable. The prospects for cooperation are not as bleak as the foregoing recitation of obstacles might suggest. The time has come to look at some of the forces which will help to overcome the difficulties. But surely, it might be asked, if an ideology of practicality really pervades the NGO's, nothing much is going to change that? So it may seem. But the situation is not without hope. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to a dialogue. In order to overcome problems, an awareness has first to be created that they exist. Perhaps in the process of doing that necessary task, the case is somewhat overstated as a way of getting the point home. The aim of identifying quite sharply an NGO ideology of practicality is to provide the starting point for a dialogue between NGOs and university development researchers. Only by developing such a dialogue about the uses and abuses of research can an area of agreement be reached. Unless such a dialogue is pursued each side will remain a prisoner of its own stereotypes, and potentially useful joint work will simply not be done.
NGOs' disinclination to undertake systematic self-evaluation will inevitably come under pressure as the share of public revenue in their total financing rises. The public mood on charities in general has already changed. They are seen as handling very large sums of money, some £10 billion a year, of which some 25 per cent comes to them through tax concessions and various forms of public expenditure (including the ODA'S Joint Funding Scheme mentioned earlier). They are also seen as complacent about the risks of fraud, maladministration and incompetence. This mood was strongly reflected in the recent Public Accounts Committee report on the work of the Charity Commissioners. Thus there are almost certain to be government demands for a marked improvement in evaluation of NGO development work. The ODA's own Evaluation Department has looked at a few NGO projects. The numbers must surely increase and the involvement of independent academic researchers must also increase as well. Hopefully, the value of these evaluations in correcting inappropriate practices will be evident, and help to persuade private subscribers that research does not merely re-discover what is already obvious to the practical person. Another useful step would be to engage developing country academic researchers to undertake some of these evaluations. To the extent that such evaluations are closer to the intended beneficiaries, their conclusions may carry more weight with subscribers who have a strong practical, grass-roots orientation.
24. The problem of confidentiality is perhaps the most intractable. Given many small organizations, the overall picture of NGO activity on development will not become clear until evaluations are pooled. Such pooling presumably will never occur until each NGO can be guaranteed "effective anonymity" - i.e. a particular evaluation cannot be identified as relating to it. It is not clear how this could be done without, in the process, destroying some of the features of the case that give it its relevance to research. If enough particularities are blotted out, the case may become entirely empty of interest. There are other areas of research which give some guidance on how to proceed. But until one tries, there is no guarantee that existing precedents would be adequate. This however constitutes a reason for having an experimental attempt, and not a reason for deciding to do nothing.

25. Similarly, on the costs of evaluation in terms of more fundamental types of research, it cannot be claimed that we know everything we want to know about this kind of trade-off. The data are crude and contain many debatable assumptions. More work is needed here to try to define the less obvious impacts of applied on fundamental research. Are there hidden benefits - applied work as a stimulus to fundamental thinking, for example - which need to be taken into account? This is something that can be followed up independently of any progress in an NGO-universities dialogue. And it might be very useful for the universities to be seen to be doing so. Development academics are often accused of prescribing rapid change for
other people but not for themselves. To make independent progress in researching their own work performance might protect them from the accusation that they regard self-evaluation as essential for NGOs, but not for university institutes.

26 February, 1988