

Nyerere on North–South relations

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On 12th December 1991, I went with several members of the British international development charity Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) to meet with Julius Nyerere at his house in Dar es Salaam to discuss the South Commission's report on North-South relations.

The purpose of the meeting was to explore how VSO staff and volunteers could argue on behalf of the South when they returned to Europe. They asked the sorts of questions they imagined they would be called on to answer in the United Kingdom or Europe.

How did Mwalimu think Northern governments could be persuaded to assist with the development of the South? Nyerere said he should be asking us that question, as he had not yet identified a solution. However, he felt that Northern governments would eventually have to bow to pressure from developing countries in their own regions. For example, the United States would have to respond to the influx of economic refugees from Mexico, and the countries of Southern Europe were under similar pressure from the Maghreb countries in Northern Africa.

It was pointed out that the South Commission's report strongly recommended setting up independent regulatory bodies to monitor international finance and economic systems, in particular it singled out the United Nations for this role. However, the UN's image in the South had been tarnished by the Gulf War so were there still grounds for optimism that it could fulfil such a role?

Nyerere said that he was concerned that institutions like the International Monetary Fund only concentrated on the economies of poor countries and did not scrutinize countries like the United States despite its huge budget deficit, even though this has wide-ranging implications for the world economy. He argued that if the North wanted to impose its economic systems on the South it must also accept the principle of universal surveillance. How prescient Mwalimu was, given the global financial crisis 16 years later.

Nyerere agreed the UN's reputation had been damaged by allowing itself to be taken over by the United States during the Gulf War. He felt that the United States only took an interest in the UN when it suited; previously Washington had been wary of it because it gave the South a forum and a voice. He also accused the UN of dubious double standards on the

grounds that the Iran-Iraq war was able to continue with minimal intervention because it tied in with Northern interests, but when the same interests were threatened by the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait the UN was forced to act by its more powerful members.

Thus Nyerere was of the opinion that although the UN is in urgent need of reform the South really needs a strong UN. The recent "Stockholm Initiative" put forward the idea of a commission to investigate reform. Nyerere was hopeful that Europe and Asia would not let the US dominate the organisation.

Nyerere was asked about his attitude to conditionality for aid. He answered that there had always been conditions attached to aid, but the emphasis was shifting from economic to ideological conditions. He wanted an international independent body set up to remove ideological bias from the system. He was also critical of recent events in Kenya whereby donor pressure appears to have made President Daniel Moi agree to multi-party elections. Although he said he held no brief for Moi, indeed he thought he was "silly" for making out that Kenyans were not mature enough even to discuss the issue, he was very concerned about the donors' attitude and said it illustrated the need for solidarity in the South. Kenya gained nothing from its isolated position.

Asked what poor countries could do to push up the price of commodities like tea and coffee, Nyerere said that during a recent visit to Brazil he discovered that coffee exporters are not interested in international agreements because they do not stand to benefit. Producers would have more to gain from fixed prices if the governments concerned passed on some of the profits instead of raising the level of taxation on exports. He felt Tanzania could learn from this. In regard to tea he suggested that late entrants into the market (for example Kenya) were opposed to quantity controls because they were not yet operating at full capacity.

On the question of environmental protection vs development, Nyerere said that it is up to the North to assist the South to gain access to less damaging technologies, and furthermore, to realise that the current way of life in the North is unsustainable. He added that there was no way the North could impose an environmental ban in the same way they imposed a nuclear non-proliferation treaty because most of

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the environmental damage in the South was occurring in order to service the markets of the North. How far seeing Mwalimu was as the world heads to Copenhagen.

The South Commission's report on North-South relations focused on the need for industrialisation, yet in Tanzania the emphasis had been on small-scale agriculture. How did Mwalimu reconcile the two? Nyerere argued that the two were not incompatible. Agriculture needs to be serviced by industry so valuable foreign exchange does not leave the country in order to purchase transport, insecticides etc. The question should not be: "Is industrialisation a good thing?" Instead it should be: "What kind of industry and how much of it?"

Fair distribution of wealth had always been a key issue for Nyerere, and he was asked what could be done to avoid income disparities. Nyerere referred to chapter two of the report and commented that the reason there were people living in poverty in countries like the US and the UK must be due to "bad management". The Tanzanian economy was growing, albeit slowly, and a 5 per cent rate of growth would soon be achieved. Nyerere wanted to see a fair and efficient system of taxation set up at the same time. Differences in personal income would always exist but Government must intervene to ensure equitable distribution.

It was suggested, in the report, that aid money is not always effectively used and quoted Norwegian sources showing that the bulk of aid from that country was spent on expatriates' salaries and Norwegian produce.

Nyerere agreed that such examples were not in the interest of countries like Tanzania. He said that soon after independence he had approached Sweden for help to train engineers (there were only two in Tanzania at the time). This initiative resulted in several hundred Tanzanians being trained in India. It was felt that the training would be more appropriate to their needs and it would support the economy of another developing country. In addition it was cheaper than sending them to Sweden. Nyerere wanted to see many more initiatives of this nature, and he wanted a promise to use local consultants.

He said that he had been criticised for spending so much aid money on education rather than on income-generating schemes. He strongly defended his priorities and pointed out that in 1961 85 per cent of the population were illiterate, and that 30 years later, approximately the same number were now literate. He also felt that Tanzania was achieving some success with its distribution of professional workers across the nation. Teachers, agricultural extension workers and health workers (with the exception of doctors who tend to be in hospitals, and thus urban-based) were located in rural areas.

It was argued by some observers, that Tanzanians

were too passive and accepting for their own good. Nyerere agreed that initiative is lacking in some key areas, for example, the public sector where managers are stifled by bureaucracy. He wanted, and had long demanded, managers to be allowed to be more flexible, in particular they should be permitted to determine wage levels.

Mwalimu was asked what issues aid workers should raise when they returned to Europe.

Nyerere acknowledged that individuals have difficulty making their voices heard and therefore recommended supporting the efforts of non-governmental organisations to put issues on international agendas. However, he cautioned about some of the newly formed Tanzanian NGOs whose intentions were not yet clear, and gave an additional warning about the simplistic approach of some NGOs in the North which do not yet understand the needs of the South.

Mwalimu then asked the group what problems they faced in carrying out their work in Tanzania. Some mentioned that they had found that villages in some areas showed little enthusiasm for development. Nyerere wondered if the impact of AIDS on rural communities had sapped their initiative and energy. It was also pointed out that people returning to the villages of southern Tanzania after receiving an education were not easily accepted back. Nyerere felt the education system might have alienated them from their roots.

Some volunteers said that they had the feeling that aid projects merely tend to disrupt people's everyday life. Others bemoaned the fact that the English medium is holding back bright pupils in secondary schools and only those with poor examination results after secondary education are going on to become unwilling teachers in primary schools.

Nyerere said that he had originally championed the English medium for secondary schools because it opened up more opportunities, and because teachers at independence and in the years that immediately followed were more competent to teach in English than Kiswahili. However, he was delighted that Kiswahili had taken hold across the country and that it had now developed a modern vocabulary. It may be that the earlier decision to conduct secondary education in English needed to be revised.

The detrimental effect of low wages on commitment and efficiency in the workplace was also pointed out. And finally, the subject of tribal representation in politics. Nyerere said the only time he had taken tribal background into account was when he realised he had only one from the Sukuma, the largest tribe, in his cabinet. He thought it might look like a deliberate omission so he sought out an appropriate candidate from the senior ranks of the civil service. ■