***“Non-Conformist Eritrea”: Extending the Conversation***

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I recently read the article, *Non-Conformist Eritrea*, authored by Ms. Ruby Sandhu, an international human rights lawyer. The article was well-written, thoughtful and perceptive, full of detail, balanced, and offered important background and context about Eritrea. Overall, I found the article to be a reinvigorating breath of fresh air; Sandhu debunks many of the tired clichés, nauseating stereotypes, and longstanding assumptions and distortions plaguing most mainstream coverage of Eritrea to provide a more accurate, reliable account of the country. Here, I elaborate on several points raised within Sandhu’s recent piece, primarily to extend the conversation and hopefully offer further clarity about these significant topics.

One point briefly raised within Sandhu’s article was about Eritrea’s “unconventional” approach to development, aid, and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which is one of the most misunderstood aspects about the country. Specifically, Eritrea turns down aid when it does not fit the country’s needs or its capacity to use effectively. To be sure, Eritrea does not reject external support – it actively welcomes it, but only when it complements the country’s own efforts. The country has long encouraged aid that addresses specific needs which cannot be met internally, which is designed to minimize continued external support, and which complements and strengthens – instead of replacing – Eritrea’s own institutional capacity to implement projects. For Eritrea, relations with NGOs and foreign donors are a fundamental issue of “dignity”, and should be based on equality, mutual respect, and cooperation. They must be “true partnerships...[and not]...based on prescription and dictation of unsuitable antidotes,” and the country’s “independence of decision should not be encroached upon by conditionalities.”

Eritrea’s unique perspective and approach are rooted in the country’s long struggle for independence, which was largely self-reliant, with much of the international community completely ignoring or actively working against the independence movement. Furthermore, the country has a strong desire to avoid crippling dependence, encourage the initiative of Eritreans, and foster a clear sense of responsibility for the country’s future among all citizens.

Unfortunately, Eritrea’s unique perspective and approach are broadly misunderstood, frequently dismissed, and often presented as “damning” evidence of the country’s alleged isolationism or supposed hostility toward the international community. However, one element generally lacking within discussions and criticisms of Eritrea’s development approach, beyond historical awareness and context, is a more balanced, nuanced understanding of NGOs.

It is undeniable that many international development NGOs are well-intentioned actors who contribute greatly across the developing world, including within Eritrea. They are often valuable development partners, and they frequently play a critical role in supporting key sectors in many countries, such as health and education. In many instances, NGOs are able to address issues or reach areas that governments are either unable or unwilling to, and they often possess the potential to provide efficient, innovative, and cost-effective approaches or solutions to difficult social and economic problems (Chege 1999).

At the same time, however, NGOs are also beset by a variety of problems. For example, while many international institutions and bilateral or multilateral partners channel development aid through NGOs rather than governments in order to avoid the corruption that prevails within the latter, NGOs themselves are not above corruption, as so clearly illustrated by the recent scandal at Oxfam International. As well, NGOs often focus on technical or temporary solutions, overlooking longstanding systemic and structural problems, and they may be plagued by a lack of transparency or questions of accountability. Specifically, since many NGOs heavily depend on external financing, their accountability is often to their funders rather than to those they serve. Consequently, initiatives or projects tend to align with donor preferences and not the community’s, local or national priorities can be neglected, and there may an overlap or duplication of activities. Problematically, many NGOs are afflicted by a saviour complex, reflecting elements of racism, sexism, classism, and paternalism, rooted in the assumption that Africans, women, the poor, and others across the Global South are powerless, lack agency, and cannot take meaningful action themselves.

The long history of NGOs within the Global South also offers further insight into some of challenges and issues related to NGOs and the aid-based, donor-driven development approach. For example, in some countries, ministries were literally partitioned among different donors, leading to many implications. Not only did it tax the attention of the nascent African bureaucracies to the extreme, but it also made the learning curve exceedingly costly. In extreme cases, local policymakers were actually excluded from the learning process as donors kept the evaluations of the programs to themselves, either through exclusive distribution of the relevant documents or because of language barriers (Mands 1993: 36).

Furthermore, it is difficult to ignore the fact that poverty, illiteracy, hunger, and development have become the basis of a highly lucrative industry for international experts, consultants, planners, and NGOs. This is not to deny that the work of these individuals and groups might benefit people and communities at times. It is to emphasize that their work has not always been an innocent effort on behalf of the poor (Escobar 1995: 46).

Overall, a broader understanding of NGOs offers greater clarity of Eritrea’s self-reliant approach. As a final point, it is a major irony of African development history that the theories and models employed have largely come from outside the continent. No other region of the world has been so dominated by external ideas and models. Eritrea’s determination to rely upon itself, and promote independence and self-reliance should be encouraged, and external organizations and potential partners should be committed to working with it on that basis. In fact, according to Christine Umutoni, the former UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Eritrea, the country, which made considerable progress on the UN’s Millennium Development Goals (which concluded in 2015), “has a lot to share that could help formulate, shape and implement the post-2015 development outlook for the good of humanity.”

Another important point raised within Sandhu’s piece meriting further discussion is about the narrative and discourse surrounding Eritrea. Coverage of the country is limited to a narrow frame focused on conflict, extremism, famine, persecution, oppression, and poverty. The negative images and pervasive stereotypes tend to drown successful local initiatives, the energy, resilience, and enterprise of the country’s people, rich local cultural practices and traditions, and important indigenous knowledge (see Hancock 1989 and Moseley 2009). In the rare instance that any positive aspects of the country are presented, they are quickly glossed over, and often belittled or dismissed. Of course, this phenomenon is not unique to Eritrea; Western media have created an image of Africa as a “dark” place of turmoil, disaster, disease, and savagery – “the repository of our greatest fears” (Hawk 1992: 13).

Overwhelmingly, the condescending, stereotypical, and oversimplified narrative and discourse on Eritrea is controlled, guided, and dominated by Westerners and foreigners, who often have little tangible experience of the country. Dissenting or alternative views and perspectives – particularly those of Eritreans themselves – are completely sidelined, silenced, ignored, or marginalized.

This reflects the historical tendency in Western academic and journalistic contexts, borne of US and European hegemony, to assume that what is said in the West (e.g. in European or American universities and publications) is only what has been said or only what matters. Black indigenous Africans, here Eritreans, cannot participate in broader discourses or actions on their own behalf. They are left out of discourses and disqualified from speaking for themselves or being recognised in the gathering of the world’s people as minds and agents of culture and history (Davies 1994; Ogundipe-Leslie 1994: 2).

Additionally, as suggested within Sandhu’s piece, there is a translation of Eritrean, and broader African, people’s contexts, interests, and realities into Western capitalist paradigms. For Eritreans, and the people of the Global South in general, “our own history, culture and practices, good or bad, are discovered and translated in the journals of the North and come back to us re-conceptualized, couched in languages and paradigms which make it all sound new and novel” (Namuddu 1989: 28 in Escobar 1995: 46).

Ultimately, rather than focusing on a single perspective and restricting or narrowing the discourse and narrative of Eritrea, a country of rich history, diversity, and complexity, a broader range of views and perspectives should be encouraged toward promoting constructive dialogue, increasing accuracy, enhancing reliability, and enriching overall understanding.