

COMMENT

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GIVE A MAN a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for life. Development workers are brought up on an extensive diet of such adages. They have watched how alternative technology matured into intermediate and appropriate technologies. They know the flaws of the top-down approach and sing the praises of grass-roots organisations. They know that altruism has very little to do with prompting Western donors to give aid to poor countries. They now know that teaching a man to fish is better than feeding him because it represents "sustainable development".

But has the practice of development work kept up with the theory? The publication, this week, of a seminal report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology on Britain's overseas aid suggests that very little has changed in the way that aid programmes are structured and projects are implemented (see This Week).

The Lords have highlighted the embarrassing fact that Britain's expenditure on aid has been lower in real terms throughout the 1980s than it was in 1979. As usual, Britain falls behind most of Europe in terms of the amount of aid it donates as a percentage of its GNP. It has raised university fees such that the number of overseas students has fallen dramatically. Those that do come are helped out by money from the Overseas Development Administration which then goes down in the books as aid to developing countries.

While witnesses who gave evidence to the committee were not undecided about the relative advantages of training people in Britain or in their own country the ODA felt obliged to state the obvious "... in that if

they provided funds for more students to be trained in their own country 'fewer people might come to this country for training ... [and] institutions and the UK economy in general might lose business'". So instead we train tropical agriculturalists from the middle hills of Nepal in greenhouses on the flatlands of Norfolk.

The report highlights the dangers of bringing Mrs Thatcher's penchant for efficiency, streamlining and private enterprise into development work. Development workers have had to add "projectisation" to their specialist dictionaries. Projectisation is the packaging of an aid project whose aims are clearly identified as a problem upon which expert development forces are brought in to tackle. Such a strategy may work in the developing countries of Europe but in, say, sub-Saharan African countries, it will have no context in which to work.

Worse still, the ODA is increasingly bringing in commercial companies to manage projects. The committee admits that it felt some such companies more than reluctant to comment on ODA activities no doubt for fear of losing business. The committee certainly couldn't comment on policy as several witnesses are reported to be at a loss to define the ODA's policy. This did not surprise the agency, which admitted that it was working hard to correct the situation.

The committee has reported plainly and comprehensively about the real fears felt by development workers on Britain's aid programme. It has also shown the excellent work that the ODA can do and has done. More money, more aid for the benefit of recipients and a clear policy to make those things sustainable must be the ODA's aims. □