

# Preamble

The title “No Mask, No Filter” has been selected to initiate a candid and open discussion on two interrelated issues: the challenges faced by the development NGOs in maintaining relevance and effectiveness in a global context, and the interactions between children and youth activists, advocates, and other professionals from the Global South with their counterparts from the Global North. Moreover, the distinction between “North” and “South” becomes increasingly blurred, perhaps even irrelevant.

The relationship between NGOs from the South and those from the North has been shaped by mutual perceptions influenced by historical and cultural factors. Primarily, the belief that Northern NGOs are better funded and possess more technical expertise, thus often assuming a dominant position. This has frequently resulted in a one-directional flow of specialized and financial assistance, accompanied by a sense of condescending paternalistic superiority. Consequently, this dynamic has bred resentment, bitterness, and antipathy among representatives from the South. Novelist Safyia Sinclair, reflecting on her upbringing in Jamaica, notes: “that being citizens of a “developing nation,” we are born already expecting to live a second-hand life, and to enjoy it... But there is hope too... because it keeps us constantly reaching for something better.”<sup>1</sup>

“If we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement.”

HISTORIAN TEJU COLE<sup>2</sup>

Conversations within NGOs concerning the Global South have often centred on the narrative of vulnerable and marginalized individuals, neglecting to fully consider the critical impact of the environment on these individuals, or the inherent integrity, strength, and resilience within them. The official diagnostic label of “Adverse Childhood Experiences” or “ACEs” underscores this perspective, refraining from faulting, blaming, or shaming the young individual, who is more often pegged as a victim of circumstance. The shift in thinking now focuses on “toxic” environments and the debilitating threats to social well-being posed by persistent poverty, discrimination, violence, institutionalization, displacement, punitive belief systems, and policies, as a means of understanding disparity, marginalization, and vulnerability.

Social scientist Paige Sweet suggests that “gaslighting” may not only unfold between two people in a relationship but also within an unequal social context, where shame plays a central role in perpetuating a cycle of defending oneself against assaults on views, feelings, and integrity. He further demonstrates that robust social networks of friends, family, and neighbours matter, as they validate their realities and provide positive counter-narratives about their self-worth.<sup>3</sup> A similar “remedy” may be necessary to counteract what mathematician Cathy O’Neil refers to as the “Shame Machine” or mass media, which she sees as programmed to make people feel ashamed of themselves, pushed down, and humiliated.<sup>4</sup>

The concept of “White Saviorism,” where white people are perceived as rescuers of “uncivilized” people, remains a problem in modern development efforts. Despite being widely recognized as wrong, it still influences contemporary development strategies. This attitude can still

be observed in the structures, methods, customs, and mindsets of development organisations from the Global North when engaging with the communities they aim to assist. This approach has caused significant harm to both the development sector and the people it intends to assist, with its origins lying in colonialism and racism, resulting in ineffective international development aid centred on European perspectives in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Social activist Themrise Khan and colleagues, in their *White Saviorism in International Development*, conclude with one



Rachel Imbwaga [left], 5, and Miriam Nduku [right], 4, are orphans and visit the kindergarten at New Hope Education Center, run by Huruma United Methodist Church in Mathare Valley. Centre: Carly Etzkorn of Clarksbury United Methodist Church, NC, USA. Photo: Gad Maiga.

crucial recommendation: listen to the people you claim to help. Understand how they perceive their own development and acknowledge the damage caused by imposing external ways on them. Only through this approach can international development be fair and respectful, rather than patronizing.<sup>5</sup>

“Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”

NOVELIST CHINUA ACHEBE<sup>6</sup>

In this context, social media specialist Gal Beckerman, in her work *The Quiet Before*, makes a compelling argument. She contends that, unlike the countless quick and fleeting contacts on social media, pre-digital meetings offered the benefits of deeper mutual understanding, further exploration of ideas, and forging stronger alliances.<sup>7</sup> There exists an unbalanced power dynamic in distanced or detached NGO work, further skewed by a lack of cultural sensitivity, top-down approaches, and insufficient consultation with local communities, along with a lack of deeper understanding by Northern NGOs of these communities' contexts and needs.

There are many obstacles that not only make it difficult, but even impossible, to attain an equitable, mutually satisfactory, respectful, and equally rewarding relationship. The first issue tackled here has been given the epithet of “The Law of Detrimental Effects.” We argue that many non-endowed NGOs, which set out to attain lofty goals and missions, discover that often, sooner rather than later, the main concern of the leadership and their staff is keeping the NGO alive, rather than serving their initial aims and ambitions. In the section “Collateral Beauty,” we show that the vulnerability of others is often a basis for generating meaning, well-being, recognition, and remuneration for those who seek

to help them. A theme further elaborated upon in “Pain.” Later, we reflect on the movement best known by its acronym DEI—Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion—and how it informs, or rather should inform, the work of “development” NGOs wherever they are.

The subsequent chapter is given the rather provocative title of “Collective Psychosis and Bureaucrats,” as it touches on the stifling and often incomprehensible administrative and managerial rules and stipulations NGO workers are subjected to. While “No Mask, No Filter,” the title of this work, is further explained in the opening and closing chapters.

This book is presented against a backdrop of a fading world order. It is not only the current wars in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East and the global decline of democratic values that provide a sombre picture. Time Magazine lists, among others, “Ungoverned AI,” “Fight for Minerals,” and the devastating effects of El Niño.<sup>8</sup> For the first time in a decade the *Global Social Progress Index* over 2023 saw a world-wide stagnation and decline in such domains as health, agency, rights, information and communications. Only 32 countries reported any real progress.<sup>9</sup> *The Economist* predicts a similar malaise, also politically, for 2024.<sup>10</sup> While the World Bank calls 2023 a “Year of Growing Inequality,” with, inter alia, the poorest people getting poorer, debt levels increasing, global economic prospects declining, a worsening climate, and the position of women not improving. The Bank offers the same bleak picture for 2024.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the flow of financial support from “rich” to “poor” has been shrinking steadily. In 1970, developed countries agreed to give at least 0.7% of their gross national income to support the economic, environmental, social, and political development of developing countries. Few rich countries ever reached this objective. Now, a figure of 0.37% is almost outside the reach of many wealthy nations, while at the same time “developing nations” are urged to “do more.”<sup>12</sup>

The text is also set in the context of a world that deals with the aftermath of slavery, colonialism, genocide, mass killings, imprisoning and murdering children, trying to erase Indigenous cultures and histories, looting, and other crimes against humanity. Public apologies have become more common. Governments and institutions often hold serious ceremonies to apologize and acknowledge their guilt for these past wrongs. At the same time, those people who are affected are increasingly sceptical about how genuine these apologies are, especially when they don't come with real reparations, healing, reconciliation, or changes in the system. Many believe these apologies are more about easing the guilt of those responsible and keeping things as they are, rather than truly making things right for the victims. This creates an illusion of progress without any real change.<sup>13</sup>

We end this writing, even more boldly, with a short reflection on the question, "What would we do if we were to receive one hundred million dollars?"