

The Merits of Used Objects

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- translated into English from Danish by Carsten Carstensen, Peter Kierulff & Lea Bergkvist

*The sharp reduction of the Danish repair- and dispatch-allowance shows
a lack of appreciation and understanding of
how to strengthen civil society both abroad and in this country.*

After having been managed for many years by Mellempøkkeligt Samvirke (= Action Aid Denmark), the repair- and dispatch-allowance is now taken care of by Danish Mission Council Development Department. On their website – <http://dmcdd.org> it is stated that around 50 allowances will be given per annum. This marks a reduction to one fourth of the previous level.

The sharp reduction in allowances shows that bringing second-hand objects into a usable state and sending them to a southern partner is apparently not highly valued these days. One could otherwise easily think that recycling would send a signal of environmental awareness of the use of resources to the people of the South and thus do away with an image of unbridled consumerism and buy-and-throw-away-culture that some locals attribute to European lifestyle and might think that it is high culture to imitate the squandering.

Through the transfer of second-hand objects, The Emmaus Movement has, in addition to the above, become aware of other regional perspectives and their implications. Western Sahara has been occupied by Morocco since 1975, and this will not end within a foreseeable future, in part due to King Mohammed the Sixth's many close friendships with European royals and with other important people (and probably also due to economic ties held by the King). Subsequently, around 165,000 Sahrawis must endure a miserable existence indefinitely in refugee camps in Algeria. Therefore it is good that Swedish solidarity organizations, not least Emmaus Stockholm, are busy sending containers with used but still usable clothes and shoes for them to wear.

The shipments are backed by SIDA =Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. This is interesting as the Danish equivalent DANIDA does not finance such shipments of clothes, shoes, and textiles. – I.e., exceptions may be made for bed clothes, sportswear, white coats and uniforms for hospitals when equipment is shipped to schools and hospitals.

Situations like the one of the Sahrawis are not even addressed by the Danish repair- and dispatch-allowance. DANIDA and a lot of more or less private organizations, in particular Danish ones, do a lot of talking about the so-called civil society often described as being neither state nor market. But the concrete market constitutes a considerable part of civil society – you are not just buying and selling, you are also talking and exchanging ideas. And while much of this interaction is not directly related to buying and selling, the social contact on the market-place is by these means very much part and parcel of civil society.

Similarly in Denmark a lot of people spend a substantial part of their time in second-hand shops, and in various types of flea markets. And even though many go as buyers and sellers, undoubtedly the social aspect plays a significant role.

Emmaus International is busy shipping lots of containers with used objects from European member organizations to member organizations in Latin America and Africa thus helping these southern associations to obtain revenues and, not least, to establish widespread contacts to local people and social life and to further contacts amongst these locals.

During Pinochet's dictatorship in the 70s and 80s, flea markets organized within Emmaus selling clothes etc. from its organizations in Europe, among them the now defunct Emmaus-Rag pickers of Aarhus, were one of the few possibilities of circumventing the assembly ban.

This opportunity was seized by former and future civilian politicians. People got together for a chat and kept spirits up amongst themselves. It is likely that this strengthening effect on civil society contributed mentally and on a long-term basis to the abolishment of the dictatorship.

Another aspect of activities involving used effects exchanges is that they have also mobilized tens of thousands of people in Denmark over the years, people who would perhaps not otherwise have been involved in collaborating with developing countries.

Ultimately, by rejecting a large number of applications for repair- and dispatch-allowances a five-digit number of people are in fact informed by the Danish establishment, supposedly Copenhagen's oh-so-noble people, that "what you can offer is of no avail for our better purposes!". This attitude will inevitably weaken popular support for the development cooperation.